

‘A war of houses and a war of land’:

Gentrification, post-politics, and resistance in authoritarian Cambodia

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Abstract

Post-war property reforms in transitional Cambodia plunged the country into new conflict: a war of land. Under the guise of ‘beautification’, 11% of the capital’s residents have been displaced in under two decades in a wave of violent gentrification, enacted through forced eviction and dispossession. Mounting resistance shows signs of taking effect, however, evincing a turning point in state-society relations. Here, the government has trialled a new approach, moving from techniques of violent expropriation towards a conciliatory method, built on dialogue, consultation and negotiation. Responding to calls for more work on resistance to gentrification and success in the fight to stay put, in this paper I investigate these claims, bringing the literatures on gentrification and post-politics to bear on the evictions crisis in Cambodia. Drawing on testimony of former residents and media analysis, I examine techniques of removal and resistance in a case study of the eviction and demolition of Cambodia’s White Building (1963-2017). I argue recent shifts are not an abandonment of the state’s compulsion to expropriation, exclusion and expulsion but a subtle modification of its gentrification strategy: away from the naked coercion associated with its own kleptocratic variant of authoritarian neoliberalism towards the post-political manufacture of hollow consent.

Introduction

Faced with a deteriorating human rights situation in Cambodia, the EU and USA have taken unprecedented steps in recent months to reprimand the Cambodian government (hereafter Royal Government of Cambodia, or RGC) for its increasingly authoritarian character. By revoking preferential trade deals to lucrative export markets, they threaten the backbone of the rocketing Cambodian economy and, therewith, the RGC's legitimacy. Alongside a spike in political repression since 2013, the EU highlights the endemic problem of 'land grabbing' (EPRS 2019) as part of a trident of concerns provoking the disciplinary measure.

Although the EU specifically notes the expropriation of rural land for the sugar sector, the spectre of land conflict extends more widely. Where 10,000 farmers have lost land to sugar plantations since 2001 (EPRS 2019), they represent only a fraction of the 770,000 people evicted between 2001-2014 (Tang and Thul 2017): 6% of Cambodia's total population. Indeed, the largest density of those affected is, by contrast, in urban areas, particularly the capital, Phnom Penh, where the proportion rises to 11% (Strangio 2014). This record is further marked its 'brutality' (Brickell 2014:1256): a surge of forced evictions enacted as a visceral physical, legal and economic violence.

More commonly conceptualised in the literature as 'forced evictions' or 'land grabbing', the twinned threats of dispossession and displacement have nonetheless occurred in urban areas under the guise of 'beautification' (Hughes 2003:13). Explicitly intended to remove 'the poor' from the city, this has resulted in the disproportionate expulsion of low-income groups from the urban centre. As such, these processes can otherwise be read as tools within the broader repertoire of gentrification, understood simply as the 'class remake' (Smith 1996:39) of the landscape.

Where geographers have called for more research on gentrification and its resistance in the South (Lees, Annunziata & Rivas-Alonso 2018), the apparent elision of Southern experiences may be deceptive. Instead, in Cambodia much work already uncovers the logics, practices and consequences of gentrification – albeit, with exceptions (Springer 2016), rarely recognised as such. This literature details, too, the potent grassroots resistance provoked, ‘jump[ing] scale’ (Brickell 2014:1264) to bring Cambodia’s evictions crisis to international attention.

Moreover, where the RGC has traditionally responded to international backlash by redoubling pressure on agitators, there are now signs it is buckling. Here, recent cases evince a shift away from stock techniques of violent expropriation towards a conciliatory approach, built on apparently democratic ideals of dialogue, consultation and negotiation. Those recently affected, for example, include inhabitants of Phnom Penh’s White Building: a 1960s architectural landmark occupying prime city centre real estate and home to 500 low-income families. Though the Building was demolished in 2017, the orderly management of residents’ departures has been hailed as ‘a model for the future’ (Niem 2019). Counter to past experiences of forced removals in Cambodia, the act of eviction was non-violent and compensated.

In this paper, I use the White Building case to respond to the call for gentrification research to examine the ‘fight to stay put’ and consider more carefully ‘what constitutes (successful) resistance’, cognisant that planetary gentrification implies an ‘imperative’ to learn from examples beyond the North (Lees et al. 2018: 347). Weaving together testimony from former residents with analysis of media sources, I cast a more cautious gaze to probe emergent suggestions that the White Building redevelopment represents a turning point in state-society relations in Cambodia and the overdue triumph of a lengthy-waged grassroots struggle.

To do so, I integrate a critical political economy approach to shed light on the enactment of gentrification in Cambodia and competing modalities of its execution. Here, where the violent and kleptocratic character of post-war gentrification bears the hallmarks of Cambodia's own, variegated brand of 'authoritarian neoliberalism' (Bruff 2014), the RGC's new approach appears to indicate a shift in tack. However, drawing on theories of post-politicisation (Swyngedouw 2009, 2018), I show this apparent shift towards meaningful inclusion of residents in decision-making is more circumspect. The RGC has merely changed the mechanisms of expropriation to better facilitate the continued stride of elite territorial control.

This shift in the state's enactment of gentrification, moreover, is therefore instructive in elucidating how 'social struggles and various forms of resistance shape the manifestations of authoritarian neoliberalism' (Bruff and Tansel 2019:234). Rather than reading the state's reactive capacity in a 'dystopian' (Lees 2014:922) vein – where resistance becomes futile against restless strategies of containment – I contend, to the contrary, that this reaction is an affirmation of past provocations: evidencing clear impacts on the enactment of evictions, albeit ambiguous in its concrete outcomes.

Further, I show how resistance itself has evolved under continued threat of violence. Taking stock of creative practices deployed through the White Building's struggle for survival, I highlight everyday forms of insurgency where covert opposition counters repression of overt contestation. In doing so, counter to demobilising narratives of post-politicisation, I lend to understandings of postpolitics as 'a hegemonic order in which the antagonistic dimension of the political has not been sublimated but repressed' (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014:5).

To develop these themes, I engage a variety of source material, exploring contestation over the White Building by juxtaposing testimony of former residents with official and public

imaginaries. Thus, I provide a grounded account of the operationalisation of post-politics to complement a theoretical literature accused of lacking a ‘sense of actually existing post-politics’ (Beveridge and Koch 2017:37). Following Lees’ (2014) example, I use the single White Building site to examine the entanglements of local perspectives and struggles as they interact with processes of urban development and authoritarian neoliberal governance, drawing wider conclusions about the trajectories of gentrification and resistance in Cambodia.

Foremost, I draw on a series of ten in-depth interviews conducted between January and April 2018 with evicted residents of the Building. In this paper, however, I return most often to Thary, who I met twice at her new home on the peri-urban fringes of Phnom Penh. When Thary’s portrait appeared on the White Building in 2015, she came to embody the struggle over the Building’s future. All interviews were conducted in Khmer with the assistance of a native speaker. Probing discrepancies between residents’ accounts and official narratives of a ‘model’ eviction, I also incorporate analysis of traditional and social media, interrogating key events, official statements and public discourse.

In what follows, I begin by reviewing the literatures on planetary gentrification and post-politics. Next, I document the property policies that warped Cambodia’s post-conflict urban transition into a new mode of gentrifying violence: ‘a war of houses and a war of land’ (Kent 2016:6). After, I present three empirical sections of the paper that illustrate the rollout of, and response to, the RGC’s recent strategic shift in fighting this “war”, away from overt authoritarian force towards the post-political manufacture of consent. In the first section, I contest suggestions that the RGC’s manoeuvres in the White Building removals represent a ceasefire in the enactment of forced evictions in Cambodia. Instead, the threat of physical violence retained an unspoken presence through ostensibly trilateral negotiations, facilitating the post-politicisation of the evictions model. In the second section, I engage the concept of

‘territorial stigmatisation’ (Wacquant, Slater and Pereira 2014) to detail the attritional campaign that framed the White Building evictions as desirable and necessary, highlighting a shift in the terrain of struggle under the post-political model from physical to discursive violence. The final empirical section reflects on the shifting nature of resistance in this post-political milieu, where ‘quotidian strategies’ counter its ‘quotidian violences’ (Gerlofs 2019) of precarity and marginalisation. To close, a discussion and conclusion consider key findings and contributions.

Postpoliticising gentrification in the planetary elsewhere

A global trend towards illiberal democracy has squared geographers’ attention, of late, on the ‘authoritarian (re)turns’ (Peck and Theodore 2019:245) witnessed since the 2008 financial crash. Coalesced in a growing literature on ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ (Bruff 2014), an emerging consensus conceives autocratic governance as a double movement of state rollout to contain the growing dissent of those marginalised by earlier neoliberal rollback. Contested as ‘top-down’ theorisation that ‘neglects everyday life and the possibilities for grassroots change’ (Bruff and Tansel 2019:236), there has been a call for a bottom-up correction that explores how resistance shapes concrete manifestations of authoritarian trajectories. At the same time, geographers of gentrification too note that relatively little attention has been paid to resistance. Accordingly, we need to look beyond ‘the right to stay put’ towards the ‘fight to stay put’, learning from examples beyond the North in a situation of ‘planetary gentrification’ (Lees et al. 2018:347).

How these two calls are related is obfuscated through a binary that frames gentrification in the North and South through distinct lenses. In the North – the site of most gentrification research – the concept figures prominently in public discourse. Though resistance is mounting, it is forestalled by the post-truth rhetoric of policymakers. Sublimated under ‘fast-

policy' (Peck and Theodore 2015) and 'feel-good' (Lees 2012:160) soubriquets like 'regeneration', planners and developers peddle urban transformations as positive change (Slater 2010). In this respect, gentrification in the North exemplifies the rise of the post-political condition and the manufacture of neoliberal consensus (Lees 2014).

Post-politics has gained traction in urban studies over the last decade, influenced by the work of post-foundational theorists (e.g. Badiou, Mouffe, Rancière, Žižek) and cultivated in urban geography notably by Swyngedouw (2009, 2018). These formulations draw on a distinction between 'politics' and 'the political': the latter understood as real contestation and agonistic engagement; the former referring to techno-managerial governance through consensus-seeking. The post-political city thesis emphasises a contemporary transformation of urban governance, where techno-managerial expertise colonises the space of agonistic contestation. This mode of governance sublimates the spectre of that hitherto known as 'the political' from urban space.

Debate about the heuristic value of the thesis continues. Critics deride the 'post-political trap' as an 'intuitively convincing, yet ultimately confining account'; at once too static, determinist and fatalist, where the 'omnipotence of the post-political order' (Beveridge and Koch 2017:31) denies potential for radical change. Its shortcomings, they argue, stem from an overly theoretical orientation, lacking empirical research and uninformed by 'actually existing post-politics' (Beveridge and Koch 2017:37).

As Swyngedouw (2017:57) clarifies, however, post-politicisation is not conceived as an end state but a 'continuous and highly politicised struggle and conflict'. Though the embrace of techno-managerial governance attempts to reduce political contradictions into policy problems, this process is itself contingent. Indeed, for Swyngedouw, post-politicisation is instead likely to provoke a resurgence of the political, since efforts to repress agonism cannot

suture the cleavages that arise from neoliberal contradictions. Instead, these wounds fester under the sticking plaster of hollow consensus politics. This distinguishes post-politicisation as a particular form of depoliticization that ‘does not imply the disappearance of politics’ but rather the ‘re-ordering of the modalities of politics’ (2017:60).

Moreover, despite assertions that post-political theorisation limits political agency to ‘heroic’, ‘revolutionary’ or ‘spectacular’ (Beveridge and Koch 2017) acts, urban political insurgency may be mundane. Swyngedouw (2017:59), for example, calls attention to ‘spectacular in the aesthetic sense’: ‘rendering visible, audible and sayable what was hitherto unseen, mere noise and unarticulated’. Building on these arguments, in this paper, I train an empirical lens on actually-existing post-politicisation of gentrification processes in the global South, contributing to the literature by spotlighting the ‘elusive everyday’ (Gerlofs 2019) manifestations of political resurgence.

To date, in contrast to the burgeoning literature on the North, there have been fewer studies of gentrification in the South. This is rapidly changing, however, as case studies of processes identified as gentrification – once assumed to be ‘virtually non-existent... everywhere outside of Western Europe and North America’ (Garmany and Richmond 2020:125) – appear from sites in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and beyond. Even within the literature on ‘planetary gentrification’ (Lees 2012:165), however, which explicitly aims to ‘decolonize the gentrification literature’ by learning from forms of gentrification in the South, still much attention is focused on world cities rather than those at the bottom of the global urban hierarchy. In Southeast Asia, for example, there are numerous studies of regional hubs like Shanghai, Seoul, and Singapore. Beyond this, cities in the least developed countries have warranted scarcer attention (Moore 2013).

Yet this apparent omission may be deceptive. In Asia, for instance, the ‘more readily used’ expressions for the negative impacts of urban projects include ‘eviction’ and ‘forced demolition’ (Shin et al. 2016:459). Nevertheless, resulting accounts of exclusion of low-income groups resonate with experiences of gentrification elsewhere. Often masquerading as ‘beautification’ (Lees 2012) or ‘development’ (Lay and Teo 2014), forced evictions can otherwise be read as one mechanism within the broader repertoire of gentrification, understood simply as ‘the class remake’ (Smith 1996:39) of the landscape.

The application of the concept to these broader settings in the global South remains contested, with concerns that the “contextual stretching” of gentrification to new sites overlooks important differences in empirical circumstance (Maloutas 2012:38). Such inattention to nuance, opponents argue, is both unhelpful to theory-building broadly and, perhaps paradoxically, privileges rather than decentres dominant Eurocentric frames.

Although the outcomes of urban capitalist development are similar across locations, the causes and mechanisms of such transformations are diverse (Ghertner 2015). In post-socialist Southeast Asia, for example, the piecemeal pioneers of middle-class housing redevelopment associated with the concept’s coinage in London are typically replaced by state actors producing mega-projects for elite consumption (Yip and Tran 2016).

Nonetheless, proponents have pushed back against the notion of gentrification as an ‘import’ (Berndt 2016) to the South, reminding us not to ‘confuse’ (Shin et al 2016:457) the coining of the concept with its origins. Rather than diffusing out from Europe, for example, Lees et al. (2016) argue gentrification is multcentred and may have existed in the East Asia for decades, even predating its appearance in Europe. Shedding the ‘epistemological “inheritances”’ that tie gentrification to its identification and appearance in the North reveals not a static or discrete condition but a ‘vivid and mutating process’ (Lopez-Morales 2015:565): another ‘rascal concept’ (Brenner, Peck and Theodore 2010:182) that remains imbricated in global

systems whilst responsive to local geographies. Viewed thus, gentrification marks a useful ‘umbrella term’ to capture ‘disparate socio-spatial formations which result in different dynamics of regeneration and population change’ (Berndt 2016:565).

Indeed, it is in the global South, where the ‘brutal tectonics of neoliberal globalization’ are often ‘more bloody’ (Lees 2012:167) that the erstwhile embrace of gentrification as a technique of authoritarian neoliberal governance becomes apparent. Here, the (re)production of urban space works to economically dispossess, territorially exclude, and therefore disempower low-income and marginalised groups. Thus, it pre-empts the threat of violence from below in cities, as ‘vanguards’ (Springer 2009:151) of precarity and resistance, whilst facilitating accumulation by elites, allowing them to shore power and privilege by distributing resources and opportunity (Sudermann 2015). In this paper, therefore, I contend that resistance to forced eviction in the South can represent, at the same time, a resistance both to gentrification and authoritarian neoliberalism. Here, by training a lens on the dialectical relationship between the enactment of evictions and their resistance, it is possible to elaborate ‘what constitutes (successful) resistance’ (Lees, et al. 2018:347) to gentrification by evaluating how these struggles have effectively ‘shape[d] the manifestations of authoritarian neoliberalism’ (Bruff and Tansel 2019:234).

In Cambodia, for example, where the empirical case study that follows is located, processes of hyper-violent state-led and state-enabled expropriation, exclusion and expulsion are rampant in urban areas. Yet, with exceptions (Springer 2016), academics, policymakers and activists rarely view these conflicts as gentrification, instead aligning these struggles with ‘forced evictions’ or ‘land grabs’. However, recent signs that the state is responding to mounting resistance by eschewing physical violence and moving towards a conciliatory approach renders these labels increasingly unapt. In what follows, I argue these shifts represent not an abandonment of the state’s compulsion to expropriation, exclusion and

expulsion but a subtle modification of its gentrification strategy, away from the naked coercion long associated with its own kleptocratic variant of authoritarian neoliberalism towards the post-political manufacture of, albeit hollow, consent.

‘A war of houses and a war of land’: State-led gentrification in post-conflict Phnom Penh

Evacuated by the Khmer Rouge in April 1975, Phnom Penh was left mostly empty through the coda to Cambodia’s civil war. Only once an interim Vietnamese socialist government assumed power in 1979 was the city gradually repopulated. Initially, property remained owned by the state, allocated first come, first served. When Vietnamese rule ended in 1989, however, property was introduced to the free market. Overnight reforms offered occupiers rights of ownership, overriding previous claims to tenure and creating an immediate inflationary land market (Hughes 2003). The conditions plunged Cambodia into a new conflict: ‘a war of houses and a war of land’ (cited in Kent 2016:6).

Cambodia’s deepening embrace of neoliberal reforms in a context of ‘globalized urban entrepreneurialism’ (Springer 2016:234) since has fostered rapid urbanisation ‘marked by the exacerbation of conflict over space, and by its commodification and privatisation’ (Talocci and Boano 2018:291). Strategic visions of the city as an ‘ordered and sanitized domain for the performance and spectacle of capitalism’ (Springer 2016:234) are at odds with the presence of low-income groups in the centre. ‘We want to keep a high standard of living by not encouraging the poor to live in the city’, pronounced Phnom Penh’s Governor (cited in Hughes 2003:13) unveiling City Hall’s Beautification Plan in 2001. Under this drive, mega-projects for elites – apartments, offices, malls – have proliferated, pushing the poor to fringe districts (Strangio 2014). The effect of this displacement is twofold, as Cambodia’s elites have ‘increased their land value while simultaneously, in a long tradition of capitalist

exclusions, push[ed] the “unsightly” and supposedly “violence prone” poor from public view’ (Springer 2009:151).

Through the 1990s, RGC rhetoric openly labelled informal communities – denoted ‘*anatapdei*’ or ‘anarchic’ settlements (Hughes 2003) – as a threat, promoting forced eviction to enforce order. Spurred by NGO interventions, the RGC has toned down its language since but, until recently, the softening of state discourse bore little impact on the fate of the newly imagined ‘urban poor’ (Kent 2016). Between 1999 and 2015, 150000 people were displaced from the capital – 11% of its population (Strangio 2014) – as Cambodia gained notoriety for the ‘scale and brutality’ (Brickell 2014:1256) of its forced evictions: enacted through rubber bullets, tear gas, and bulldozed homes; with negligible compensation, if any (STT 2016).

Of late, however, mounting resistance shows signs of taking effect, as inventive displays by local grassroots activists have leveraged interventions from global figures and institutions (Brickell 2014). Traditionally the RGC has responded to international backlash by ‘redoubling’ (Strangio 2014) pressure on agitators, imprisoning high-profile activists and stifling avenues of collective mobilisation (Beban et al. 2017). Yet with the punitive eye of the international community trained on potential sanctions – the EU has partially revoked Cambodia’s preferential trade access – there are signs of a shift in the RGC’s approach to eviction, away from naked physical force and the economic violence of expropriation towards a conciliatory model that engages affected communities in negotiating settlements (Tacoli and Boano 2018).

Those recently affected, for example, include inhabitants of Phnom Penh’s White Building, a 1960s architectural landmark home to 492 low-income households (Simone 2008), demolished in 2017 by developers for a new 21-storey residential tower. Fusing high modernism with aspects of traditional Cambodian design, the Building was Cambodia’s first

social housing project and a major work in New Khmer Architecture, a social and aesthetic vision for independence: a ‘striking hybrid form that encapsulated the hope and optimism of an ancient civilisation taking its first steps as a modern nation-state’ (Strangio 2014:163). Like much of Phnom Penh, however, the White Building lay empty under the Khmer Rouge, left to degrade until the post-war government offered the complex for use by artists working at the newly reinstated Ministry of Culture. Now fallen victim to the city’s ‘frenzied’ (Strangio 2014:155) land grabs, the White Building again exemplifies an era of rapacious authoritarian neoliberal reform.

Yet despite its historic social and cultural importance, the White Building’s demise was relatively quiet. Contrasted with the spectacular violence of past evictions, the clearance and demolition of the White Building was calm and orderly. Here, the Land Ministry trialled a novel approach at conflict resolution, brokering negotiations between residents and a private developer, reaching a financial settlement in exchange for forfeiture. The departure of residents on receipt of payments and in advance of the Building’s demolition, without physical force, was lauded by various stakeholders and observers, including the Land Ministry and housing NGOs (MLMUPC 2019; STT 2016), heralded as a turning point in state-society relations.

Drawing on these commentaries and juxtaposing them with the reflections from the White Building’s evicted residents, in the first empirical section of this paper I turn attention to the settlement process and its outcomes. Here, I show that from residents’ perspectives, its successes were at best equivocal, reflecting not the democratisation but post-politicisation of housing conflict in Cambodia.

Ceasefire? The post-politics of a ‘model’ eviction

In February 2016, after cracks appeared in the White Building's structure, the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction (MLMUPC) declared it unsafe for habitation. In October, a Japanese private company, Arakawa, was selected to redevelop the site as 21-storey housing project. The MLMUPC brokered negotiations between developer and residents, resulting in a choice between two compensation packages: a monetary offer to leave the Building, or resettlement on site within the new project (STT 2016). By July 2017, all 492 households had accepted the cash offer of \$1400 per square meter (Kong 2017). Within days of the last inhabitants leaving, bulldozers moved in and the Building was destroyed.

Despite the loss of the White Building, the eviction was praised by stakeholders. Housing groups observed 'the recent handling of the "White Building" case... may be an indication that the "threat of eviction" type cases which garner wide media coverage and national attention are being handled more openly' (STT 2016). The MLMUPC itself published a best practice guide based on the White Building's clearance as 'the model to be used in other similar redevelopment projects', praising 'transparency, equity and equality between residents and the developers' (Niem 2019). Even residents tended to agree that negotiations were fair, evidencing a duty of care towards citizens. Thary, for example, reasoned:

'The City Hall clearly thought about the people because they consulted with us... The Minister took care of the people... His Excellency Chea Sophara solved this for us' (Thary, former resident, 23/02/18).

Tellingly here, no side disputes the basic fact of the eviction itself. These statements may thus evidence gentrification's power as a form of 'fast-policy' (Lees 2012:160) in the South, where associations with progressive development imbue it with a 'feel-good' character that is 'hard to argue' against. An established consensus frames the problem of evictions as one of

upholding property rights through just economic compensation, rather than the displacement of residents.

Yet despite general praise, former residents' testimony raised critical perspectives elided in formal assessments, where muted accolades for the new approach weigh against the spectre of former evictions. Residual fear played a direct role in negotiations, as residents explained:

‘Before I used to live in Dey Krahorm...we were violently evicted then, so this time we were too scared to make an objection’ (former resident, cited in Kong and Baliga 2017).

Past state violence continues to structure response to threats of removal, where ‘even small compensation is a ‘win’’ when ‘expectations and fears of repression are shaped by a history of conflict, political exclusion and unpredictable shifts in land policy’ (Beban et al. 2018:599).

As Thary described, the MLMUPC's negotiations ran counter to expectation, as offers made to residents decreased from an initial fixed rate of \$70000 per apartment, to \$1400 per square meter by the third meeting. On the revised offer, Thary was allotted \$45000, less than half the market rate (CVEAA 2016). Nonetheless, observance of past evictions left Thary's neighbours feeling pressured to accept:

‘Most of them said they had to accept it. Otherwise they would get nothing like the people at *Borey Keila* [a past eviction site]. They would destroy it anyway... I had only few people [willing to disagree]. We could not win against them so I followed the others to give my thumbprint to sell to them’ (Thary, former resident, 23/02/18).

Thus, although physical force was never levelled against residents directly, it remained present through the afterlife of others' trauma. The echoes of evictions at Borey Keila, noted by Thary, are moreover reflected in residents' unanimous acceptance of the (lower value) monetary compensation package over resettlement within the new development. At Borey Keila, the developer agreed a land share deal with informal dwellers, promising to rehome

them in ten dedicated blocks of the new scheme. A decade later only eight blocks had been built, rendering hundreds of families homeless (Tacoli and Boano 2018).

Against this background, civil society's optimism that the Building's developer 'won't develop on the tears of poor villagers' (Khuon 2016) was evidently not shared by residents, whose refusal to accept places in the new development reflects a history of land deals dogged by a lack of transparency and accountability (Strangio 2014). Moreover, residents' scepticism proved prescient. In March 2019, local media (Khmer Times 2019) revealed that the White Building site, purported to become an affordable housing project would, in fact, be transformed into NagaWorld 3: a 55-storey luxury casino hotel and, at US\$4 billion, 'the single biggest private sector investment so far in the country and may be for years to come'.

This use of this falsehood to drive downwardly mobile negotiations highlights the one-sidedness of the negotiation process. The terms were fixed in advance, rendering discussions a moot exercise in securing legitimacy and consensus: performative rather than antagonistic. As Talocci and Boano (2018: 294) suggest, this performativity signals the post-politicisation rather than democratisation of housing disputes in Cambodia, incorporating 'superficial' involvement rather than meaningful participation in decision-making as a means 'to annul opposition and contestation'.

Since agreed compensation was below market rates for the centre, evicted residents moved to fringe districts. Thary purchased a small house close to the airport, 15km from her previous home. It was all she could afford, creating a long commute to her central workplace. As she explained:

'I take a *motodup* [motorcycle taxi] to the bus stop and then take the public bus to work... It is difficult when we live far away from the workplace. We need to take a

bus and there are traffic jams on the way. Colleagues get to work at 7am but I reach the workplace at 9:00 am' (Thary, former resident, 22/01/18).

Thary's testimony is a tacit recognition that evictions and their ensuing displacements in the South represent, as Lopez-Morales argues (2015:565), 'more than a class-imposed dispossession of land value. It is instead the loss of the use value... [including] access to mobility and public services'. That residents view eviction as more than a violation of economic property rights is also evident in their narratives of socio-spatial change in the city. Another former resident, for example, complained:

'The new towers are the main changes in the city. The old houses have been replaced by big, new buildings. Everywhere is so busy now, so crowded, as so many people come to live in the city. It is the most powerful that benefit most from this change – the rich.' (Boran, former resident, 05/04/18).

Moreover, Thary herself invoked a frequent refrain that is heard all the city – 'rich get richer, poor get poorer' – poor in her assessment of change, explaining:

'The rich remain the rich because they have had capital since the past. But the poor remain poor because they have not had money to do any business' (Thary, former resident, 23/02/18).

These statements speak to a fundamental social and spatial injustice driving the transformation of the city and the rampant experiences of dispossession within it. Yet such agonistic concerns were shrouded by economic logic in the post-politicised management of the dispute. Since force was not used, it has been presented as absent. Nonetheless, its presence was felt in the inverted character of negotiations and the refusal of any household to accept a place in the planned redevelopment. Moreover, as the next section shows, this

followed a wider campaign of territorial stigmatisation, whose influence played an undergirding role in the negotiation and reception of the settlement.

Attrition: Crafting a post-political consensus on gentrification

Testifying to the ‘slow violence of housing dispossession’ (Pain 2019:385), residents’ experience of place-taking in the White Building began much earlier than its 2017 demolition. Previous work on the geographies of forced eviction in Cambodia has highlighted the physical and emotional violence that occurs in removal, as well as the slower economic and emotional impacts that accrue over the longer term through experiences of resettlement, relocation or homelessness (Brickell 2014; Springer 2016). The pre-emptory acts of narrative contestation that ‘displace’ (Davidson and Lees 2010, emphasis in original) residents whilst they remain in situ have been less acknowledged, however. In this section of the paper, therefore, I engage the concept of ‘territorial stigmatisation’ (Wacquant, Slater and Pereira 2014) to highlight the ‘attritional violence’ (Nixon 2011) deployed in constructing the White Building’s homes as targets for urban redevelopment.

Following years of neglect under the Khmer Rouge, the Building was already in considerable disrepair when it was reoccupied post-war. By 2006, a survey of remaining examples of New Khmer Architecture in Phnom Penh noted the Building had been ‘adversely affected by high humidity and a lack of maintenance... Today's impoverished occupants have no means and the general state of the buildings is so bad that it seems inconceivable that they could one day be renovated’ (Ross and Collins 2006:32).

Initially the Building’s unkempt appearance was not out of character in its Bassac neighbourhood. However, as land values in Phnom Penh soared, reaching ‘30–50 per cent annually’ (Simone 2008:189) from 2002 to 2005, the transformation of Bassac rendered the Building incongruous in the urban landscape. The eviction of 3000 families from two

adjacent informal settlements, Sambok Chap and Dey Krahom, in 2006 and 2009 eradicated the immediate presence of other low-income communities. In their stead sprung elite megaprojects: a new National Assembly building and Foreign Affairs Ministry; the Phnom Penh Office Centre; and Nagaworld, a 5-star casino, soon joined by the gold-cladded towers of Nagaworld 2. Nevertheless, the Building's residents retained against the trajectory of gentrification, initially unperturbed by the evictions taking place elsewhere. As Thary explained, 'it was different because we lived here with all proper legal documents. They could not treat us like the people at Borey Keila' (Thary, former resident, 23/02/18).

However, the RGC's dexterity in past evictions has undermined legal claim to title. At Boeung Kak, for example, a 'legal conjuring act' (Strangio 2014:1) transformed the tenure status of developer-coveted lakeside land from 'state public' to 'state private' designation, depriving existing inhabitants of formal certification. Yet by the mid-2010s, the RGC's position was more problematic. High-profile evictions at Borey Keila and Boeung Kak made international headlines, training the gaze of global media and governments on the febrile evictions landscape in Cambodia (Brickell 2014). This necessitated a subtler approach by the RGC, beyond customary coercion.

The Building's erstwhile denigration in public conscience as a 'slum' was central to this new tactic, with salacious press coverage establishing its notoriety even in the UK. A lurid feature in *The Mirror*, for example, spotlighted Phnom Penh's 'once grand White Building' as 'a slum dwelling where prostitutes and drug addicts live alongside families and nuns', taking readers on a voyeuristic photo-journey of a building with 'a reputation for being a ghetto and a haven for ne'er-do-wells' (Dean 2016). A more lucid take in *The Independent* profiled the Building's architectural history yet still concluded the contemporary site is 'more dystopia than utopia': an 'eyesore, a place of drugs, prostitution and violence' (Wills 2015).

Partial truth underlies these sensationalising headlines. Simone's (2008) survey of the White Building, for example, counted 16% of households engaged in sex work. Yet these were outnumbered by performing arts households at 25%, and diverse smaller groups. Moreover, whilst such a density of sex workers might tickle the sensibilities of the papers' UK audience, Phnom Penh counts many whose occupation, though criminalised, is hidden in plain sight on the city's central streets (Hoefinger 2013). Indeed, Simone (2008:192) describes a 'very mixed population' that troubles the Building's 'negative connotations in other quarters of the city, simultaneously embodied as a failed project of 'modernist living' and as the dangerous contiguities of sex, art, crime, popular culture and informal commerce'. Here, Simone's invocation of 'contiguities' is instructive, speaking to the associational logic of 'selective accentuation or fictive projection' (Wacquant, Slater and Pereira 2014:1273) that gives rise to 'territorial stigmatisation' or 'spatial taint'.

Analysis of the 34 new reports published in the local English-language *Phnom Penh Post* featuring the 'White Building' between 2013 and 2017 exemplify the Building's negative public imaginaries. Whilst reports spotlight the Building's vibrant cultural life – its resident arts community and public galleries – descriptions casually overlook its cultural and historical significance, as well as its domesticity. Here, words residents used to describe their community like 'peaceful', 'secure' or 'happy' do not appear, and there are infrequent markers like 'heritage' (2 instances), 'architecture' (1) or 'historic' (3). Instead, after 'iconic' (30) – which might refer to the Building's history or notoriety – the most frequent adjectives ascribed to the Building were negative signifiers, like 'dilapidated' (11), 'old' (8), and 'crumbling' (6).

This lack of symbolic popular investment in the White Building enabled an ongoing lack of material investment from the RGC, who instead promoted the restless elite transformation of Tonle Bassac unimpeded by the inconveniences of regulation. In 2015, construction of a 10-

storey hotel was permitted adjacent to the White Building (Sen and Cuddy 2015). Within days of the contractors breaking ground, a network of snaking cracks had formed throughout the White Building. Residents slept on the streets, fearing imminent collapse.

Yet residents found themselves blamed for the Building's degradation following a belated survey of the damage, which noted 'families repaired or added structures to the building to make it overloaded and [did so] without taking good care of the building' (Sen 2015). By pointing the finger at residents' piecemeal repair work, decades of neglect in urban infrastructure by the RGC was left unwritten. The decay was instead rendered a product of their delinquency. This process is reminiscent of the discursive construction of so-called 'sink-estates' in the UK, as described by Slater (Slater 2018:882), 'where the behaviour of tenants is, first, under intense moral condemnation, and second, both cause and symptom of poor housing conditions and neighbourhood malaise'. In an act of administrative violence, the survey findings codified the White Building residents' stigmatisation. Later, the damage was used to condemn the structure. An act of ultimate loss, residents were told to vacate and a developer sought to renovate the site, finally realising the RGC's long-term ambitions for its central location.

The relative calm of the White Building's departures has tended to forestall analysis of resistance. However, subtle forms of opposition did emerge. Drawing on the cultural resources of the community of artists dwelling in the Building, residents forged a powerful rejoinder to the adverse imaginaries of place and people. In the next section of this paper, then, I turn to this creative resistance and its reception by the state authorities and wider public.

Counter-strike: The resurgence of the political

In December 2015, prior to its condemnation, the White Building became the focal point of further national controversy when a rare piece of public art appeared on the structure's façade, only to be removed by city authorities within days. The four-storey mural depicted Thary, a long-term resident of the White Building and seamstress for Cambodia's Royal Ballet. The work of an American street artist, the image was intended to celebrate the thriving community of art and artists within the White Building. Announcing the completion of the mural, given the title 'Thread of Life', its creator explained:

'Since I had the opportunity to paint such a large, visible wall in a place where there are seemingly no other large-scale murals like it, I felt an extra sense of responsibility to paint something beautiful, meaningful, and uplifting. This mural honors Cambodia's artists, both contemporary and those lost during the Cambodian genocide of the mid to late 1970s, when nearly all of the country's creative population was targeted and murdered by the regime' (El Mac 2015).

This act of celebration was well received by the mural's audience, winning popular appeal among city residents: 'people around here were very supportive of this kind of art because it can show our culture to the world and help preserve our history for our next generation' (Visal, former resident 23/01/18).

Yet among general admiration was noted praise for one novelty of the image, where the subject – an ordinary woman at work – had never previously been the focus of such a visible public display. As residents described, the mural 'showed a woman with a sewing needle. She is creating some work. I have seen art painted on a wall before but I have never seen a picture of a woman, doing something like that' (Sophea, former resident, 08/02/18). Here, an ordinary woman in a position of prominent public display was a radical act of hierarchical repositioning.

Viewed thus, the mural tapped into a wider process of creative resistance under way in the White Building. As the threat of removal intensified, residents mobilised their collective cultural resources in defence of their dwelling. A program of workshops and collaborative projects spotlighted lived experience ‘as a means to challenge, alter and ameliorate government and business interest in the building’, allowing ‘residents of the Building, represented in mainstream media and widely understood as a slum overrun by drugs, gang and prostitution, could offer alternative visions of the diverse community’ (Louth and Potter 2017). Events traversed the Building’s private, common and commercial spaces and dissolved the differences between them, as, for example, residential stairwells were turned into public galleries displaying home lives of the Building’s inhabitants.

These practices mirror a wider trend of categorical inversion of private and public space. Creative interventions against housing precarity in London’s so-called ‘sink estates’, for example, serve a similar function: foregrounding narratives and experiences of estate residents, challenging the tendency to dehumanise them and to ‘equate the material deterioration of estates with social deterioration of their communities’ (Blunt and Sheringham 2018:6). Particularly, in authoritarian contexts like Cambodia, where even nonviolent direct action provokes legal sanction or physical force from state authorities (Brickell 2014), the example of the White Building illustrates a reaction that is public yet only implicitly confrontational. Speaking to the constrained possibilities but ever-present capacities for resistance in even circumscribed contexts, then, the White Building example testifies that the apparently simple feat of ‘making the invisible visible is a political act’ (Lees and Ferreri 2016:35). By confronting the conventional separation of home and city, private and public, that renders home life invisible and therefore secondary, the El Mac display and the White Building collective demanded recognition of its importance.

Indeed, authority figures justified the mural's removal on these same grounds. Explaining the decision to remove it, a City Hall spokesman explained permission had not been granted. Moreover, he outlined, 'we would not have allowed those people to paint this picture because the painting's subject is not deserving of being on public view' (City Hall spokesman cited in Aun and Ford 2015). Local administration echoed the sentiment, arguing 'if they want to represent Cambodian culture in such a prominent way, they should paint more well-known or experienced people that the public will recognise' (village chief cited in Vandy and Muong 2015).

In light of the Building's destruction, residents' endeavours may seem futile, given they failed to preserve the Building and its community. Yet the mural exemplifies the effects such innocuous resistance can wield, reshaping public imaginaries. Indeed, notwithstanding its short lifespan, the mural left an indelible mark on Phnom Penh public consciousness, provoking popular outrage at City Hall's removal. Affirming its tenacity despite its fleeting presence, comment flooded Cambodia's social media streams protesting and ridiculing City Hall's decision.

These efforts were often light-hearted, such as one user's image superimposing a mug of Cambodia's eponymous brand of beer into Thary's hand (Fig.1) or another contrasting the mural's fate with innumerable adverting hoardings across the city (Fig.2). Nonetheless, serious sentiments underlie the humour, recalling injustices inherent in the city's social and aesthetic landscapes and the corrupt economic and legal frameworks that underpin and mould them. Indeed, in parodying the logic by which the mural was removed, these satirical responses uncovered precisely those processes of recategorization underway in the struggle over the White Building. Like the mural, they challenge not only the 'pervasive ideology that a woman's place was the home' but the 'gendered spatial divisions' by which 'city streets

and public spaces, by contrast, were depicted as principally male spaces’ (Blunt and Sheringham 2018: 4).

Damage report: Gentrification, post-politics and resistance in Phnom Penh

The ‘class remake’ (Smith 1996:39) of Cambodia’s landscape is increasingly clear yet has rarely (cf. Springer 2016) been considered as a form of gentrification. In part, this reflects a wider tendency in the South and post-socialist Asia, in particular, towards naturalising urban transformations as part broader national “development” (Yip and Tran 2016; Ley and Teo 2014). In Phnom Penh, gentrification has been ‘discursively euphemised’ as ‘beautification’ in an effort to transform the city’s aesthetic from an “undeveloped,” anachronistic space of chaos into a “developed,” modern site’ (Springer 2016:235) inviting for investment capital. However, this elision also reflects a deliberate narrowing of focus (Beban et al. 2017) on ‘forced evictions’ and ‘land grabbing’ to draw attention to the human rights violations committed by Cambodia’s elite in enacting this transformation. Here, recent interventions by the EU and US to reprimand the RGC illustrate the apparent success of these tactics.

Nonetheless, this framing also limits the resistance it seeks to provoke. By focusing on the momentary violence of removal, struggles over the right to the city and the slower violence of displacement often remain hidden. Resultantly, ensuing conflicts are often about ‘the scale of compensation’ (Ley and Teo 2014:1295) rather than more fundamental socio-spatial injustice of demolition and displacement. Indeed, acts of resettlement, as elsewhere in the South, are often critiqued for their economic impacts, including disruption to livelihoods, rather than the violence of dislocation. The elision of spatial (in)justice concerns works to cede critical ground by obscuring the territorial conflict at root.

By contrast, gentrification invokes the ‘expulsion and exclusion’ that ‘ruptures the connection between people and place’ (Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard, Lees 2019:1) and therefore critiques the

logics that undergird urban transformation rather than its material consequences. Here, gentrification is useful because it demonstrates that low-income groups ‘suffer not from a lack of capital but from a lack of power’ (DeFilippis in Slater 2010: 307). As such, where the term is absent it serves to ‘disempower global debate’ (Lees et al. 2015:448) where perhaps it is most needed, as ‘fast-policy’ (Peck and Theodore 2015) and financial capital render cities in the South the coalface of contemporary urban transformations.

The case of the White Building exemplifies the erstwhile poverty of these dominant framings and provides a timely call to rethink conceptualisation of Cambodia’s systematised expropriation and expulsion of urban poor groups. Under pressure from grassroots resistance and global governments over the ‘scale and brutality’ (Brickell 2014:1256) of forced land seizures, the recent demolition and eviction of the White Building marks a change in tactics by the RGC. In contrast to the physical and economic violence of past evictions, the White Building’s clearance was ostensibly voluntary, peaceful and compensated.

This apparent shift evidences a wider trend, whereby Cambodia elites ‘are increasingly deploying the exclusionary powers of law and discourses of legitimation, rather than outright force’ (Beban et al. 2017:598) to facilitate land transfer. As the case of the White Building corroborates, however, the ‘emerging primacy of legitimation does not mark the end of violence and fear’ (Beban et al 2017:592), nor a transition to inclusive and equitable participation. Instead, as its authoritarian techniques draw censure from international observers, the RGC has adopted a new strategy of urban governance by which ‘people must be persuaded to concede to their exclusion’ (Beban et al 2017:594). The White Building exemplifies a self-professed ‘model’ of this approach (Niem 2019). Rather than building ‘transparency, equity and equality’ as the MLMUPC professes, however, I suggest here that post-politicisation (Swyngedouw 2009, 2018) offers a better lens for understanding the new governance of land disputes in Cambodia.

Viewed thus, this study offers an empirical account of the operationalisation of ‘actually existing’ (Beveridge and Koch 2017:37) post-politicisation to complement a theoretical bias in the literature. I present the MLMUPC’s tripartite forum as an attempt to reduce the agonistic contestation that has erupted over past evictions. Although another example of fast-policy thinking widely heralded as ‘empowering, participatory, inclusive’, designed to foster consensus through collaborative deliberations, tripartite fora routinely exhibit ‘a series of contradictory tendencies’ (Swyngedouw 2018:3). In this example, the key terms of the negotiation were set far in advance of community involvement, negating the real possibilities of debate. Contestation over the White Building’s residents’ right to remain in situ was effectively foreclosed by the city’s mobilisation of modernising ambitions. This enabled the MLMUPC to set proscribed aims for dialogue fixed on deliberating a market solution of appropriate compensation and sublimating the spectre of the political that has volubly challenged Cambodia’s neoliberal urban settlement over the past decade.

This shift in the modalities of urban governance away from naked autocratic tendencies towards a subtler rallying of consent challenges current thinking about the trajectories of authoritarian change. Where worldwide ascendance of the illiberal order has been seen primarily as ‘a move away from seeking consent for hegemonic projects’ (Bruff 2014:116), the case here suggests a more contingent shift. Where coercion and consent are not dichotomous, an overreliance on illegitimate force creates a contradictory fragility, risking a rise in popular discontent directed at the state (Bruff 2014). The emergence of post-politics in Cambodia provides a complementary foil to trajectories of penal policy-making in the authoritarian neoliberal mould, foreclosing the possibilities and means of struggle through a cacophonous model of ‘impotent participation’ (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014:5) that promises democracy in name but delivers tyranny in nature.

Nevertheless, the success of these efforts at eradicating the political is limited. Counter to dystopian narratives that paint resistance as futile where strategies of containment restlessly adapt, the case of the White Building illustrates more than depoliticization. Instead, the resistances sparked exemplify the threat of ‘the return of the repressed’ (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014:12). Shifting modes of governance only mask the appearance of fundamental political contradictions that rupture urban society; they do not heal these fractures. Whether repressed through authoritarian force or post-political sleight-of-hand, agonism remains and new modalities of resistance emerge in response. Here, the White Building evictions opened up new spaces of contestation. Denied opportunities to voice concerns in formal negotiations, the Building itself became a canvas for the expression of struggle and remains a symbol of urban injustice in democratic channels of social media satire.

Counter to claims that conceptualisation of post-politics represents a denial of everyday acts of political agency (Beveridge and Koch 2017), the White Building case testifies that ‘resistance is not always a call to arms and a storming of barricades’ (Lees et al. 2018:351). Indeed, given that the impacts of post-political manoeuvring manifests most tangibly in ‘quotidian violences’, like precarity and marginalisation, it is likely through ‘quotidian strategies’ (Gerlofs 2019:379) that it is resisted. Moreover, small in scale does not entail insignificant in effect. Returning to Lees et al.’s (2018:347-348) question ‘of what constitutes successful resistance’, here the White Building suggests a need to recast definitions of success in gentrification struggles beyond ‘winning the fight to stay put’. Though this struggle was regrettably lost, it nonetheless mobilised national attention and seeded critical public engagement with the manifold injustices of Cambodia’s neoliberal urban transition.

Conclusion

Provoked by the spread of ‘fast-policy’ (Peck and Theodore 2015) and financial capital, gentrification is increasingly recognised as ‘a (if not the) key struggle with respect to social justice in cities worldwide’ (Lees et al. 2018: 347). Perhaps because of its alacrity, scholars have struggled to keep pace with its developments. Until recently, relatively little attention has been paid to the matter of resistance to gentrification. Accordingly, geographers of gentrification (Lees et al. 2018:347) argue we now need to turn attention from ‘the right to stay put’ towards the ‘fight to stay put’. Moreover, they argue, ‘in a situation of planetary gentrification it is imperative that we learn from examples outside of Europe and North America’.

In this paper, I attend to these calls for further work on gentrification and its resistances in the South by exploring the eviction and demolition of Cambodia’s White Building (1963-2017). Here, I show an evolution in the state’s management of its programme of urban development, from authoritarian force to the production of consensus. By conceptualising this shift as a form of post-politicisation (Swyngedouw 2009; 2018), I help to reorient understanding of the trajectory of urban governance in Cambodia. Contrary to suggestions of a more participatory and democratic apparatus (Niem 2019; STT 2016), here I argue that the White Building case evinces an attempt to manage and stifle dissent in response to growing threat from internal and international actors.

This account of ‘actually-existing’ (Beveridge and Koch 2017:37) post-politicisation in Cambodia attunes focus to wider trajectories of ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ (Bruff 2014). Wrested under pressure from a prolonged campaign of grassroots resistance to the state’s stock techniques of violent expropriation (Brickell 2014), it reifies the importance of local geographies for understanding the manifestations of authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff and Tansel 2019). Moreover, rather than marking a simple departure from the politics of consensus, the White Building example confers how techniques of post-politicisation may be

operationalised to strengthen autocratic rule, marrying the promise of consent with ongoing threats of coercion to create a more robust veneer of state legitimacy.

Although a seemingly dispiriting account of efficacy of local struggles against ‘authoritarian gentrification’ (Lees et al 2015:446), the White Building case highlights how strategies of resistance themselves evolve in response to shifting tactics of repression. Here, I lend to understanding of post-politics not as the eradication of the political but an effort at its sublimation, which contradictorily also sows the conditions for ‘the return of the repressed’ (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014:12). Rather than revolutionary, however, insurrectionary acts may emerge in the everyday. Moreover, even where such acts fail in their ostensible ambitions they may still succeed at reshaping the terrain of struggle, making a nonetheless substantive contribution to emancipatory urban politics.

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