

# The Blueprint

**Striking a Balance Between a  
Designer's Imagination, an Investor's  
Limits and the Expectations of  
Clientele**

Gone are the days of rushed planning, cut corners and a quick and easy profit; the industry commands an increasingly higher standard and wider range of options. New developments have to not only match these standards, but also raise the bar to keep ahead of the thriving market.

One innovative company staying on top of the game is ASMA Architects. French architect Ivan Tizianel and his colleagues founded the company in 2002 after designing the Kantha Bopha conference center in Siem Reap. "We used local materials as much as possible, and used a simple shape for the

design," Tizianel says of the initial project, a prototype of ASMA's clean signature style. After this success, ASMA has gone on to design a range of buildings, including spas, hotels and cafes, in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap.

With 14 years' experience in Cambodia, Tizianel is well equipped to deal with the inevitable pitfalls of working on a hospitality building project. Even in the early planning stages, the artistic and commercial sides of the project can seem incompatible. "With a hotel, for example, you can't just base everything around the idea or concept. You also have to think







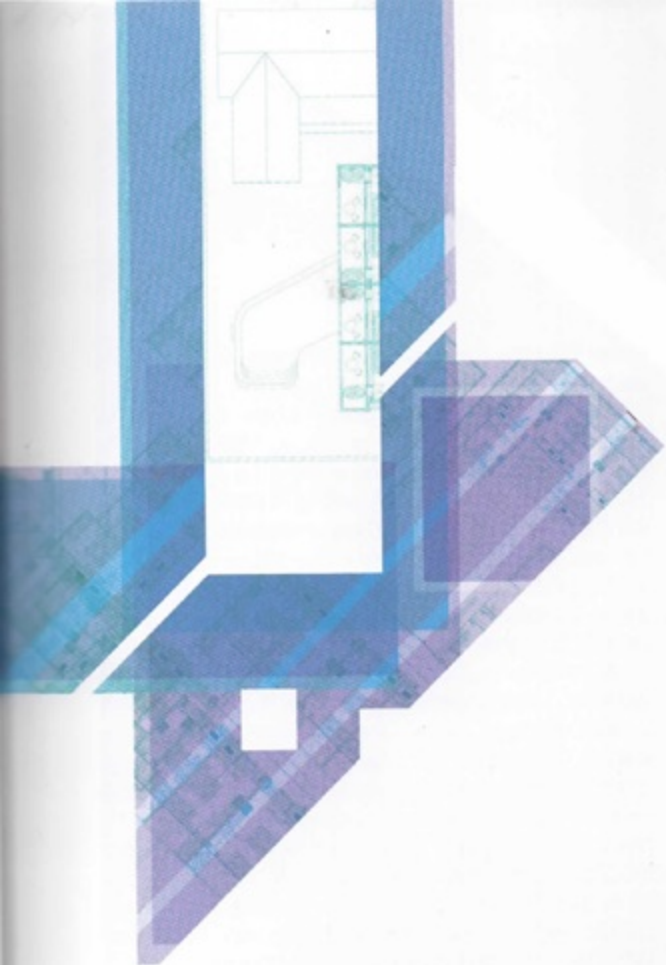
**“ BRICKS AND CLAY ARE PRODUCED HERE, AND RATTAN AND WATER HYACINTH ARE EVERYWHERE - YOU CAN DRY THEM TO MAKE MATS AND TEXTURES. ”**

you don't plan properly, you end up with an aircon unit stuck on the facade. To avoid that you have to spend a lot of time thinking about how to hide it."

Construction of Rambutan Hotel took 10 months, from the first discussions to the finished buildings. "At first, all his designs didn't have enough rooms," explains DeGraff. "I had to ask him to make more or else the hotel wouldn't survive. At first, the kitchen and restaurant were in the main building, but we would've lost so many rooms that it would have been impossible."

Rambutan's open layout, with the reception and bar area underneath the raised main building, is very much in keeping with ASMA's signature airy designs. "If you have a building that starts from the ground, you're just left with the space around it [for outdoor features]," explains Tizianel. "If you use pilotis, like in traditional houses here, you can completely free the ground floor. If it floods it doesn't affect the house and the space remains fresh, and when you're there you





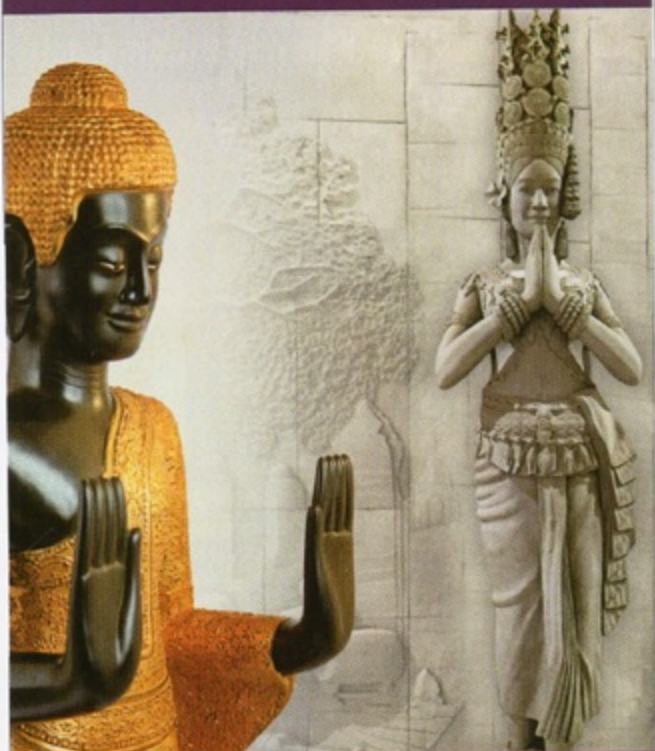
don't have the feeling of being under the building. At Rambutan, we made a building at the entrance which is on columns, and the rooms are on the first, second and third floors, so quite quickly we had a solution to the tight space."

#### Know Your Environment

Tizianel explains that although there are building regulations in Cambodia, "they are not really clear, and some are not finalised. For example, there are very few firefighters here, so you can't meet them for safety advice like you would in Europe." Rambutan Hotel is set back from the street, as "it's the only law that seems to be clear in Cambodia – it had to be set 4 metres back from the street, and 2 metres away from the neighbors."

Finding building materials can be another challenge, so Tizianel tries to use local resources as much as possible. "Bricks and clay are produced here, and rattan and water hyacinth are everywhere – you can dry them to make mats and textures." For the terrace of Phnom Penh's Plantation Hotel, another ASMA project, Tizianel used bamboo, although "it was difficult to treat. Insects tend to eat it because there is a lot of sugar inside, so you have to soak it in

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## CONSTRUCTING IN CAMBODIA:

### the Dos and Don'ts

#### Do

Check regulations. They're hard to find, but there are nonetheless still a lot of things to check.

Ask yourself if it is worth launching a hotel now? It's mainly marketing, at the end of the day. You can make a beautiful hotel but if there's no market, there's no point.

Take time to plan. You have the shape of rooms, size of rooms and number of beds. Do you need a restaurant? What is the most important part of your hotel?

Remember that it's easy to start construction but it's really hard to finish. Often, builders just leave everything you can't see, such as underground pipes, and it takes a long time to take them out.

#### Don't

Don't believe that it's easy. I don't think tourism is increasing in Phnom Penh. If people do come, it's often not what they expect as tourists.

Don't cut corners. Most investors want to save a lot of money and make things cheaply, but often if you choose a cheap company, you choose trouble. They say they can finish the work in six months but it doesn't make sense. In the end, it usually takes longer than what a serious company would estimate.

Don't believe pricing and quality always correlate. Source from the same supplier that sells the same products from the same well known companies. If there's a problem they can contact the factory, so it's much safer.

water for a few months. Even with preparation, natural materials don't last very long."

The lack of quality control when it comes to imported products is also an issue. "We try to work with the same supplier. There are a lot of shops on Mao Tse Toung Boulevard selling materials, but you can't guarantee that they'll keep the same stock if you run out. However, there are a few bigger companies that import from Thailand and Vietnam who keep the same suppliers and renew stock, so we can order directly from them with no problem," he says.

According to Tizianel, construction is always "a disaster. Most projects don't have the money for a project manager, so we follow construction and do the job of a project manager. Contractors often make changes on the run because it's easier for them in the short term, and when you discover these later on it's really hard to change it back to how it was," he says. DeGraff adds, "there will always be problems, but make sure you're on top of the process and always check. All the mistakes at Rambutan happened because we didn't check up, even though I was on site every day."


#### You Get What You Pay For

Tizianel warns that it's not easy to stick within a budget, as "prices are rising at the moment. The time between the first discussion and the final design of the building can take a few months, even a year. Then, sometimes you find that the original budget isn't enough anymore. The difference can be up to 20% more. Luckily, you can save on the finishes and make everything a bit cheaper: for example, local stone here isn't too expensive. Materials can be adjusted without reducing quality."

It's the attention to detail which makes a hotel really stand out. "We always hide everything technical," says Tizianel. "We put the piping between the ceiling and first floor to completely hide it. If it's not planned properly then the contractors will work quickly and add the pipes at the end, on the outside of the building, which looks ugly. We work with an engineer for all of the construction and design to make sure the piping will be in a proper shaft with access, but invisible."

Finally, DeGraff advises to "keep thinking practical. Keep in mind how things work, and how you're going to operate. No project can be perfect, but you have to make it work."





" IF YOU USE PILOTIS, LIKE IN  
TRADITIONAL HOUSES HERE,  
YOU CAN COMPLETELY FREE  
THE GROUND FLOOR. IF IT  
FLOODS IT DOESN'T AFFECT  
THE HOUSE AND THE SPACE  
REMAINS FRESH... "

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