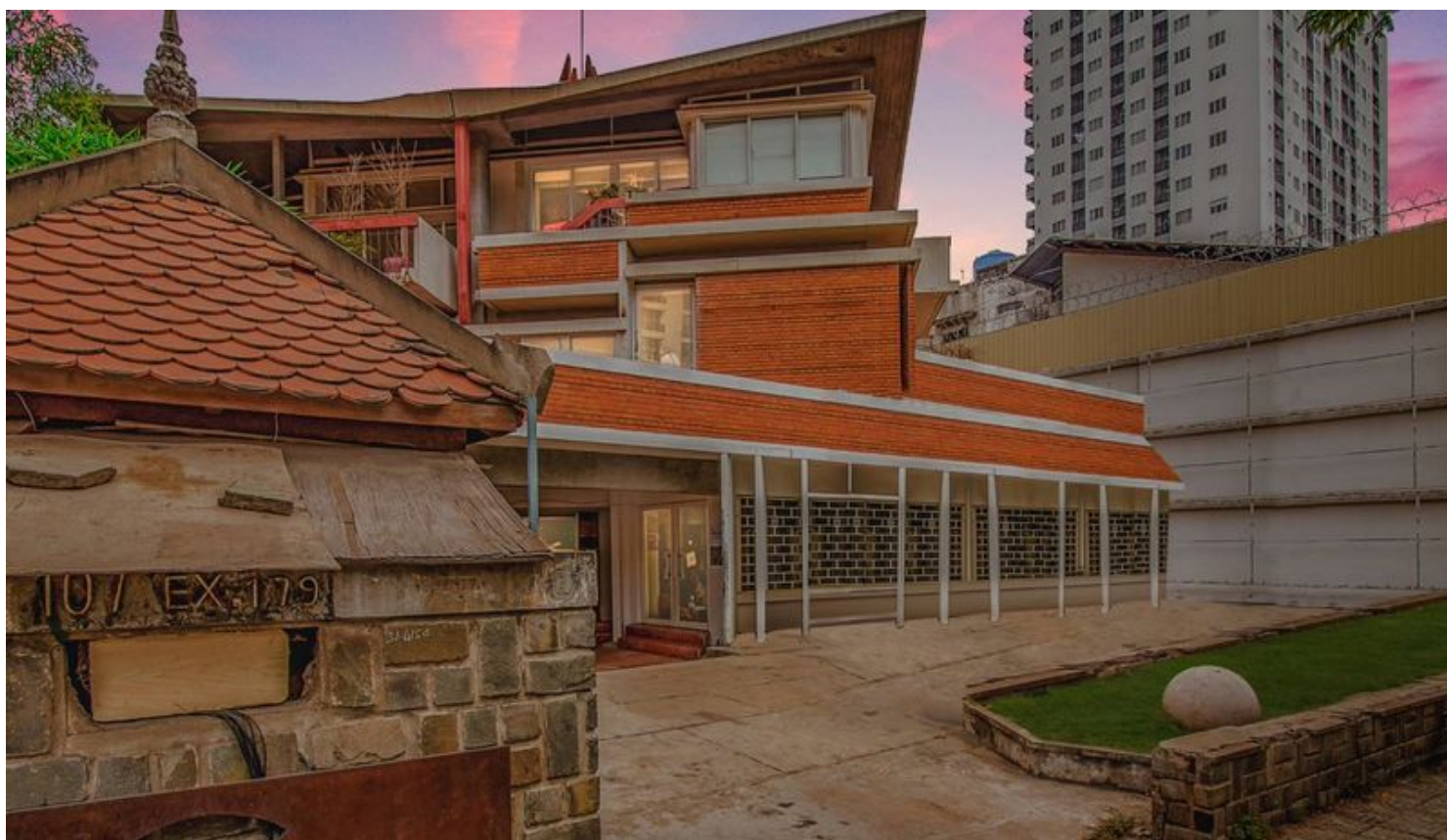


A Modernist Architect's Home Is Threatened by Modern Developers

Architect Vann Molyvann is known as the man who built Cambodia. Now his own home could become yet another generic skyscraper.



The children of Vann Molyvann, the Cambodian architect who died in 2017, are selling his home in Phnom Penh. *Photo Courtesy of IPS Cambodia*

By [Sheridan Prasso](#)

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Amid the honking horns of a busy Asian capital lies an elegant residential oasis – a four-bedroom, parabolic-roofed architectural gem. Built in 1966 as the home-atelier of one of East Asia's greatest architects, it is said to be a window into his soul.

The house of Vann Molyvann – the builder of Cambodia’s modernist classics – carries architectural importance on the scale of Frank Lloyd Wright homes. Yet it doesn’t carry their protections. Listed for sale in the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh, for \$7 million, the home has no preservation law, conservation regulation or heritage designation to save it. A buyer would be free to tear it down and put up a new commercial building or shopping mall, just like the many nearby that have driven up land values along the busy boulevard it abuts.

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The children of Vann Molyvann, who inherited their childhood home upon his death in 2017 at age 90, favor a buyer who has preservation in mind, according to the listing agent, [IPS Cambodia](#). But that may not be enough. A call to turn the home into a museum – to help promote Phnom Penh’s [unique architecture](#) as a tourist attraction and an alternative to its current genocide-related [tourism sites](#) – has neither political will nor funding behind it.

“The price pressure on the land is so strong that it would overwhelm any nostalgia about the past,” says Helen Grant Ross, a British-French architect who uses the term “New Khmer Architecture” to define Vann Molyvann’s unique style merging European modernism with classic Cambodian design elements. “Sadly, it’s an excellent location for a skyscraper.”



A view of Phnom Penh from the Vann Molyvann home. *Photo Courtesy of IPS Cambodia*

This tension between preservation and modernization is pervasive in the developing world and particularly evident in Southeast Asian cities that have been flooded with Chinese and Korean investment over the past decade, pushing up demand for real estate. In Phnom Penh's prime districts like the one where Vann Molyvann's home resides, land that cost \$600 a square meter in 2006 more than tripled to \$2,000 by 2010, and has tripled again to around \$6,000 today. The asking price for the Vann Molyvann home and its surrounding quarter-acre of land breaks down to \$7,575 per square meter – a possible deterrent to buyers looking to use the land for a new development project.

Cambodia's efforts at preservation so far have primarily been aimed at the country's rich heritage of Angkor Wat, the 12th century temple complex in central Siem Reap that draws millions in tourist dollars every year. It and two other Cambodian temples are listed by Unesco as World Heritage sites. None of the approximately 100 buildings credited to Vann Molyvann are.

It's a tragic oversight for a man who is the equivalent of America's Wright, France's Le Corbusier and Japan's Tadao Ando combined, and all the more significant because of the country's colonial and genocidal past, Grant Ross says. "It's just because he happened to be from an insignificant country where they don't promote him," she says by phone from France where she now lives after a dozen years in Phnom Penh that included consulting for the Cambodian government, lecturing at the Royal

University of Fine Arts and co-authoring a book, “Building Cambodia: New Khmer Architecture 1953-1970.”



An interior view of Vann Molyvann's home. *Photo Courtesy of IPS Cambodia*

Cambodia's three decades of war and its genocide under the Khmer Rouge are surely a factor. In the 1950s, as the country was just embarking on its new independence from French colonial rule, Vann Molyvann returned from studying in Paris. As Cambodia's first fully qualified architect, he was appointed by King Sihanouk to oversee the building of a modern nation. That heady era of scientific advancement, space travel and social progress throughout the 1960s was a time of daring concepts and architectural experimentation, producing such buildings as the TWA terminal at John F. Kennedy International Airport. In Cambodia, Vann Molyvann adopted this modernist approach to create vaunted state buildings with Khmer elements, designed to allow ventilation and light in the tropical heat, and placing him among the world's first mediators between modernism and tradition.

His works turned Phnom Penh into one of the most modern capitals of 1960s Southeast Asia: the imposing, serpent-adorned Independence Monument, an homage to Paris's Arc du Triumf that symbolizes Phnom Penh today; the elevated, gently-curved Council of Ministers, reminiscent of Le Corbusier; the magnificently askew National Theater; the fan-shaped Chaktomuk Conference Hall; the legged, raised-for-ventilation Institute of Foreign Languages, and its nearby university library, ringed

like a king's crown; the National Sports Complex, built to Olympic standards – and then his own home, where he lived and worked before fleeing to Switzerland with his family after the 1970 Lon Nol coup.



Buddhist monks sit on a motorcycle as they ride past the Independence Monument. *Photographer: Tang Chhin Sothy/AFP via Getty Images*



Cambodian children play soccer outside the national stadium designed by Vann Molyvann. *Photographer: Tang Chhin Sothy/AFP via Getty Images*

Then came the Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, who emptied the capital of its population in 1975 and over the next four years executed or killed (through starvation or overwork) as many as 2 million Cambodians – a quarter of the country’s population. When the Khmer Rouge tried to blow up one of Vann Molyvann’s government buildings in the southern city of Sihanoukville it was so well-built that they did not succeed.

Vann Molyvann returned to Phnom Penh in the early 1990s after the United Nations had instituted a plan to transition the country from civil war to peace. He found an impoverished city with his buildings in a state of neglect. His stadium had been used by the Khmer Rouge as an execution ground. Prime Minister Hun Sen gave the architect back his home, which was being used as a municipal office. He initially took on a titular role in the government, which he used to successfully advocate for the inclusion of Angkor Wat on the Unesco heritage list, but ended up watching the destruction of several of his own creations: His Council of Ministers was demolished in 2008; so was the National Theater after a devastating fire.

Other buildings he designed have undergone modernization that has undone some or all of the original intention. The Grey Building, a Le Corbusier-like housing complex designed for traditional

Khmer family living, was redeveloped beyond recognition in the 1990s. His 60,000-seat stadium was handed to a Taiwanese developer in 2000. Its redevelopment introduced shops and condos and eliminated Vann Molyvann's original drainage system of monsoon-protecting moats reminiscent of the Angkor temples, turning it into a parking lot. His buildings at the Royal University of Phnom Penh have also lost their surrounding moats and landscaping, especially large shade trees, compromising the buildings' integrity, says Grant Ross. At his Ministry of Defense, tiled roofs were added to "Khmerize" the modern architecture, she says.

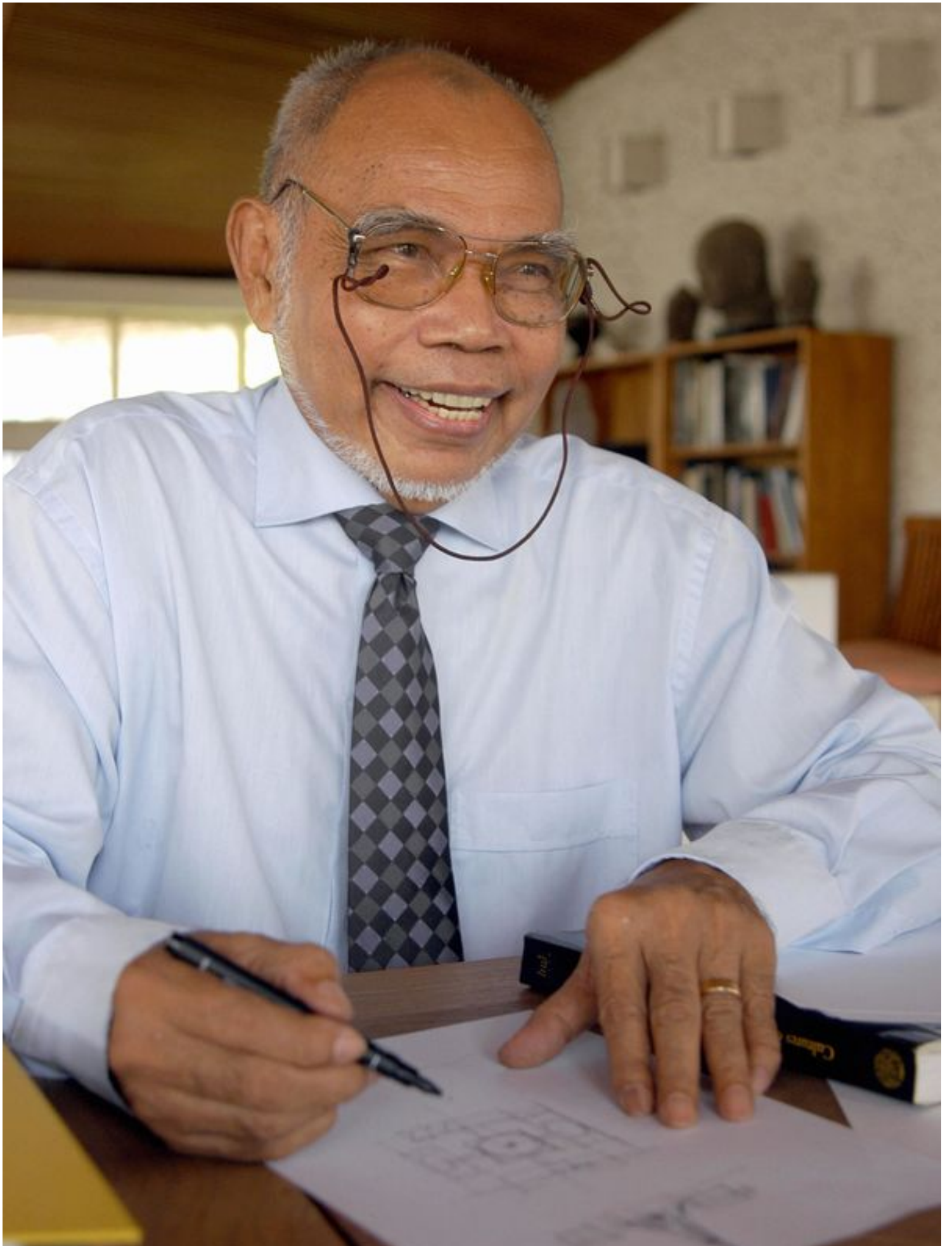
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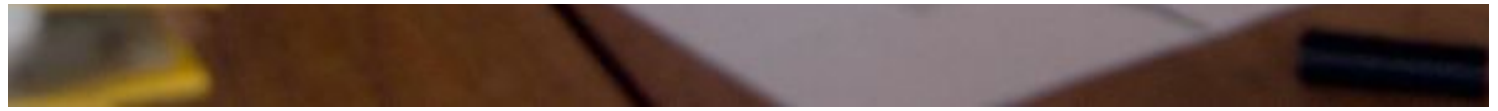
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Cambodian architects recognize the significance of Vann Molyvann and support a call by a columnist of a local newspaper to turn his home into a museum, says Hok Sokol, founder of an eponymous architectural firm specializing in traditional Khmer wooden houses. "They're very concerned about it, that we feel we should preserve it, but our association doesn't have any power to preserve it," he says. Vann Molyvann is revered but suffers from a lack of understanding about modernism among Cambodia's architectural community, he says. Plus, the iconic architect's buildings were built for an era when Cambodia had only 6 million people, a third of what it has now, and before government buildings required air conditioning and more space. "Since he passed away, it seems they care less and less," says Hok Sokol. "Everything is just becoming history."





The Vann Molyvann Project, launched a decade ago to recreate the lost architectural drawings of about 30 of his structures, has documented the house in its mapping project. It plans to post the design on its website and include it in a local exhibition as well as one scheduled in Berlin early next year, says director Pen Sereypagna.

“They are remarkable buildings that tremendously contribute to the history and identity of the modern architecture movement in Cambodia as well as Southeast Asia,” he says. The project is designed to allow Vann Molyvann’s buildings to be reconstructed as they are increasingly lost to history. It previously helped sponsor architecture tours of Vann Molyvann’s works in Phnom Penh and partnered Cambodian architecture students with those from Parsons School of Design and Yale University to work on the project with funding from the U.S. government. “Vann Molyvann’s work forms one of the most important collections of postcolonial buildings in the developing world,” the project’s website states.

Promoting Vann Molyvann’s legacy for high-end tourism would lessen Phnom Penh’s international reputation as a city defined by tragedy and help draw visitors to more than just its gruesome sites: Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide, the school-turned-secret-prison where the Khmer Rouge brutally tortured 14,000 people and left behind haunting photographs; and the Choeung Ek killing fields, containing the mass graves of almost 9,000 executed Cambodians.

A project with assistance from the French government to preserve colonial-era buildings has identified more than 500 important structures across the country. Yet there’s been little government effort to promote architectural tourism or even to enforce the limited preservation regulations that exist. Like Vann Molyvann’s creations, more and more buildings – including an elegant riverfront structure that housed a municipal tourism office – are disappearing.



The top floor of Vann Molyvann's home. *Photo Courtesy of IPS Cambodia*

Vann Molyvann's house encapsulates the genius of his architecture, blending new ideas with tradition and even whimsy, says Grant Ross. The home's complex composition melds five split levels in an open plan, with dual grand staircases, private spaces for his children and a garden shrouded with bamboo. In an interview before his death, Vann Molyvann said the house was his opportunity to experiment with ideas he didn't dare impose on the government or private clients. As such, it is especially deserving of preservation, Grant Ross says. "It is the home of someone, who, one day, will inevitably become a hero of the nation," she laments. "One day there will be an appreciation of him, but when that is, God knows. I'm afraid it will be too late by the time they wake up."

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