

ARCHITECTURED SERENITY

AN INTERVIEW WITH IVAN TIZIANEL, ARCHITECT



Co-founder of Asma Architects firm with Lisa Ros and Bun Yalin, Ivan Tizianel has designed many public and private buildings since 2001 in Cambodia, including Plantation, a Phnom Penh, award-winning urban resort. Among his latest projects appear the Bodaiju Residences, a high-end residential complex in Phnom Penh, and the Aviary Hotel in Siem Reap. This conversation with MAADS took place in April 2016.

What was your reaction when you first went to the grounds where Templantation was going to be built?

Trees had me in awe. Many of them are really imposing and with age, which is striking in a tropical context and within the socio-cultural fabric of Cambodia. Country people tend, or until recently tended to be ambivalent towards large trees: they honor the spiritual power vested in them although they dislike the proximity of tall trees next to their houses, because rodents and snakes may in effect climb the limbs and get into their living space.

In the instance of the architectural structure the surroundings inspired to me immediately, I felt essential not only to keep the most venerable trees but even to organize the buildings «around» them. I mean it literally – in the reception area, we designed the patio in order to keep two large trees inside the building.

On this property, one would notice at once how close it is from the Angkor rainforest. Just on the other side of the main road leading to the hotel, wooded expanses are still under the protection of the Angkor Authority. This has been a residential area for quite a while but nature here remains relatively untamed, compared to the rest of Siem Reap District.

During my first visits, I also took in the remarkable variety of the original flora: you have definitely jungle-like elements abutting sugar palm trees, which are traditionally planted around the paddy fields to strengthen the levees, you have fragrant formations of «Rumdul» trees, the flower of which being a national symbol of Cambodia and, in Angkor times, used to make lip wax for women...*

That natural context leads us to the architectural lead we would follow: the greatest possible fluidity between built-up structures and landscaped grounds.

Which would explain why anyone stepping inside Templantation instantly feels «this is not just another hotel» ...

With its proportions and the way natural light is filtered through openwork partitions, the lobby area has been designed as a kind of «decompression chamber», coming from the outside.

...Not unlike the anteroom in a temple, would you say?

Some may have that perception. Still, the main idea was to prepare guests, at a visual and sensorial level, to the patio and its «water walls» leading to the lounge and restaurant area. And here again we let the natural surrounding take precedence: a vast, open cemented structure which seems to glide above head in front of the swimming pool, like a giant parasol on the shore of an unexpected lake...

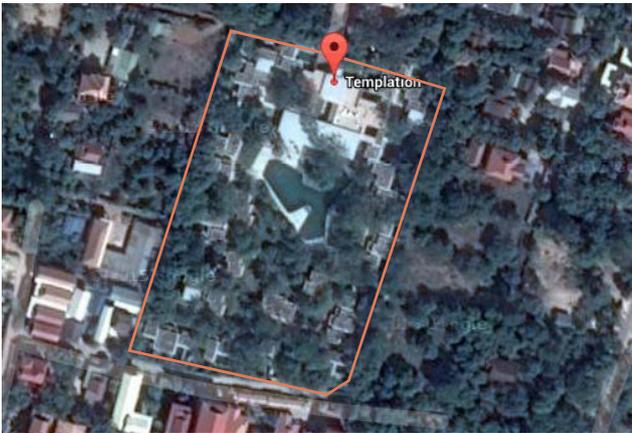
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...The main swimming pool as a lake.

A reflection body of water which adds to the general sense of space. Its shape occurred to us — the landscape designer, Stephen Kerr, and I — quite naturally, since we wanted to follow the ground ripples, the implantation of the trees. That said, it is also designed to actually swim, since it boasts a thirty meters length at its largest point.

And then, past the pool, the villas and suites are spread out among the vegetal setting. They are unobtrusive, even if their size is quite impressive for a hotel-resort configuration. They blend into the landscape, up to the roofs that are all «green», covered with plants, an esthetical and ecological choice which is also offers a great insulation. I was impressed, the first time I saw the property on Google Satellite, by the fact that you do not really see the buildings, only an expanse of green beyond the main swimming pool.



So close to such an architectural wonder, we obviously tended to go for understated, streamlined structures. And as much as Angkor's character is about centralization, we opted for non-centralized, spread-out structuration. What unifies the architectural

design here is the choice of materials: uncoated cement, a local stone which is not easy to cut and carve like the laterite used at Angkor sites for the walls, or the same fine-grained, foliated, slate-like local stone for the pools' tiling...

Some architectural notes are variations on traditional Khmer building technics, such as the use of natural air flow for cooling or, in the villas, the idea that the bathing area is markedly separated from the living spaces, and open to the sky — traditionally, countryside people in Cambodia like to bathe outside, although for a modern hotel accommodation we obviously needed to ensure privacy with high walls around the shower and tub area.

How do you see your work fitting into Cambodian architecture's new trends?

It is not easy to say because, like so many aspects of Cambodia nowadays, architecture is going through a transitional stage, caught between several influences and directions. The taste for some kind of «neo-Angkorian» style seems to be fading, meanwhile you have outbursts of rather intriguing choices, such as the new Ministry of Environment building in Phnom Penh and its «Imperial India» look.

More than a revival of the traditional Khmer housing, I do notice among my clients, institutions and individuals, the wish to stay close to the natural environment, to live in spaces both sheltered from the heat or the multiple strains from the outside (noise level, etc...) and relatively open to the street, the neighborhood or to landscapes that remain still untouched by urbanization's fast pace.

Personally, I'm still fond of the Cambodian architecture from the 1960s, particularly clever when it comes to taking advantage of light and air circulation, or combining «private» and «social» sides.

* Rumdul is the Khmer (adapted into English) word for *Mitrella Mesnyi*, an evergreen tree much appreciated for its blossom and fruit in Cambodia.

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