the town had revealed itself to me, and after we had successfully found each other, I walked back home feeling fulfilled and a bit more grown up.

K: I was never scared of the dogs we would find in our way, you know. I was used to them. But I was scared that if you got bored of the game, I would lose my companion.

D: One day I walked past a man who said something to me. Pretending to be a grown up, pretending there was nothing odd about walking around without my parents, I replied casually and kept going my way. I remember this feeling of pride: I was out there walking by myself, talking to strangers!

K: The narrow streets were usually empty, making me feel like the sole ruler of a place that was all mine, while hoping for no unexpected encounters. It was the fear of strangers challenging my right of wandering alone ‘in places I shouldn’t be in’. It was also the fear that I would have to answer the annoying “where are you going, young lady?” and “Nowhere” was not a good enough answer. And to this day I don’t know why not.

D: Luckily, we seem to have maintained the same curiosity, really. I think it has to do with this experience we shared, with this game of ours. We still walk slowly and observe the world, feeling a sense of wonder for everything in it. We’re not afraid of losing ourselves or each other in it.

K: Why is this game still such a reference point in our lives? Have we romanticized it and used it to explain our personal and professional paths and choices, or could it be that it wired our brains to keep seeking the unexpected, the unknown, the somehow scary?

D: I feel a strong attachment to the experiences and images gained through this game, and to a certain degree I think they are universal for all kids in that age. In some way, all children experience their surroundings through play and those fragments of places stick with them.

K: As grown-ups, we play less and less; we live urban adventures less and less; connect with our fellow playmates less and less; and lose connection to our environment and our social role in it more and more. This is why I’m happy I’ve grown to still act like this wandering fearless child I used to be. I still continue walking and exploring—sometimes with you and sometimes alone—, seeking new urban stories to share and people to connect with. I’m never tired of it, I’m in constant awe of the city around me.

D: And now that I moved to the same city as you, we can play our game again, picking up from where we left it and perhaps recruiting new members to get lost with.
estimated 3 million lives. Instigated by the fabricated Khmer nationalism of the French Indochinese authorities during the colonial protectorate,


the Khmer Rouge forcibly enacted an ultranationalist identity. Enforced by Angkar, they denounced the values of Western-Imperial society. Angkar attempted to annihilate all previous traditions and culture by targeting religious denominations, urban professionals, intellectuals, artists, and ethnic minorities. These legacies of colonialism and ethnocide afflict Khmer peoples with historical amnesia. The frustration for a person who cannot trust the telling of their past, is the insurmountable task of knowing where to start.

Amidst this confusing history, these cultural signifiers displaced from meaning create room for reinterpretation in our historical moment. Repair within this context is understood as re-appropriation, or the absorption of what symbolizes the American (and French) imperialist into the temporalities of the Khmer cosmology. This re-appropriation of Americana is a translation of value, resisting white-washing narratives.
Fig 2. Plan detail of spirit structure deployment. Drawing by author, December 2019.
Fig 3. Perspective detail of an asura army confronting praying Khmerians.
Drawing by author; December 2019.
Until 1994, the Office of Refugee Resettlement processed over 150,000 Khmer refugees into ‘ideal’ locations across America. In New England, Lowell’s Cambodia Town is the second largest Khmerican ethnoburb in the USA. The ethnoburb delineates a spatial boundary wherein a minority group publicly exhibits their traditional religious and cultural values, such as Chinatowns, Little Ethiopias or Paseo Boricuas.6

SPIRIT HOME, TRANSLATED TEVADA

In Cambodia, tevada is a practice of shrine construction predating Buddhist religion. These power objects are commissioned and built with the most readily accessible materials, existing between the format of an object and a building.7 Across Khmerica, spirit homes are constructed within the standardized Home Depot catalog of materials. They are inherited and regularly repaired, upheld by a notion of collective ownership within the ethnoburb. Spirit homes are always erected in relation to a larger structure, with beliefs varying regionally and no ultimate consensus on who occupies these homes. They host routine offerings of items such as mangoes, hell bank notes or nips of Johnny Walker to appease...
the resident spirit. The preference for burning either dollar, euro or yen joss paper offerings have fluctuated with trends in the global market. Flammable lakes of Louis Vuitton and Gucci handbags as well as Macbooks, iPhones and other high-end products reflect the increasing commodification of even the spiritual world.

These monuments depict faux Rococo molding and a skillfully composed Buddhist color palette supplied by Benjamin Moore & Company, complemented by an opulent display of gold. The aesthetics of these spirit homes project a tension between the class values and devotion of the Khmer diaspora who pray to them today. This enduring practice is characterized by several types of structures, namely buddhas, devas, and ancestral spirits. The exact specifications are still passed down orally and maintain an internal construction logic legible as a formal hierarchy of elements. Tevadas for Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are the tallest because their feet must rest above a person’s head during prayer. Statues of deities such as the legendary black-skinned founder of present-day Battambang City, Ta Battambang [Fig. 04] often occupy the plinth. Ancestral shrines rest atop four piliotis creating a platform typically around waist height. Spirit structures cluster in packs in order to display the full effect of spectacle, regardless of their context. The impression of a much larger scale, for instance, can be achieved by stacking trim atop trim, multiplying the number of edges on a spirit structure. The ‘true’ reasons and organizational logic were forgotten long ago, allowing the spirit home to become self-referential.

Spirit structures are precursors to a larger action, as some are outfitted with caster wheels to easily move within the property line of the Buddhist temple, or to leave for a ceremonial procession [Fig. 05]. During Lowell’s annual Southeast Asian Water Festival, New England’s Khmer community converges on the shores of the Merrimack River to race dragon boats, perform traditional dances, and sell revered goods. The spirit homes of Wat Glory mobilize to distinguish each zone of activity, temporarily expanding the ethnurb into a completely different part of the city. Spirit homes are built with the understanding that many people will come to appeal to these shrines. This typology allows for thinking about the production of architecture as forecasting certain kinds of deployment, habitually activated during cultural events.

EPILOGUE

The myth of American exceptionalism reveals a tragic irony for the Khmer diaspora. Refugees forced to flee from US intervention, so indoctrinated that they mistake their aggressor as a savior. A familiar narrative of assimilation which safeguards US from any critique. Protests simply written off as un-American, exclude vital conversations necessary for healing from and overcoming systems of oppression. America's future is black, brown, and mixed. By 2043, the US Census projects that America will technically become minority white.9

The abstraction of a diaspora offers the potential for an expansive identity bridging dialogue within the nuanced intersections of lived experience. Khmericana offers a cultural contribution through syncretic artifacts that connect discourse across the diasporic heritage of America. The spirit home is grounded in the constructs of community and stability, recreating spaces through a practice of cultural repair. This work leverages spirit structures to invent new artifacts expanding the expectations for practicing Cambodian-American traditions. Khmericana offers alternative ethics for diasporic Khmer life, a project investigating sacred values through the production of architectural knowledge.

REFERENCES


