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Architectural Legacy: French Colonial Administrative Building in Cambodia



Abstract: - The study focuses on the architectural landscape of the French colonial period in Cambodia, specifically emphasizing office architecture. The topic was chosen due to the paramount importance of understanding the French influence, the amalgamation with indigenous traditions, and the architectural evolution in the region.

The French colonial era distinctly shaped the architectural identity of Cambodia, leaving lasting imprints on its built environment. Examining the architectural developments during this period is crucial for unraveling the complexities of cultural assimilation, power dynamics, and the fusion of Western design with local influences. By scrutinizing the French architectural footprint, nuanced insights into historical exchange and adaptation emerge.

Keywords: Cambodia, Administrative Buildings, Characteristics, The French Colonial Period, Cultural Context, Traditional, Climate, Adaptation

I. INTRODUCTION

This study meticulously investigates the architectural transitions during the French colonial period in Vietnam and Cambodia, with a specific focus on office architecture. Objectives include analyzing the influence of French styles, probing indigenous adaptations, and identifying the impacts of environmental and cultural factors on design. The study aims to highlight the progression from initial mimicry to a nuanced synthesis of Western elements and local nuances.

The exploration is limited to the early and secondary stages of the French colonial period in Vietnam and Cambodia, with a primary emphasis on office architecture. The scope involves an in-depth analysis of political and administrative structures, emphasizing the shift from direct imitation to a sophisticated integration of Western and local architectural elements. The significance lies in illuminating the nuanced processes of cultural exchange, adaptation, and architectural evolution during this colonial epoch.

II. INDIGENOUS CULTURE AND TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURAL CONTEXT IN CAMBODIA

A. *Indigenous Culture in Cambodia*

Cambodia is situated on the southwestern part of the Indochina Peninsula, bordered to the west and northwest by Thailand, to the east by Vietnam, to the northeast by Laos, and to the south by the sea. The topography of Cambodia comprises approximately 75% of the Tonle Sap Basin and the lowlands of the Mekong River, primarily consisting of plains with elevations below 100 meters, interspersed with rivers and highlands. With a coastal boundary, Cambodia experiences a tropical monsoon climate. The weather here is characterized by two distinct seasons – the wet season and the dry season – each lasting for approximately equal durations.

Cambodia receives a substantial amount of rainfall; however, due to its topography, most of the water flows directly into the sea, with only a small portion feeding into the rivers within the basin. Nighttime humidity remains relatively high throughout the year, often exceeding 90%. During the daytime in the dry season, average humidity drops to around 50% or lower, but it rises to about 60% during the wet season [17].

The indigenous culture of Cambodia, deeply rooted in the ancient and diverse Khmer civilization, has a long and rich history influenced significantly by Indian culture. Hinduism and Buddhism are the two main religions, and these religious philosophies directly impact all aspects of Cambodia's material and spiritual life. Buddhism, in particular, serves as a societal standard by which the Cambodian people navigate their family life, work, and social interactions. Similar to Laos, Buddhism shapes the distinctive cultural identity of the Cambodian people, leaving its mark on various cultural and social facets such as literature, art, architecture, sculpture, and legal practices.

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Buddhism is intricately linked to the prosperity of Cambodia, and its presence has helped shape the unique cultural identity of the nation. Temples serve not only as cultural centers for villages but also as guardians of the nation's ancient heritage, preserving and enhancing the beauty of Cambodian life. The gentle and harmonious nature of the Cambodian people is reflected in their peaceful coexistence with the natural surroundings of rivers and water. With a deep reverence for Buddhism, the principles of the Buddha resonate profoundly within the Cambodian people – fostering a culture of respect, humility, and a love for Buddhist festivals.

The natural conditions in Cambodia seem to have instilled a resilient spirit in its people, evident in their ability to confront harsh environmental conditions. This resilience is exemplified in their efforts to withstand floods and wild animals through the construction of sturdy elevated houses [15].

B. *Traditional Architectural Context of Cambodia*

Religion strongly influences the traditional architecture of Cambodia, especially in religious structures such as temples. Typically, a Cambodian temple consists of a central sanctuary, a spacious courtyard, surrounding walls, and an outer moat—a design inspired by the mythical Mount Meru in Hindu mythology. The influence of religion is further evident in the harmonious representation of the universe through symbols and decorations on deities or bas-reliefs in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

One distinctive feature of traditional Cambodian architecture is the stilted house, similar to Laos, which is an integral part of Khmer culture. Stilt houses are elevated on tall wooden posts, often exceeding 3 meters in height. The reason behind the prevalence of stilted houses in Cambodia is its geographical location, situated in the lower Mekong River basin. During the flood season, water from Tibet flows downstream, submerging a significant portion of the country. At the Tonle Sap River, water levels can rise up to 15 meters compared to the dry season, making the practice of living in elevated houses essential to avoid flooding.

Throughout Cambodia's history, the country has been home to various dangerous animals and venomous snakes. While the Khmer people revere snakes, they also fear them. During the flood season, when snakes lose their habitats, they crawl onto human dwellings. Consequently, Cambodians build stilted houses to prevent snakes, as well as crocodiles and other wild animals, from entering their homes. The stilted house remains practical in Cambodia's agricultural and climatic conditions. Farmers in Cambodia rear many cattle, and they don't need separate enclosures. In the evening, they lead the cattle to the space beneath the elevated house. This area also serves as a cooking space and a place for midday rest. The roofs are predominantly covered with dragon-scale tiles, and the poor households use thatch or palm leaves, providing excellent insulation against heat.

The roof structure typically takes a triangular shape, similar to traditional Vietnamese houses, with six or eight evenly spaced sections, allowing efficient water drainage [9] (Fig. 1).



Fig 1: Traditional houses belonging to the upper class in Cambodia

Therefore, due to Cambodia's tropical climate and its classification as a tropical monsoon climate, distinct characteristics have emerged in the traditional architectural art of Cambodia. Initially, during the French colonial period, official structures were constructed with little regard for regional climates. However, with the emergence of Indochinese architecture, the French began considering practical architectural solutions that align with the local climates of different regions within Cambodia [17].

III. FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE IN CAMBODIA DURING THE FRENCH COLONIAL PERIOD

A. *Western Architectural Influence through Colonial Approaches in Cambodia*

In the pursuit of establishing control over a new culture in Indochina, particularly Cambodia, France underwent a distinct and well-defined historical process, closely tied to the characteristics of urbanization and colonial-era constructions. Notably, two major colonial policies implemented by the French had a significant impact on the indigenous architecture [2, p.40]. The first and second phases of French colonial exploitation, occurring between 1897 and 1914, had incremental influences on cultural and technological aspects in Indochina. The French systematically redesigned the urban landscape of Indochina to resemble that of the metropolitan France. Infrastructure development led to the emergence of various urban centers, accompanied by the diversification of economic activities. Consequently, profound social stratification ensued as an inevitable outcome of these transformations. Indochinese society experienced substantial changes in politics, economy, culture, society, and lifestyle.

During the first colonial exploitation phase, cultural and technological elements gradually permeated Indochina. The French introduced urban planning strategies mirroring those of the homeland, resulting in the establishment of numerous urban centers. The ensuing variety of economic activities reflected the diversification of the societal structure. Simultaneously, the implementation of colonial policies required corresponding facilities, providing an opportune moment for the introduction of Western-style architecture into Indochina [5], [13]. This period witnessed the construction of more professional and grandiose colonial administrative structures compared to previous eras [13] [16].

The second phase of colonial exploitation occurred from 1919 to 1929, following France's victory but amidst significant economic and financial losses. To revitalize the domestic economy, the French government intensified its colonial exploitation efforts, primarily in Africa and Indochina [3, p.5]. During this period, the urban system in Indochina continued to evolve based on the foundations laid by the first colonial exploitation phase. Indochina saw the refinement of a more professional administrative system. In Vietnam, there were extensive colonial administrative structures built by the French in Saigon and Hanoi; in Cambodia, administrative buildings were interspersed within French quarters in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Battambang, and Kampot; in Laos, specialized administrative areas were established in Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Savannakhet. Urban development created conditions for the assimilation of Western culture in Indochina. Gradually, the three countries in Indochina began to exhibit urban civilization.

During this phase, architectural adaptation occurred to suit the local climate and culture. The fusion of Eastern and Western cultures in architecture became evident in Indochina [5], [13]. Both colonial policies influenced the architecture of Cambodia during this period, impacting the construction of administrative buildings in particular. In the first phase of colonial exploitation, administrative structures in Cambodia were predominantly replicas of those in the homeland, with basic adjustments for local climatic conditions. In the second phase, the French paid more attention to the cultural and social context of Cambodia [13].

B. Main Architectural Styles of Administrative Buildings during the French Colonial Period in Cambodia

Colonial circumstances stem in part from the imposition of authority by a powerful nation on another. Indigenous populations often resist such oppressive regimes, aiming to protect their land, territory, and local traditions. Therefore, the French adopted similar approaches in the three Indochinese countries. In particular, French-imposed laws for construction and design were meticulous and extensive. The administrative policies of the French empire in the first 40 years in Indochina aimed at rebuilding the colonies in the image of France [8]. City planning was determined by grand boulevards, and administrative buildings were constructed in the form of Western Classical architecture, highlighting the authoritarian rule of the colonial government [6].

Later, the French realized that the copied Western-style structures were uncomfortable and unsuitable for the tropical climate of Indochina. Consequently, architectural styles emerged that reflected efforts to blend Western architectural forms with traditional indigenous patterns, aiming to harmonize with the local context in the newly established urban areas by the French. It proved more effective than imposing an aesthetic deemed universal in the West at that time. Organizations from mainland France heavily sponsored the development of urban areas in Indochina, including administrative districts, both in new construction and preservation of historical structures [7] [10].

In the historical development of architecture in colonial Indochina, the main architectural styles of administrative buildings during the French colonial period in Cambodia gradually took shape.

In Cambodia, similar to Vietnam, the country possesses a complex blend of religions and a grand historical tradition, yet it does not qualify as an urban culture. France established the Indochinese federation in 1887 under

the name "Indochine Francaise," comprising three countries: Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. However, French influence in Cambodia was limited due to France's goal of using Cambodia as a stepping stone to strengthen its hold in Southern Vietnam, pave the way to annex the remaining part of Cambodia, and expand its conquest into Laos. Nevertheless, French capital and investment were primarily focused on Vietnam, given its strategically significant position. This resulted in a tendency to overlook the distinctive characteristics of Laos and Cambodia in the cultural center of Indochina. Therefore, the colonial identity that the French sought in Indochina often unfolded more prominently in Vietnam [5], [9], [13].

Since gaining the protectorate over Cambodia in 1863², As the French initiated the establishment of the colonial administration, they began to reorganize road systems and construct facilities to serve the ruling regime. During this period, the concept of urban culture started emerging in Cambodia. The key urban centers established by the French in Cambodia, such as Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Battambang, Kampot, Kep, represented a blend of Indochinese architecture and Khmer architectural elements [11]. Thus, the structures built during the French colonial period in Cambodia, similar to Laos, were characterized by imposition, predominantly copying original designs from the metropolis. Architectural styles prevalent during this period included Neo-Classical, Art Deco, Baroque, exemplified by notable structures like the central post office, Phnom Penh railway station, central market, and the Unesco building [9].

Subsequently, Cambodia's architecture transitioned into a phase of integration, where the French combined architectural elements to ensure the structures adapted well to local culture and climate. As mentioned by Le Minh Son about Daniel Fabre in his book "Architectures of Indochina," Le Minh Son believes that Fabre was the only person capable of blending indigenous elements into colonial structures. Arriving in Cambodia in 1884 and leading the construction agency at the time, Fabre left an enduring mark on Cambodia's architectural history during the colonial period. The "Snake Bridge" at Kompong Kdei, situated on the Phnom Penh canal belt, stands out, drawing inspiration from Angkor architecture – a local style highly regarded [4, p.25]. Fabre also incorporated Khmer architectural features into colonial structures in other colonies. In Vietnam, for instance, the meticulous integration of Khmer architectural elements, such as the horizontal branches and small spire-like towers surrounding the upper terrace of traditional Cambodian houses, was ingeniously applied to the roof of the Bank of Indochina in Saigon (see Fig. 2).

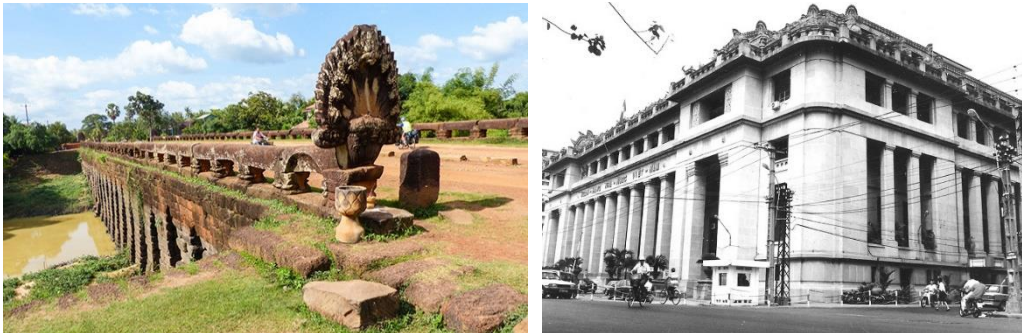


Fig 2: Snake Bridge - Cambodia, Indochina Bank – Saigon (from left to right)

In general, similar to other French colonies worldwide, such as in Africa, Morocco, or Madagascar, during the first phase of colonial exploitation, which mainly took place in Vietnam, the primary focus was on swiftly stabilizing colonial territories and ensuring maximum profits for the French empire. This was to showcase the real power of colonial dominance. Consequently, the architecture in Indochina, particularly in the initial stages, was predominantly characterized by the imposition of designs from the metropolis, incorporating certain techniques to adapt to the colonial climate [14]. Architectural styles prevalent during the early phase, as Western architecture began to influence Indochinese architecture, included pre-colonial architecture, Neo-Classical architecture, local French architecture, and Art Deco architecture [12]. The subsequent phase marked a notable shift towards adapting to local cultural and climatic conditions.

C. Architectural Characteristics of Administrative Buildings during the French Colonial Period in Cambodia

² With the initiative of French officer Ernest Doudart de Lagrée from Southern Vietnam (Cochinchine Française), King Norodom of Cambodia willingly complied. On July 5, 1863, in Saigon, international agreements were signed, granting France the protectorate over Cambodia. In 1867, the French protectorate authority was established throughout the country, while Siam renounced its authority over Cambodia [1].

The French arrived in Cambodia and undertook extensive construction in major cities such as Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Battambang, Kampot-Kep. Among these, the topography of Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, and Battambang is mainly flat, similar to the natural conditions in the southern part of Vietnam. However, the notable difference is that the plains of these three cities are entirely inland, not coastal like those in southern Vietnam. Therefore, major storms are less frequent in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, and Battambang. Given the expansive flat terrain, when constructing administrative buildings, similar to Luang Prabang in Laos, the French easily adhered to the regulations outlined in the Cornudet Law. Their focus was primarily on solutions to cope with the hot and humid climate, characteristic of Cambodia's two distinct seasons—wet and dry. Administrative buildings in Cambodia predominantly featured sloping roofs, effective in shading and weather resistance. Additionally, these buildings incorporated spacious courtyards, hallways, and a significant proportion of windows compared to the vertical facades [9], [11], (Fig. 3).



Fig 3: Archives Office - Phnom Penh, Government Office - Phnom Penh (from left to right)

Cambodian culture bears the imprint of Hinduism from the early era and Buddhism from the 7th century. These ideologies have profoundly influenced Cambodia's historical development, leaving a significant impact on the material and spiritual aspects of the Cambodian people, particularly in architecture. Noteworthy architectural structures were constructed during the ancient Khmer era (late 12th century to early 13th century), showcasing decorative art influenced by both Buddhist doctrine and mythological beliefs.

A distinctive feature in the architectural ornamentation of structures during this period was the use of wood and stone materials. Temples and fortifications were carved from stone blocks, while roads were lined with large serpent-shaped Naga sculptures (a symbol of Cambodian spirits), towering 2-3 meters high, casting shadows over the streets. The shared decorative form of ancient structures in Cambodia featured multi-tiered curved roofs stacked on top of each other, gradually diminishing in size as they ascended. The pointed peaks at the center of these roofs symbolized the Xome mountain, signifying a spiritual connection (following Hindu beliefs). The wooden shingles at the central part of the roof were often intricately carved with images of deities such as Riehu, Mahaknot, mythical bird deities like Kâyno, and the four-faced deity Mohabrom, accompanied by various patterns and motifs. The roof's edge, gently curving upwards, conveyed a sense of softness. The four walls of ancient structures typically displayed bas-reliefs depicting life in the afterlife, the current life of the Cambodian people, struggles with neighboring countries, or the image of traditional Apsara dancers in the presence of monkeys and horses from the Indian epic Ramayana. These curved roofs were typically crafted from vibrant red dragon-scale tiles, featuring uniformly circular tiles, a characteristic different from the pointed dragon-scale tiles in ancient Vietnamese architecture. The color of the roofs and sharp towers was often gold or red, representing the two key colors in Buddhism, symbolizing sanctity and nobility. Additionally, intricately engraved characters and numbers were commonly found [8], [9], [11].

Similarly to Vietnam, the administrative buildings constructed by the French during the initial period in Cambodia were essentially replicas of decorative details from Classical Western architecture. Drawing on the experience of blending the characteristics of both Eastern and Western cultures in Vietnam, some administrative buildings in Cambodia, although reflecting Western architectural styles, delicately incorporated traditional Cambodian decorative details. As the transition to the combined phase occurred, with the emergence of Indochinese architecture, the elaborate Western-inspired decorative patterns ceased to exist on Cambodia's administrative buildings. Instead, traditional Cambodian architectural details took precedence.

Given the distinctive and unique nature of this decorative style, considered the pinnacle and hallmark of Khmer architecture, when the French began to explore Cambodian culture and introduced Indochinese architecture, they

applied it to significant structures, including administrative buildings. Similar to their approach in Vietnam and Laos, the decorative details were executed by combining them with new Western techniques. Specifically, traditional wood carvings were preserved in some instances, while in others, they were replaced with gypsum bas-reliefs, a characteristic of Western architectural styles. Additionally, decorative elements on roofs, column heads, doors, and windows incorporated new materials such as reinforced concrete, ceramics, gypsum, and glass [8] (Fig. 4).



Fig 4. The French integrated Khmer architectural styles into administrative buildings in Cambodia, combining traditional elements with Western techniques (from up to down, left to right)

IV. CASE STUDY: NATIONAL ARTS MANAGEMENT OFFICE

This building located north of the Royal Palace, constructed from 1917 to 1924 under French rule and designed by French architect George Groslier, who was also the first director of the office. Previously known as Cambodia's National Arts Management Office, the control of this entity was transferred to the Cambodian people by France on August 9, 1951, after gaining independence in 1953, and is now known as the National Museum of Phnom Penh. The construction process of this building spanned over three years during the French colonial era. As a result, the architecture of the structure reflects a blend of both French and Cambodian architectural styles, with a strong emphasis on traditional Khmer elements evident in the color palette, materials, and lines of the building.

The National Arts Management Office is designed symmetrically following the principles of Classical Western architecture. It consists of four earth-toned brick buildings constructed from locally available materials. These buildings surround a lush green inner courtyard, meticulously landscaped with a harmonious arrangement of tropical plants, four lotus ponds, and indigenous trees, serving to mitigate the heat from the intense sunlight. The vegetative carpeting helps alleviate the heat, a common architectural strategy in the region. At the center of this inner courtyard stands a Buddhist temple, reflecting the religious beliefs of the Khmer people—a nod to the indigenous culture that the French respected, especially the history of Angkor.

Traditional Cambodian architecture primarily featured raised houses or religious structures with simple construction forms. The incorporation of inner courtyards was not prevalent in traditional Cambodian houses. However, the addition of inner courtyards, primarily found in regions with temperate climates, became a prominent feature in the architecture of Classical Western structures. The inner courtyard was designed symmetrically in the vertical axis of Classical Western architecture, playing a vital role in improving the indoor environment, cooling the house during hot weather, and acting as the "lung" of the entire structure. The Romans introduced a transformative design element, where inner courtyards became both functional and aesthetically appealing in Europe. Influenced by Classical Western architecture, architect George Groslier applied and integrated this design into the National Arts Management Office. Thus, the building, while retaining its Khmer stylistic essence, also adopted the Western architectural approach (Figure 5) [11].

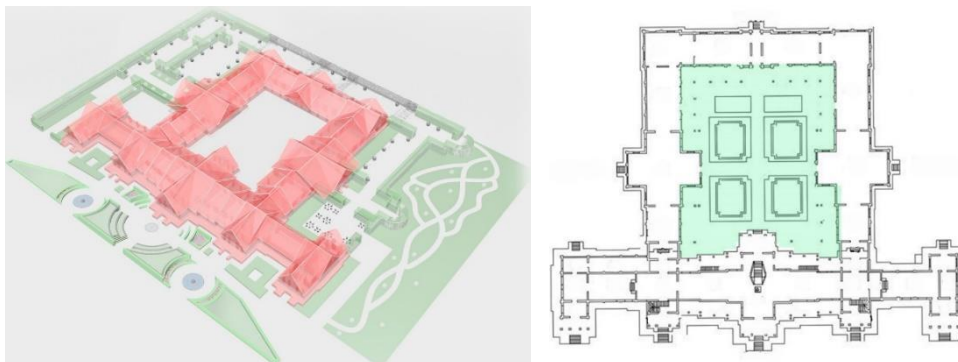


Fig 5: The National Arts Management Bureau of Cambodia

The floor plan of the structure consists of simple, robust rectangular blocks with an effective system of supporting walls capable of withstanding heavy rains and storms. Similar to administrative buildings in southern Vietnam, the foundation utilizes a shallow footing design with hewn stone to a width of up to 2 meters. No mortar is used to prevent water seepage from the ground, considering the hot and humid climate of Cambodia.

The roofing of the structure is characterized by its weight and low profile, featuring multiple layers in the traditional Cambodian architectural style. While the roof imparts a sense of heaviness and low elevation, the interior space remains lofty and cool due to the elevated roof structure. Locally sourced clay tiles are used for the roof, contributing to the rich Khmer aesthetic, highlighted by the vibrant red color of the building and the deep red tiles against the backdrop of the capital's skyline (Figure 6).

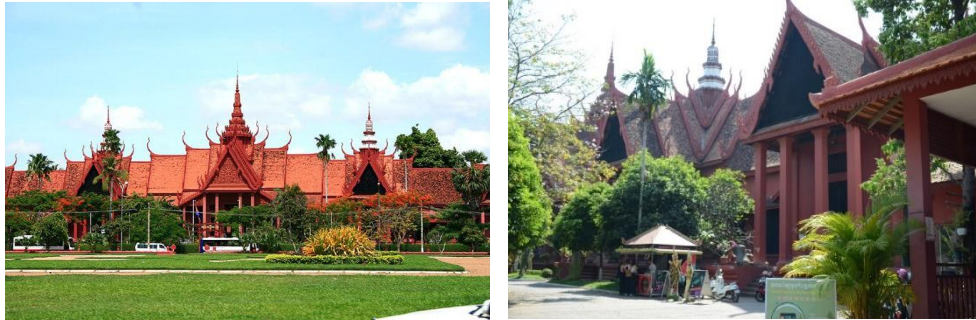


Fig 6. The National Arts Management Bureau of Cambodia

The building incorporates a system of verandas and protruding tiles similar to structures in Vietnam, complemented by large doors and windows designed to provide excellent sun protection, suitable for Cambodia's two-season climate. The extensive, well-ventilated doors are constructed with thick, cam xe wood, featuring iron grilles on the inside and decorative Khmer-style roof eaves. This door arrangement not only serves as a primary decorative element but also functions as the ventilation system for the entire structure.

Thanks to the thick wall system, the windows are set back to a certain extent to create shaded areas, particularly against the westward sunlight. This is a feature modified by Western architecture when constructing buildings in Cambodia, as Western-style buildings do not typically incorporate setbacks in windows, aiming to allow direct sunlight for interior warmth.

The roof drainage system is free-flowing. However, to prevent flooding and seepage, the floor level is raised approximately 1 meter, a solution designed to counter the frequent rainfalls in Cambodia (Figure 7).



Fig 7. The National Art Management Bureau of Cambodia

V. CONCLUSION

Through the examination of administrative buildings in Cambodia, it is evident that structures built during the French colonization and the initial colonial exploitation period were relatively simple, often mimicking designs from the metropolis. Some adaptations were made to suit the local climate, but a distinct style had not yet emerged. It was only during the second colonial exploitation period, coinciding with the introduction of Indochinese architecture, that administrative buildings in Cambodia underwent significant design and stylistic transformations, departing from Western architectural norms.

Specifically, while certain classical architectural principles persist, there have been substantial alterations, especially in exterior decorative features. Despite strongly reflecting indigenous cultural influences, these structures draw upon certain Western architectural motifs. Ultimately, the buildings undergo comprehensive modifications to seamlessly adapt to Cambodia's climate.

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