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## Battambang art festival engages people through the prism of art

Ben Sokhean / Khmer Times



The circus show during the urban art festival in Battambang province's Battambang City. Olivia AUDO

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Battambang City has successfully hosted an urban art festival to engage residents in a dialogue on the province's sustainable development trajectory through the prism of art.

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The festival on Saturday was attended by more than 1,000 participants. The works will remain on display, open for all for free, until Saturday at Samdech Kralahom Sar Kheng Park in the city.

This unprecedented event is the culmination of a project initiated by Phare Ponleu Selpak, a non-profit arts school that empowers children, youth and their communities, in collaboration with the Agence Française de Développement (AFD) and supported by the Fonds Métis, a unique initiative to link art and development.

The city was recognised for its artistic and architectural contributions, it was decided to implement the project there.

The festival presents the challenges and opportunities of the province about AFD's areas of intervention in the region, including water resource management, education and access to electricity.

Sandrine Boucher, Head of AFD in Cambodia told Khmer Times yesterday that art is a generator of emotions, with the unique power to create links and engage all generations in discussion.

"The aim of the festival is to mobilise these emotions to imagine solutions for the sustainable development of Battambang province. Participants are invited to explore and interact with the artworks, which are designed to help them build new shared horizons," she said.

According to a joint press release, the project began with the Phare Design Lab in Battambang in January, in collaboration with Phare Ponleu Selpak and the School of Visual and Applied Arts (VAAS).



Over a week, about 20 students gathered, working in teams to consider an artistic representation of their ideal Cambodia of the future.

After a week of intensive work, including field research, collective ideation and the production of a work, seven prototypes of visual or living art were presented.

These models were exhibited in the garden of the French Embassy in Phnom Penh on February 20, during the celebration of AFD's 30th anniversary in Cambodia.

The second phase of the project is an "artistic mentoring through the Métis project".

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Three professional artists were mobilised to support students in the design, construction and exhibition of these works. It was decided to keep only five installations, to meet the artistic, technical and budgetary constraints of the project.

The exhibition of the works took place during the urban art festival in Battambang on Saturday. The festival included five monumental art installations and a circus show, designed to invite local communities to discuss the province's sustainability trajectory issues.

The four installations named Bakprea; Having electricity, having transformation; New generation, new era; and A drop of life, present the axes of development of the province of Battambang in the key areas of the management of the fishery resources, access to electricity, education and water resource management. The structures were made from natural and recycled materials.

The fifth installation, Golden Soil, has a strong participatory dimension. The festival participants were invited to enter and immerse themselves in Battambang soil: they were able to explore a dark forest of suspended roots, thanks to a flashlight.

In parallel, a circus show took place during the inauguration of the festival. This specially created new show choreographed by Phare Ponleu Selpak, highlighting the artistic dimension of all these works.

"I have seen a remarkable progression in students' thinking about social and community issues, greatly enriching their artistic approach. Our discussions highlighted the importance of recognising art in the environment, enabling the creation of works that are deeply rooted in the social context," said Eng Riithchandaneth, a professional artist and project mentor.

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