



Project of rehabilitation and extension of the **National Museum of Cambodia**

Pre-programming intentions

ENG

23/04/2025

A. Introduction	2
1. A promising status report	3
2. The ambition of a vision in connection with heritage	6
3. A shared expertise for a precise schedule	7
B. Pre-programming intentions	2
1. A museum of heritage and for the future	3
1.1 Remarkable collections.....	3
1.1.1 A museum of masterpieces from all over the country, offering a panoramic view of national history	3
1.1.2 A great potential of collections in reserve.....	5
1.1.3 A key role as Cambodia's leading museum institution	5
1.1.4 Displaying Cambodia's heritage	7
1.2 A unique site and architecture.....	8
1.2.1 A historic location with close ties to the Palais Royal in the heart of the city.....	8
1.2.2 Heritage buildings	8
1.2.3 Unique architecture inspired by Buddhist monasteries and palatial architecture	9
1.2.4 A building originally designed to display the collections of the Old Museum and promote the renaissance of Khmer craftsmanship.....	9
1.2.5 Close ties with the Royal University of Fine Arts	10
1.2.6 A site that preserves a valuable green landscape and offers a high-quality environment	10
1.3 Extension and integration	11
1.3.1 New collections and missions involving expanded facilities	11
1.3.2 Harmonization of building complexes.....	11
1.3.3 Strong architectural, landscape and symbolic connectivity.....	11
1.3.4 A link between tradition and modernity.....	11
2. Khmer history, the identity of a nation	13
2.1 The Khmer Empire : a pivotal point in the narrative	13
2.1.1 The heart of the story : a historical overview of Cambodia	13
2.1.2 Reconfigured and expanded museum sections	13
2.1.3 A chronological and thematic progression through the collections	13
2.1.4 Thematic presentations as transitions between chronological sections	13
2.1.5 A variety of experiences to keep visitors' attention.....	14
2.2 An omnipresent intangible heritage and living arts	14
2.2.1 Intangible heritage as a key to interpretation	14
2.2.2 Cultural programming intrinsic to the museum	14
2.2.3 A meaningful immersive and experiential installation.....	14
2.3 Heritage and the Sacred : more than a museum.....	15
2.3.1 An integration of traditional beliefs as a lens through which to interpret the entire collection	15
2.3.2 The special place given to ancestors in traditional Khmer culture	15
2.3.3 A spiritual dimension of the works respected through the scenography	16
2.3.4 Beyond artworks : ancient objects as living entities.....	16
3. A museum for youth and tourism	17
3.1 For Cambodian youth : a space of cultural engagement and empowerment.....	17
3.1.1 An attractive and unique site.....	17
3.1.2 An adaptation for young audiences	17
3.1.3 A common symbol of their identity	17
3.2 For tourists : an essential gateway	18
3.2.1 A museum as a key to understanding Cambodian culture.....	18
3.2.2 A crucial first step in tourist itineraries.....	18
3.2.3 A complement to Angkor, as well as a museum representing other major national sites in Khmer history	18
3.3 Innovation and sustainability : distinguishing oneself and evolving	18
3.3.1 A 21st-century museum	18
3.3.2 A sustainable museum.....	19
3.3.3 A constantly evolving museum	19
C. Identification and organization of functions.....	20
1. List of functions	21
2. Synoptic.....	22

A. Introduction

1. A promising status report

A top-notch institution :

- The site :

Inaugurated on April 13, 1920 by King Sisowath, the National Museum of Cambodia (NMC) is one of the largest and most beautiful museums in Southeast Asia. Maintained with constant care, restored and enlarged by the great architect Vann Molyvann (1926-2017), this preserved place, of great architectural harmony, has been miraculously spared from the ravages of time despite the dramatic history of Cambodia in the 1970s and 1980s.

The institution occupies, with the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA), a space originally granted by the king and whose position, immediately north of the Royal Palace, is part of an astonishing continuity. Indeed, whether in Angkor Thom (10th-15th century), Oudong (17th-18th century) or Phnom Penh (19th century), the land adjoining the northern limit of the palace was traditionally allocated to craftsmen and their workshops. The place has retained its exceptional character. In a city in full expansion, the museum appears as a key element, with the palace and the large temples of the city center, of heritage buildings of Phnom Penh.

- The landscaped environment :

In the heart of a sprawling city whose rapid and spectacular expansion leaves little room for green spaces and the integration of plant cover into the city, the grounds of the MNC and URBA, like those of the neighboring Royal Palace, appear more and more each day as rare preserved places, right in the city center, where nature has still retained some rights. A corpus of very beautiful trees, planted since the foundation of the museum and remarkably maintained for a century, contributes to the quality of the visit to the museum, invites you to take a walk and a prolonged stop, and allows you to appreciate the traditional sensitivity of the Khmers towards nature and the development of lush gardens. The museum's position opposite the sacred space of royal cremations and, beyond, the no less sacred quay where the confluence of the Tonle Sap and the Mekong can be observed, where, during the Water Festival, the sovereign presides over the change in the course of the river, contributes to the prestige of the place.

- An exceptional architecture :

Built under the leadership of George Groslier (1887-1945) as part of the establishment of the Directorate of Arts of Cambodia (DAC) which he directed from 1919, the national museum benefits from very particular attention in the architectural choices adopted and the details of its ornamentation. The whole is very closely inspired by the studies carried out, at that time, in the field of traditional arts of the country, of which the institution must appear as a conservatory of the very first order. The details of the elevation of the building, the rhythm of the pavilions alternating with long galleries, the proportions of the stepped roofs, all this contributes to a very harmonious result and of great nobility, inspired in particular by the palatial architecture of the Angkorian period as it is captured in the bas-reliefs of some temples of the 12th and 13th centuries. The technical and decorative treatment of the door leaves and window shutters is in the same spirit and calls upon the talents of the painters and sculptors of the Arts Department.

The 1969 renovation, orchestrated by Van Molyvann, does not seek to introduce, into this heritage building, the contemporary dimension that this founder of the "New Khmer architecture" theorizes elsewhere and puts into practice in the construction of new buildings in the independent city (Chaktomuk theater, 1961). On the contrary, the modernist architect here chose to scrupulously respect the original designs by integrating, in the

central wing rebuilt identically but with modern materials, a storage area on the ground floor, hidden by the basement, and, above the mezzanine entrance gallery, an office level.

- Very rich collections :

With a collection of more than 19,000 works of all kinds, the national museum presents around 1,400 pieces in the permanent collection galleries organized around the interior courtyard-garden, the true lung of the museum which gives it, like a cloister in a monastery, all its charm. A well of light, an oasis of greenery, it allows for a regular moment of pause in a fairly dense route.

If, from the outset, the integration of ethnographic collections was mentioned in the museum project, the main destination of the museum is to evoke the major aspects of the art and archaeology of ancient Cambodia throughout its history (pre- and protohistoric Khmer arts (1st millennium BCE), pre-Angkorian (3rd-8th centuries), Angkorian (9th-15th centuries), post-Angkorian (15th-19th centuries). The museum's strong points concern the stone and bronze statuary and the architectural stone decoration testifying to the rise of Khmer royal and aristocratic patronage in favor of Hinduism and Buddhism. Masterpieces of world sculpture from all over Cambodia are exhibited there.

- A national museum and its resources at the service of other museums in Cambodia :

A top-ranking institution in Cambodia, the MNC has a national mission of expertise and assistance to the country's provincial museums. Regularly requested by these institutions, the museum staff carries out regular training and support missions for projects developed in the region.

The MNC archives (documentary and photographic sources), remarkably preserved as part of the work carried out by the restoration workshop at the time when it was placed under the supervision of the French School of the Far East (EFEO), constitute a valuable source of information for the history of the institution and its collections and, more broadly, for the history of the creation of Cambodia's museums.

The main areas to develop for a 21st century museum :

The authorities of the NMC and the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts of Cambodia have initiated a reflection on its renovation and development for several years, in connection with the issues raised by the integration, in the scientific and cultural project of the establishment, of the spaces and premises of the URBA. The ambition of this national project is to raise the NMC to the level of an institution in line with the standards of the 21st century. Several areas for improvement can be mentioned here.

-The first concerns all aspects related to the reception and support of the visitor throughout his experience of visiting and enjoying the place.

We note in fact that all aspects related to the reception of the visitor and his support must be improved :

Before the visit, all questions relating to the website, the visibility of the institution on the web, the preparation of the visit before traveling to the premises, online ticketing, etc.) must be updated. Similarly, upon arrival at the site, it would be appropriate to better design the accessibility of the different spaces and their readability in terms of mediation, the local ticketing offer and the communication elements accompanying the entry to the site (annotated map, leaflet with essential reference elements, etc.).

In the museum galleries, the communication elements concerning the general tour route, the general theme of each space, the groupings of works could be the subject of more in-depth reflection, whether in the proposed discourse or in the means chosen to highlight them (room panels, commentaries on labels, paper or multimedia devices from wing to visit, etc.).

Finally, in this reflection in connection with the support of the visitor, it would be appropriate to strengthen the cultural offer proposed by the institution. In addition to guided tours that provide an overview of the institution's masterpieces, work will need to be done to enrich this offering in multiple directions (thematic tours, adapted to different audiences, educational workshops, temporary presentations, etc.).

-The second area for improvement concerns the administration of the premises and questions relating to the logistics of the institution's operation in relation to its staff resources.

The NMC has a team of competent and motivated civil servants assisted, on ad hoc missions, by recently graduated contract workers, most of whom come from the RUFA. An initial observation is clear. The limited number of these civil servants, and the variety of their internal missions, which are superimposed on the expert missions with territorial museums, constitute desirable areas for improvement in a very constrained administrative and budgetary context. A more effective policy of continuing training for these personnel and redefining their missions could in particular overcome state recruitment constraints.

Similarly, all aspects related to the internal logistics of the establishment could benefit from a general reflection to improve issues relating to offices, their location and organization, working conditions, the presence of premises better adapted to the uses necessary for the life of an institution of this type (maintenance, toilets, various storage, etc.).

Finally, in this internal area of improvement, the question of the logistics of works of art arises. Crucial answers to major questions will have to be provided as part of this reflection: reserves (location within the museum or externally, format, adaptation to the collections, accessibility, link with the restoration spaces, permanent exhibition, temporary exhibition, with the unloading dock, etc.), places of temporary storage of the collections (buffer spaces ensuring the connection with the spaces mentioned here), and secure spaces of contact with the outside in connection with the loans or receptions of collections from territorial museums or loans to international institutions, generally speaking the entries and exits of works.



2. The ambition of a vision in connection with heritage

Designing the National Museum of Cambodia for the 21st century cannot consist solely of renovating architectural spaces and designing an updated and more explicit program for redeploying the permanent collections. While these are obviously the essential missions of a project of this type, it is indeed appropriate to be much more ambitious, upstream, on the general vision that this renovation imposes, particularly with regard to the integration of the RUFA spaces into the scientific and cultural project of the national museum. Such a vision must integrate a certain number of fundamental notions, the broad outlines of which will be given here.

The first concerns the national dimension of this institution in a country that, precisely, seeks to reconnect with its glorious past and shows, in many ways, its desire to demonstrate at the national and international level the pride of an entire nation with regard to its prestigious historical and heritage legacy. In this context, the NMC has a leading role to play, in conjunction with the country's museums, for which it assumes the status of expert and referent, as well as with the national authority Apsara in charge of the management and restoration of the monuments of Angkor and Preah Vihear.

The second, closely related to the first, concerns the particular dimension that witnesses of the past (archaeological remains, fragments of statuary or architectural decoration, etc.) possess in the traditional culture of Cambodia where the link with the sacred has never been broken. For many Cambodians, visiting the ruins of a monument like the galleries of a museum presenting witnesses of the Khmer past is not only sacrificing an aesthetic or leisure pleasure, but often participates in a much more subtle approach inscribed in an almost religious respect for the national past. If this dimension most often escapes the Western public, it is not unique in Asia, but presents, in Cambodia, a more important aspect than elsewhere in connection, most probably, with the traditional conception linked to the cult of the "Neak Ta" (ancestors, tutelary geniuses). This conception must not only be respected, it will have to be explained and integrated into the general route of the collections.

The third is linked to the integration of the premises and certain essential missions of the RUFA into the scientific and cultural project of the MNC. Long discussed, sometimes considered a handicap in the general development of the museum, this question of the integration of the RUFA within the PSC of the museum appears today as a strong point of the project, allowing in particular to preserve certain aspects of student life within the historic walls of the university: certain regalian activities (graduation ceremonies, training of dance and music classes, visual arts workshops of the upper levels, festive performances of the RUFA organized in close collaboration with the cultural activities of the national museum, presentations of temporary exhibitions linked to the work of the students, etc.). While the exact nature of these activities and their adequacy with the scientific and cultural project of the national museum still need to be clarified, everyone agrees on the relevance of this close collaboration which will make the national museum and the entire site a sort of cultural and meeting space whose dimension will go well beyond a simple museum of art and archaeology and will integrate, even better than today, the place of the younger generations in its development.

3. A shared expertise for a precise schedule

The wish of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts (MCFA) of Cambodia is to undertake a concerted reflection on the future of the NMC and the integration of the premises and some missions of the RUFA within the general program of the institution. France was requested by the MCFA in 2023 to support Cambodia in this process. Orchestrated jointly by the Cambodian MCFA and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Europe (MEAE), set up since June 2023, this cooperation is designed over two years, 2025 and 2026. It is structured around a Steering Committee, co-chaired by her Minister of Culture and Fine Arts of Cambodia, Her Excellency Sackona Phoeurng and the President of the National Museum of Asian Arts – Guimet, Yannick Lintz. The steering committee holds decision-making authority, which is exercised based on the recommendations of the technical committee, co-chaired by the Director of NMC Visoth Chhay and the Director of collections and conservation of the National Museum of Asian Arts – Guimet. The project is operated by Expertise France, in charge of schedule and financial management, and overall monitoring of project implementation. The project manager, Olivia Thorng, is based in Phnom Penh for the matter.

The feasibility studies carried out within the framework of the project deals with several dimensions that are organized in three components as below :

Component 1 : Study of collections and museum strategy

This component focuses on the study of the museum's collections, with the objective of proposing a distribution of artworks for the museum's expansion project. It also involves developing conservation and packaging recommendations for relocating the artworks during the museum's expansion construction. Finally, the last objective is to define a museum strategy that enhance the national museum as the leading institution within the network of Cambodian national museums.

The expected deliverables listed below should enable the evaluation of transportation and relocation costs for the collections and displays, as well as the restoration of certain artworks to be factored into the overall cost estimation for the museum expansion :

- Collections catalog for the museographer,
- Recommendation report on the distribution of artworks within the museum premises,
- Museum master plan, including an assessment of the strategy of the National Museum of Cambodia.

Component 2 : Functional and architectural assessment of the museum

This component focuses on the study of the buildings, aiming to provide a historical and technical assessment to define rehabilitation needs as well as the programming requirements for the future museum. These definitions will lead to the development of preliminary plans and design concepts for the renovation of the National Museum of Cambodia, while also incorporating financial estimates and the project timeline.

The studies conducted under this component will result in the following deliverables :

- Historical and technical assessment of the National Museum of Cambodia,
- Specifications document outlining the functions and uses of the building,
- Architectural sketch for the redevelopment and extension of the building, based on the specifications for the functions and uses of the completed building, including a costed estimate for the work.

Component 3 : Audience policy and the museum's scientific and cultural pre-programming

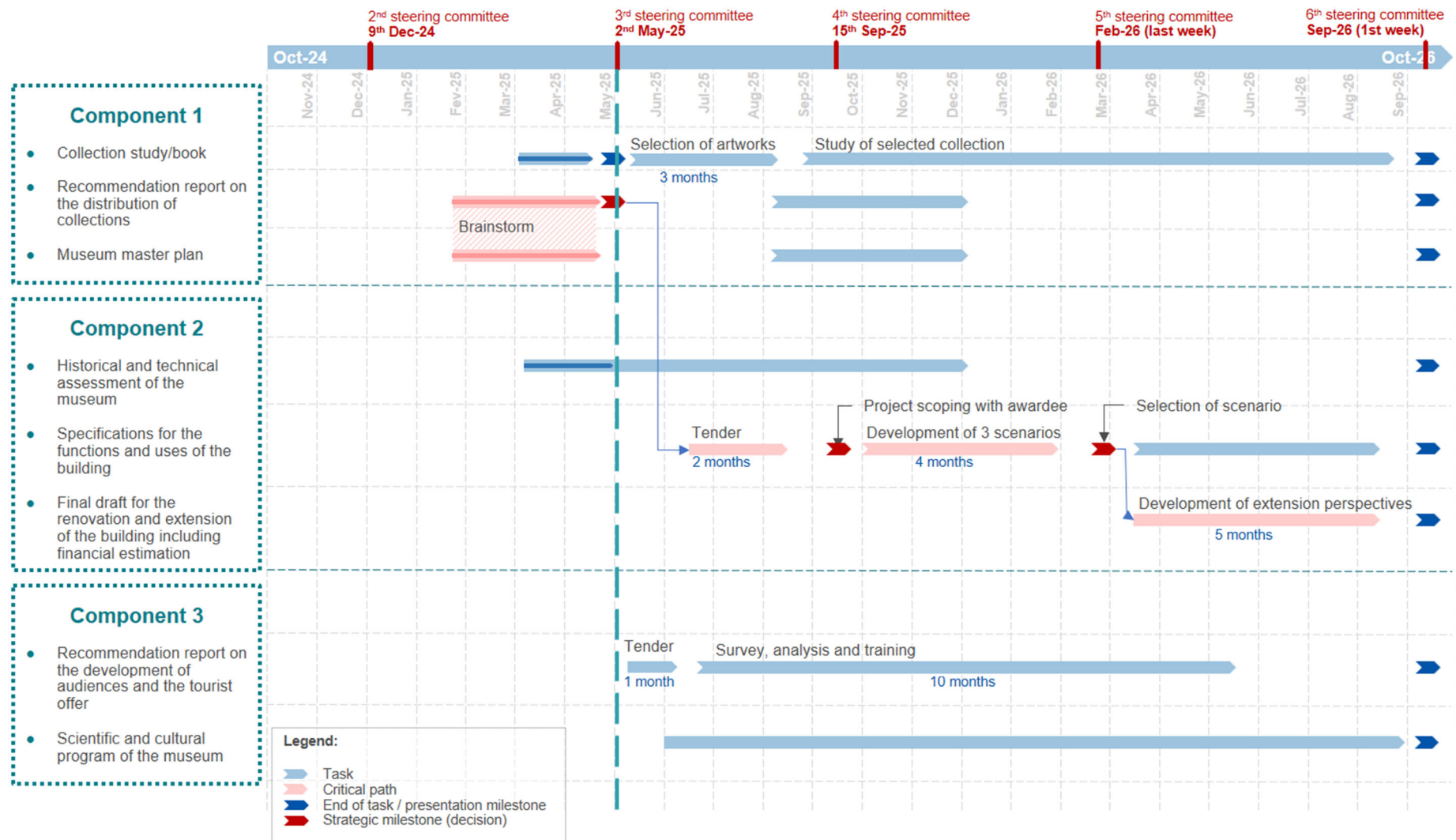
This component involves conducting a study of museum audiences, developing strategies for visitor engagement and interpretation, assessing the museum's economic model, and collaborating with the museum teams to create a preliminary scientific and cultural program for the museum.

The studies carried out under this component will be translated into the following deliverables :

- Recommendation report on audience development and tourism offerings,
- The museum's scientific and cultural pre-program. The pre-PSC will include the mediation to be planned, the updating of the visitor itinerary, the strategy for exhibitions and highlights, as well as educational actions. It will propose a business model, team organization and training plans.

Implementation of the various deliverables listed above is scheduled according to the schedule **on the following page.**





In summary, the year of 2025 would be mainly for the assessment of the current conditions and data gathering in order to define a complete specifications set so that the year of 2026

would be for the development of the National museum's extension projet up to an architectural sketch with cost estimation of the overall project.

B. Pre-programming intentions

1. A museum of heritage and for the future

1.1 Remarkable collections

1.1.1 A museum of masterpieces from all over the country, offering a panoramic view of national history

For a long time Cambodia's only proper museum institution, the NMC brought together pieces from all the country's territories. These collections, gathered by the Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, then in charge of studying and preserving Cambodia's heritage until 1970, are completed by the most exceptional recent discoveries, for which the museum remains, for the time being, the preferred destination. The acquisition policy in this area remains very active.

These collections focus on Hindu and Buddhist stone and bronze statuary, for which each period offers outstanding examples.

As a rough indication, although no definitive number has yet been decided, the museum currently exhibits around 1,500 works. The intention, depending on the progress of the feasibility study, is to increase this number by 10% over time.



Vishnu and two of his avatars: Rama and Balarama, sandstone, late 6th century, Prasat Phnom Da (Ta Keo province)



The battle of Bhima and Duryodhana in the presence of the Pandava and Kaurava, sandstone, second quarter of the 10th century, Prasat Chen, Koh Ker (Preah Vihear province).



Presumed portrait of Jayavarman VII, sandstone, late 12th-early 13th century, Preah Khan d'Angkor (Siem Reap province)

1.1.2 A great potential of collections in reserve

Over 18,000 works are kept in storage. Among these are a number of outstanding pieces deserving of a place in the permanent collection. In recent years, a desire to lighten the presentation of the museum's galleries and make them more accessible has led to a drastic selection of exhibits, with a large number of masterpieces being placed in reserve. In an enlarged layout, with enriched themes, these works would find their rightful place.

These collections also offer considerable potential for loans for temporary exhibitions, both nationally and internationally.



Examples of outstanding pre-Angkorian statuary, stored in storage at the NMC

1.1.3 A key role as Cambodia's leading museum institution

In association with management, NMC teams are regularly approached for collaborative projects with their colleagues in local institutions (museums in Battambang, Preah Vihear, Ta Keo, Kompong Thom, Angkor National Museum, Norodom Sihanouk Museum in Siem Reap, etc.).

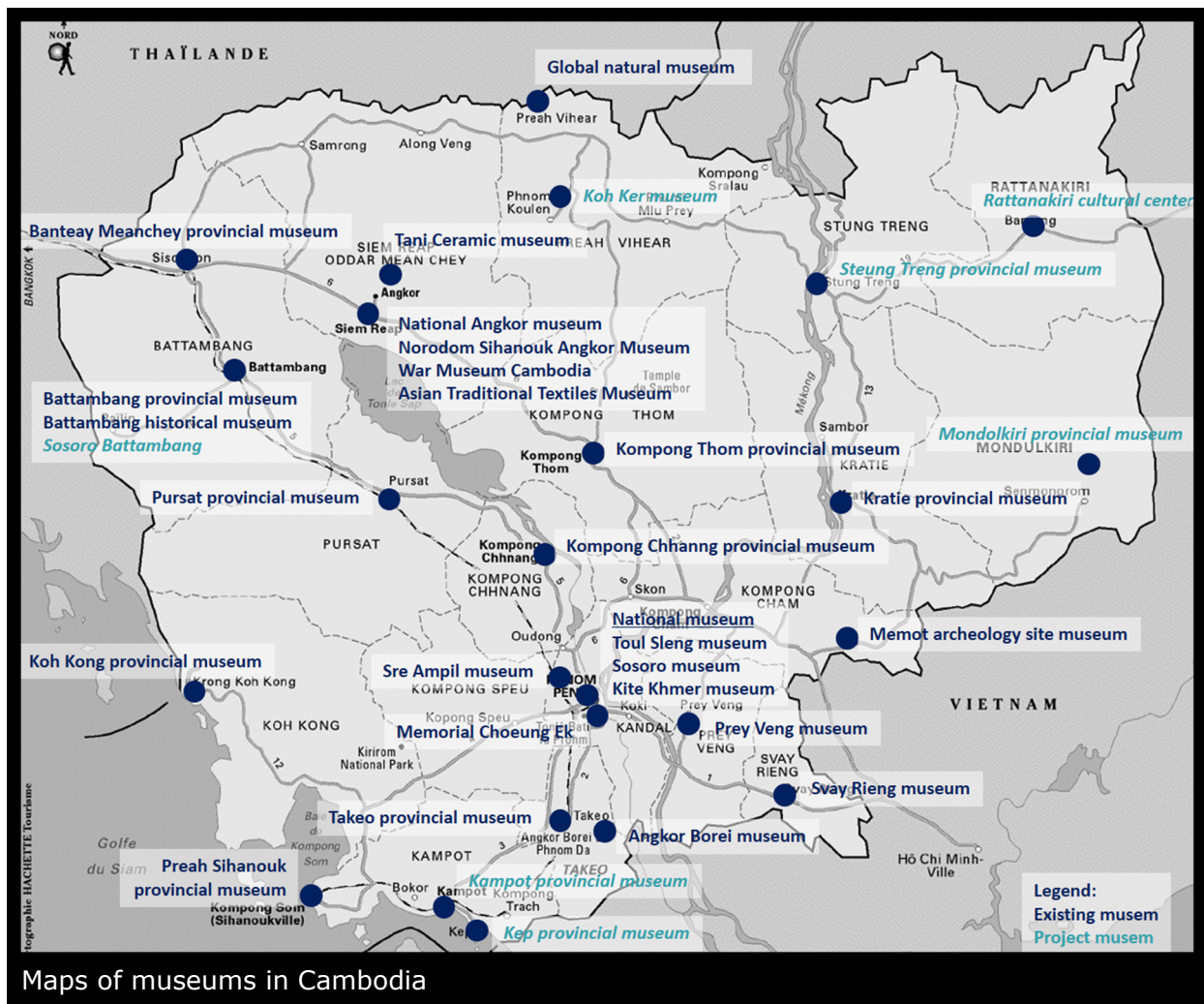
In 2015, MNC teams participated in the renovation and redeployment of the collections of the Battambang provincial museum, with the help and support of FOKCI (Friends of Khmer Culture, Inc) : selection of works, definition of the exhibition path and scenography, drafting of labels with comments in Khmer and English, definition and adjustment of the lighting.



Renovated exhibition hall of the Battambang Provincial Museum, reopened in 2015

The National Museum plays a central role in preserving and promoting the country's cultural heritage. In the past, many works of art, particularly statuary, were transferred to the museum mainly for security reasons. Today, this centralization is motivated more by the symbolism represented by the national museum. Indeed, provincial museums consider that masterpieces should be displayed in this emblematic location, to underline their national importance and value. Moreover, for individual donors, the trust they place exclusively in the national museum is a key factor. The museum is seen as the guardian of the preservation and promotion of these cultural treasures, reinforcing its fundamental role in the country's museum scene.

To date, the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts has 25 other institutions in its museum directory.



1.1.4 Displaying Cambodia's heritage

Since the creation of the NMC, the question has emerged of including ethnographic collections within its scope of competence, but throughout the institution's history, the tendency has remained to privilege the stone, bronze and terracotta heritages of the pre-Angkorian and Angkorian periods.

In recent years, Cambodia's Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts has considerably increased its interest in matters relating to intangible heritage as defined by UNESCO, which includes evidence of traditions or living expressions inherited from ancestors and passed on to their descendants, spoken traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, or the knowledge and expertise required for traditional crafts.

It is in this spirit that the NMC intends to broaden its area of expertise and include in its acquisition policy traditional costumes and ornaments linked to rites of passage in Cambodian society, as well as performing arts such as masked theater and ballet (Lakhon Khol), shadow theater (Sbaek Thom), or classical Khmer music.

1.2 A unique site and architecture

1.2.1 A historic location with close ties to the Palais Royal in the heart of the city

As mentioned in the introduction, the site occupied by the NMC reflects the importance attached from the beginning to an institution designed to serve as a testimony to the greatness and longevity of Cambodian art and civilization.

The land itself was once part of the royal domain dedicated to the palace's craftsmen. More recent archaeological work (excavations at the royal palace of Angkor Thom under the direction of Brice Vincent, EFEO) has shown that this tradition probably dates back at least to the foundation of Angkor in the early 10th century, and that it was repeated in the later capitals of Khmer royalty before the final settlement in Phnom Penh.

From a place of creation and work for the Palace's craftsmen, in close contact with the prestigious patron, we have moved on to a place of study and training for art and archaeology students, trained in these disciplines through direct contact with the archaeological and heritage collections preserved in the museum galleries occupying a section of this space. Art and power have always been linked in traditional Cambodia.

1.2.2 Heritage buildings

In the introduction, was mentioned the key role played by George Groslier (1887-1945) in the colonial authorities' concern to preserve and even "revive" the country's artistic traditions at the beginning of the 20th century. The creation of the Direction des Arts du Cambodge (DAC) was part of this approach. All existing skills in the fields of fine arts and architecture were gathered from all over the country, in order to build up a knowledge centre in Phnom Penh, on the premises of what was to become the Royal University of Fine Arts, which soon organized itself into a structured teaching team.

The architectural choices adopted for the NMC demonstrate this attention to detail, both in the general principles of elevation and the overall style of the architecture, and in every detail of its ornamentation (see p.8 and 5)

In this sense, the NMC building can be seen as the most accomplished and best-preserved conservatory in Cambodia of traditional Khmer architecture as it was known and practised in the second half of the 19th century, during the reign of Kings Norodom and Sisowath.



Direction des Arts du Cambodge, Wood Sculptors, 1939 (NMC Collection)

1.2.3 Unique architecture inspired by Buddhist monasteries and palatial architecture

The pace of the building's elevation is set by a noble storey with very high ceilings, punctuated by high windows and pillars supporting the overhanging roof structure. It rests on a high, moulded base whose decorative motifs are perfectly in line with Angkorian temple and palace architecture.

The long galleries, regularly arranged with an acute sense of symmetry and proportion, alternate with pavilions marking the center and corners of the facades, and whose higher and sometimes stepped roofs elegantly punctuate the silhouette of the whole, all contribute to a very harmonious and noble result.

The overall design is clearly inspired by the palatial architecture of the Angkorian period, as seen in the bas-reliefs of certain 12th and 13th century temples, and as long preserved in the Buddhist monasteries of the country, of which very few examples have survived from before the beginning of the 20th century.



National Museum of Cambodia : initial building and current situation

1.2.4 A building originally designed to display the collections of the Old Museum and promote the renaissance of Khmer craftsmanship

This "palace museum" was designed to house the collections of the former museum and, above all, to integrate the most exceptional examples of statuary and architectural decoration uncovered throughout the country by the Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient since 1900, and since 1907 in the provinces of Siem Reap, Battambang and Sisophon. In fact, it was during this fieldwork that EFEO archaeologists selected pieces whose particular features required museum protection, which was then centralized in Phnom Penh.

It soon became clear that the initial idea of an institution to serve as a model for the artists and craftsmen trained at Royal University of Fine Arts, was coupled with that of an institution with a more classically museum-like vocation of a conservatory for archaeological remains. Gradually, in the main galleries, devoted to masterpieces of Buddhist and Hindu statuary presented in chronological order, the path doubles as a presentation of architectural décor under the porch overlooking the inner garden. Here, lintels (traditional Khmer door tops in brick and sandstone), colonnettes (lintel supports), pediments and architectural statuary are displayed in chronological order, and soon pile up as if in a lapidary depository.

1.2.5 Close ties with the Royal University of Fine Arts

Despite this natural evolution of the national museum over time, it is undeniable that the institution's link with the Royal University of Fine Arts ("RUFA") has never diminished. The very presence of the teaching facilities close to the museum, in a harmoniously designed architectural setting, is in itself a strong bond. The common color of the buildings immediately brings them together.

But beyond the location and appearance of the buildings, the entire life of RUFA and the NMC is based on a genuine synergy. The notion of models, of immediately accessible references, remains very strong in all aspects of RUFA's teaching (archaeology, fine arts, dance, etc.), and students regularly visit these rooms. Many of the national museum's scientists also teach at RUFA, and the prestige of their position at the museum enhances their standing with students. These student/teacher relationships regularly encourage the museum's management to recruit highly motivated young talents from the ranks of recent graduates, on temporary contracts, to take on a wide variety of roles within the team.



1.2.6 A site that preserves a valuable green landscape and offers a high-quality environment

As mentioned in the introduction, the spaces of the NMC and RUFA are set apart from the surrounding dense urban tissue by the preservation of a large corpus of beautiful trees, planted at the time of the museum's foundation and remarkably well maintained over the past century. Their presence, scattered throughout the various buildings of the two institutions, contributes to the quality of the visit to the museum, inviting visitors to take a stroll or linger for a while, and enabling them to appreciate the traditional Khmer sensitivity towards nature and the enhancement of luxuriant gardens.

The museum's position facing the sacred space of the royal cremations and, beyond, the no less sacred riverside where the confluence of the Tonle Sap and Mekong rivers can be observed, and where, during the Festival of the Waters, the sovereign presides over the changing of the river's course, also contributes greatly to the prestige of the site.

1.3 Extension and integration

1.3.1 New collections and missions involving expanded facilities

A thorough study of the collections on display in the museum's permanent galleries, of the remarkable artifacts still hidden away in storage, and of the new prospects for enriching the museum's presentation through the addition of ethnographic collections linked to intangible heritage, all lead to the need for larger exhibition spaces that are better suited to this trend.

This observation, which could lead us to consider in the future museum's program only the enlargement of the permanent galleries, in which a simply enlarged presentation would take place, actually goes hand in hand with the desire to inscribe in the building's architecture this desire to make the national museum not only a heritage site, but also a living cultural place, open to the challenges of the evolution of Cambodian society. All this requires not only new floor space, but also new equipment.

1.3.2 Harmonization of building complexes

Integrating RUFA's buildings into the museum's scientific and cultural project is no easy task. The NMC seems to turn its back on RUFA, even obscuring its main buildings, whose facades are set back only slightly, the more so as the spaces in front of them are divided between the two institutions. What's more, these buildings are not built on foundations of the same height.

Nevertheless, the challenge of this rehabilitation/expansion is to preserve the majority of the site's heritage buildings, i.e. the entire national museum and most of RUFA's historic buildings.

A successful renovation / integration project will therefore have to define the new functions of each part of RUFA in harmony with the needs of the national museum and the preservation of some of the university's core missions.

1.3.3 Strong architectural, landscape and symbolic connectivity

In addition to redefining the new functions of each part of the RUFA in harmony with the needs of the national museum's new scientific and cultural project, the key challenge of the renovation/integration will be to create a genuine architectural connectivity, which is currently unfulfilled, and which will enable the museum and university to be brought together in a single harmonious entity at the heart of a building and landscape setting with a strong identity.

This harmony, visible in the architectural choices made, the newly opened and defined perspectives and accesses, accompanied by a vegetation cover underlining this strengthened relationship, should enable visitors to appreciate the site as a whole, and to move naturally from the historic museum to its extension on the university side.

In addition to the concept of redefining the building's missions, the visitor's path through all the spaces has to be taken into account, not forgetting the constraints of operation and the necessarily easy relationship between collections and storage areas, temporary display areas and services such as the auditorium, restaurant, store, etc.

1.3.4 A link between tradition and modernity

The entire project is in line with this desire to combine tradition and modernity. Beyond the cliché frequently used, the aim here is to harmonize a heritage architectural context, preserving archaeological and artistic collections, with an approach that seeks to integrate, in addition to the classic functions of a museum, the promotion of skills and practices around works of art and artistic creation, on the one hand, and the many aspects of intangible heritage, on the other, in a meaningful narrative.

Added to this was the desire to integrate a contemporary building into this harmonious heritage ensemble, combining the advantages of an air-conditioned space that meets contemporary standards for the preservation of collections made from organic materials, with the innovative nature of a modern, inspired building in keeping with the century, whose design would contribute to the contemporary signature of the project as a whole.

2. Khmer history, the identity of a nation

2.1 The Khmer Empire : a pivotal point in the narrative

2.1.1 The heart of the story : a historical overview of Cambodia

The uniqueness and richness of the National Museum's collections enable us to present a historical and cultural panorama of Cambodia in the light of great masterpieces spanning the entire chronology, from the first centuries before our era to the present day.

Certainly, their strongest point remains the Pre-Angkorian and Angkorian periods (first centuries AD - 15th century), often considered a golden age of Khmer civilization.

Careful restoration of the Angkor temples and the image of Cambodia exported by this site and its many exceptional buildings are among the key elements of the Cambodian government's policy. Restoring Angkor's grandeur is also at the heart of the preoccupations of some of the country's young people, for whom, over and above the artistic and cultural dimension, the political dimension of a developing country, long under the yoke of its neighbors, is added.

Without going further into these considerations, it is important to see the renovation of the national museum in this frame of mind, and not to neglect this dimension without, however, having an impact on the scientific discourse provided by the museum.

2.1.2 Reconfigured and expanded museum sections

It is likely that the general layout of the future museum will be chronological. If the bronze collections were not presented separately from the rest of the presentation and placed in the introduction, as has been the case from the opening of the museum to the present day, it would be easier to offer visitors a more explicit introductory section, outlining the history of the institution and its general purpose. This would be followed by the traditional chronological sections of Cambodian history : pre- and protohistory, pre-Angkorian, Angkorian and post-Angkorian.

A question that remains unsolved is whether or not the museum is chronologically limited. Does the museum stop at the 19th century, like the Louvre ? Or does it include the modern and contemporary periods ? The question remains open.

What we do know, however, is that new spaces should be devoted at least to ethnography, to the residence of George Groslier and, perhaps, to visitable reserves or study galleries.

2.1.3 A chronological and thematic progression through the collections

Within this essentially chronological general itinerary, it was decided to integrate thematic approaches, punctuating the spaces and acting as transitions designed both to break the monotony of an excessive linear vision, and to take a closer look at more specific questions of civilization, enriching the general theme.

2.1.4 Thematic presentations as transitions between chronological sections

In this chrono-thematic progression, specific spaces would be created in which artworks would be selected according to the desired theme, with a cross-disciplinary look at the works allowing them to be recontextualized by evoking particular themes such as themes linked to the spread of Indian culture (between protohistory and the pre-Angkorian period), questions of writing, language and epigraphy (in the early Angkorian period), questions of religion and iconography (Hinduism, Buddhism but also the cult of Neak Ta / animism), questions linked to the specificity of Khmer architecture in relation to that of the Indian world, etc... along the Angkorian journey.

2.1.5 A variety of experiences to keep visitors' attention

The main purpose of these thematic sections, in addition to punctuating and energizing the tour, is to focus on social events, customs, rituals and so on.

This cannot be achieved without the interaction, in addition to the exhibition works, of a variety of mediation devices capable of offering visitors other ways of considering these issues and maintaining their attention during the visit : interactive and multimedia devices, miniature maps or replicas, low-tech manipulations, etc.

2.2 An omnipresent intangible heritage and living arts

2.2.1 Intangible heritage as a key to interpretation

In accordance with the wishes of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, the new National Museum will focus its scientific and cultural program, as well as the general layout of its collections, on the most diverse aspects of Cambodia's intangible heritage, according to the themes mentioned above (2.1.4), and in the transitional spaces arranged regularly between the permanent galleries.

These civilizational themes will serve as interpretation keys for both Cambodian and international audiences.

2.2.2 Cultural programming intrinsic to the museum

One of the main focuses of the future museum will be to develop a cultural program that meets the challenges of transmitting intangible and living heritage, closely connected to the collections.

This program should be built around cultural events, celebrations of the country's traditional festivals, music and dance performances, temporary exhibitions, conferences, and more, all dedicated to these themes.

Maintaining strong ties with RUFA is clearly a key element in its involvement in the design and implementation of these events.

2.2.3 A meaningful immersive and experiential installation

The National Museum of Cambodia of tomorrow must meet the experiential expectations inherent in contemporary tourism, which targets a wide and diverse audience.

For this reason, and because the narrative developed within the permanent exhibition would be significantly enriched by such an approach, it would be highly desirable to include a strong immersive and experiential installation that reflects the Cambodian life cycle and its associated rituals (birth, coming of age, marriage, funerals, etc.), a central theme that is essential to understanding Cambodian identity.

2.3 Heritage and the Sacred : more than a museum

2.3.1 An integration of traditional beliefs as a lens through which to interpret the entire collection

Beyond the historical narrative and the presentation of masterpieces related to key moments in Khmer civilization, major highlights of the visitor experience at the National Museum, consideration should be given to the ways in which traditional Cambodian beliefs can be presented

Largely unknown to Western audiences and experienced by Cambodian youth within a rapidly changing world, without necessarily being perceived as a source of cultural richness or as a defining aspect of the Khmer spirit, these beliefs nevertheless play a vital role in how Cambodians relate to their heritage and interpret works of art.



Buddha statue consecration ceremony

2.3.2 The special place given to ancestors in traditional Khmer culture

Among these traditional beliefs, the special place given to ancestors, Neak Ta, and to the cults and ritual practices associated with them emerges as a key to understanding Khmer civilization.

As such, it should be given a prominent place in the museum's mediation. One notable example is the enduring practice, especially in rural areas, of maintaining small domestic altars where fragments of statuary or architectural elements, recovered from nearby ruined monuments, are used as objects of veneration and regularly receive offerings.

2.3.3 A spiritual dimension of the works respected through the scenography

The sacred dimension of heritage artworks, in the general mind of Khmer people, is a key concept that must be made explicit.

It will allow the project as a whole to develop a scenographic approach that is both adapted and unique, a reflection of a culture that, despite the challenges of globalization, has managed to preserve a distinct way of seeing.

Acknowledging and giving this perspective the place it deserves will enrich the narrative, particularly for Western audiences, who as heirs to the intellectual legacy of the late Enlightenment and the French Revolution, have largely lost their connection to the sacred. Once clarified, this notion will take on an unparalleled role within the scenographic design. In this sense, the visitor experience will powerfully embody and convey Cambodian identity.

2.3.4 Beyond artworks : ancient objects as living entities

Beyond scenography that respects the sacred dimension of the artworks, ultimately contributing to the creation of a strong and compelling identity-driven display, all actions surrounding the works must encourage diverse uses and interpretations.

For example, it could be valuable to incorporate into the overall scenographic approach the possibility of flexible configurations, allowing the artworks to be temporarily freed from their interpretative frameworks during specific ceremonies or selected moments from the traditional Khmer calendar.

Likewise, it would be worth considering the development of a cultural program that welcomes and supports practices related to the sacred nature of the works (such as attending a ceremony, or explaining it to visitors discovering it for the first time, etc.).

While the museum is not intended to become a temple, the aim here would be to respect this sense of the sacred and to make it understandable to the public.

3. A museum for youth and tourism

3.1 For Cambodian youth : a space of cultural engagement and empowerment

3.1.3 An attractive and unique site

Anyone who walks through the museum's galleries today, especially on weekends or during holiday periods, can see how much Cambodian youth have embraced the museum as a cherished space for culture, but also for elegance, peace, and serenity.

The chatter in the garden between friends or lovers, the selfies taken in front of specific artworks or against the beautiful vistas offered by the museum, all reflect the success the museum has already achieved.

This dimension should be prioritized in the future, and it is essential to ensure that the integration of RUFA spaces, in the context of preserving its plant life as mentioned earlier, strengthens this trend of youth viewing the museum as a sanctuary for peace and relaxation.

3.1.2 An adaptation for young audiences

In this perspective, it is crucial to integrate from the start the idea that the museum's mediation tools and their content should be specifically tailored to this target audience.

The Minister of Culture and Fine Arts has reiterated time and again that the entire project must be focused on youth.

A discourse specifically aimed at young audiences, developed alongside the museum's general mediation strategy, along with carefully selected activities to attract and guide them throughout their visit, represent key areas for improvement in the future.

3.1.3 A common symbol of their identity

The actions undertaken by the museum to engage young audiences, by creating a privileged space within a constrained urban environment and developing appealing tools and dedicated activities, aim to foster a strong sense of belonging among this crucial segment of the visitor base.

Ultimately, the goal is to establish the museum as a shared symbol of their identity.



Visite du musée national par un groupe « jeune public »

3.2 For tourists : an essential gateway

3.2.1 A museum as a key to understanding Cambodian culture

Despite the development of museum institutions in Cambodia, including the renovation of the Battambang Museum and, most notably, the creation of the Angkor National Museum — which, however, struggles to attract visitors in proportion to the temples — the National Museum offers a unique, truly national dimension.

It is important to emphasize this key point, which the institution does not communicate clearly enough.

3.2.2 A crucial first step in tourist itineraries

At a time when international flights required a stopover in Phnom Penh before heading to Siem Reap, the National Museum served as a valuable and necessary introduction to the visit of Angkor.

Today, while most tourists go directly to Siem Reap without passing by Phnom Penh, many visitors and tour operators still seek to prioritize a more complete experience of Cambodia. The uniqueness of the National Museum, the only one of its kind in Cambodia, therefore makes it an essential step in understanding the country. It is in Phnom Penh that the most exceptional masterpieces, uncovered throughout the country — from the provinces of Takeo to Preah Vihear — are gathered for the enjoyment of visitors. Combined with a visit to the nearby Royal Palace, a visit to the National Museum is one of the most extraordinary experiences in Southeast Asia.

3.2.3 A complement to Angkor, as well as a museum representing other major national sites in Khmer history

While many of the foremost masterpieces displayed in the National Museum's galleries were discovered at Angkor and its surrounding areas, this is not the museum's only strength.

In fact, it is in Phnom Penh that the most exceptional masterpieces, uncovered throughout the country — from the provinces of Ta Keo to Preah Vihear — are gathered for the enjoyment of visitors.

It is also in Phnom Penh that one can truly understand the stages of development of Khmer civilization, particularly through the process of Indianization.

For example, the rise and significance of the southern and central pre-Angkorian kingdoms around Angkor Borei and Sambor Prei Kuk can only be fully illustrated by the collections of the National Museum.

3.3 Innovation and sustainability : distinguishing oneself and evolving

3.3.1 A 21st-century museum

Designing an ambitious renovation and extension project for the National Museum cannot be done without ensuring that the institution meets the international standards of major museum institutions.

Thus, this project must be conceived with ambition, both in the content of its scientific and cultural program and in the design and implementation of everything that will enhance the visitor experience, revitalized through the use of innovative tools better suited to the expectations of today's audience.

3.3.2 A sustainable museum

In the same spirit of making this institution a museum of its time, it will be important to prioritize all aspects that will ensure the project is well-calibrated for long-term use, following a sustainable development approach.

For example, the restoration of the traditional architectural elements of the historic building, originally designed to promote air circulation and renewal, should be prioritized over the widespread use of air conditioning in all spaces.

Similarly, care should be taken to ensure that the chosen interpretive tools do not impose excessive constraints in terms of energy consumption and operational costs.

3.3.3 A constantly evolving museum

Finally, it is essential that the institution's scientific and cultural project places significant emphasis, in all aspects of its implementation, on its capacity for renewal.

Far from being a static institution, the museum shall focus on building a loyal audience through a dynamic program of temporary exhibitions and various events, as well as by regularly changing displays in the permanent galleries to highlight specific themes.

Supported by communication platforms with which the museum should strengthen its connections, such dynamism will contribute to increased attendance from local visitors in a megacity of 2.3 million inhabitants, whose population has doubled in the past twenty years.

C.	Identification and organization of functions
-----------	---

1. List of functions

The list of the various functions of the renovation project has been defined :

- Sheet 1 – Reception
- Sheet 2 – Shop
- Sheet 3 – Food services
- Sheet 4 – Cultural activities
- Sheet 5 – Auditorium
- Sheet 6 – Permanent exhibition
- Sheet 7 – Temporary exhibition
- Sheet 8 – Resource and research center
- Sheet 9 – Security
- Sheet 10 – Administration
- Sheet 11 – Museographic logistics
- Sheet 12 – Building logistics
- Sheet 13 – Privatization
- Sheet 14 – Landscaped areas
- Sheet 15 – Replica workshop
- Sheet 16 – Storage rooms

At this stage of the project, work on each functional sheet is ongoing. Each identified function is being informed by data collected from key contacts at the National Museum of Cambodia. Based on this preliminary work, an initial functional overview of the future facility has been developed.

2. Synoptic

