

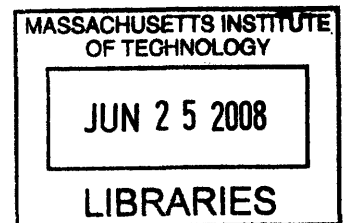
# Beyond Celebration: The Cambodian Struggle for Representation In Lowell, Massachusetts

By

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Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master in City Planning  
at the  
MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
June 2008



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## **Abstract**

Since the early 1980s, an estimated 30,000 Cambodians have found their way to Lowell, Massachusetts. Constituting nearly 25% of the total population, they are now the city's dominant minority group. This thesis began as a study of the Cambodian community in Lowell and their rise to civic participation thirty years since their first arriving.

By researching the evolution of one refugee community in one post-industrial mill town, I sought to answer two questions: 1) How do new immigrants to America's smaller cities progress from being "outsiders" to engaged community members? and 2) What can be done to facilitate this movement?

This thesis shows that the path from "outsider" to "insider" is not easily described. There are multiple ways for immigrants to enter the civic structure of a city, and the routes chosen by a particular ethnic group in a particular city depend on a number of factors including, but not limited to: 1) the ethnic group's cultural predisposition toward politics, education, work, and enterprise, 2) the speed at which city institutions reform to meet demographic change, 3) the level of financial and institutional support that is available for different types of organizing activities, 4) the presence of a vocal, educated class, and 5) the city's overall tolerance for "otherness."

In conversations with Lowell's Cambodian community leaders, I found that broadly-supported art and cultural programs have given Cambodians a way in to civic life. These programs not only help them preserve their heritage and culture, they also act as community development tools. In addition, the existence of such programs helps reinforce Lowell's image as a progressive, cosmopolitan, and multi-cultural "Immigrant City."

However, Cambodians and other non-whites have thus far had little success garnering positions on the school board, city council, city agencies, and police force. Given such exclusions, this thesis assesses the authenticity of Lowell's reputation as a good "Immigrant City" and gives voice to Cambodian community advocates who live and work within this construct.





## **Acknowledgements**

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This thesis is the culminating achievement of two years at MIT and a reflection of the last seven years of my life. I give thanks first to my thesis advisor, Sam Bass Warner, Jr. who was patient, gentle, encouraging, and perceptive throughout this entire process. Thanks also to my readers Lang Keyes and Tunney Lee, plus my unofficial advisors Phil Thompson, Lorlene Hoyt, and Larry Vale. All of you have given me great advice and encouragement over the past two years. I am so happy to have found you in the Department.

In Lowell, my debts are many. To all the people who took time to share their perspective with me, I am grateful. Thanks to Bill Lipschitz and Linda Silka for orienting me to the city. Also to Mehmed Ali and the women at the Mogan Center who openly shared their resources and contacts. To all the Cambodian leaders, I offer my deepest respect and gratitude, especially to Rithy Uong, Vesna Nuon, and Vong Ros who welcomed me into their personal networks as if I were an old friend. I hope this piece is helpful to your work.

To my fellow MCPs and friends who endured all my impassioned ramblings in class and beyond, I give thanks. To my thesis buddies, Jonathan Cherry and Bryant Tan, I extend my thanks and congratulations. To my roommates, Cali Gorewitz and Jessie Durrum, more thanks. To my copy editor and boyfriend, Ray Huling, I owe much, and to my parents who gave me my life in the U.S., even more. Thank you for your unconditional support.



*For my niece and nephew and*

*For the 14 million refugees displaced from their home countries*

The dilemmas of difference, in all their cultural, social and spatial manifestations, are a challenge to the current ways of thinking of the city-building professions, to city-dwellers, and to ideas of urban governance and urban politics. Contemporary cities are sites of struggles over space, which are really two kinds of struggle: one a struggle of life space against economic space, the other a struggle over belonging (Sandercock 2003, p.4).

The irony here is that if the city were to look into an undistorted mirror, she would see that the face of Lowell had long ago changed, and that transformation did not come about by the hand of a marketing strategist. Furthermore, if the city were to joyfully embrace its current Khmer-Latino-Afro-Brazilian identity, then it would make a real commitment to nurturing and developing that part of itself,... (Stitely 2008, p. 35).



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## **Introductory Notes**

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### **The Author's Bias**

Let me begin this thesis by stating that I do not believe in the neutrality of the planner or the pretense of neutrality in social science research. To Lowell and to the Cambodian community in Lowell, I am an 'outsider.' Up until November of 2007, I had never stepped foot in the city, and I had no relationship with anyone living or working there. However, I bring to this thesis a set of values that were formed over 34 years living in the United States as an Asian female. These values color the text that follows.

I am a Korean adoptee who was raised in a town that was about one-third the size of Lowell with about one-tenth the ethnic diversity. When I was 27, I spent a few months working as a mobile ESL and citizenship tutor for refugees who had been resettled in Seattle, Washington. The year after that, I spent a year as an Americorps volunteer in Providence, Rhode Island, where I taught art to at-risk Latino, African-American, and Asian youth. Following that experience, I traveled to Southeast Asia, visiting a Burmese refugee camp on the western Thai border and Cambodia's killing fields, S-21 prison complex, and War Museum. Though I felt uneasy as a westerner touring the sights of suffering, I am certain that my understanding of the world expanded from those experiences.

That Southeast Asian adventure ended with my falling off a motorbike in the Mekong Delta and returning to the U.S. with a wrecked knee and no health insurance. Rather than return to underpaid non-profit humanitarian work, I joined an architecture firm that was in the process of converting all of the major historic mill buildings in Rhode Island into residential complexes. I worked on several of these projects, both low-income and high-end ones, including the Washington Mills Loft conversion in Lawrence, Massachusetts, before running into a conflict of values. When the firm took on a 33 million-dollar mills-to-urban village project that I knew would decimate one of Providence's poorest Latino neighborhoods, I decided to return to graduate school.

A year later I found myself wandering the halls of the MIT Urban Studies and Planning Department. I quickly found refuge in the MIT@Lawrence community-university partnership, acting as the teaching assistant for Professors Lorlene Hoyt and

Langley Keyes practicum course called ‘Information, Asset Building, and the Immigrant City.’ Through the practicum, I became more familiar with the phenomenon of ‘forgotten cities,’ a term used to describe those American post-industrial cities that all but collapsed during the 70s due to the out-migration of jobs and people. Realizing that my past four years in New England could be understood through this lens, considering the youth I taught in Providence and the mills I helped convert into loft apartments, I chose a thesis topic that could help me better understand how immigrants fit into this picture.

While I was tempted to continue working in Lawrence, I ultimately decided Lowell was the city to begin these investigations. I chose Lowell because it offered an opportunity to connect the research on ‘forgotten cities’ to that of ‘refugee experience.’ In other words, I chose Lowell for the Cambodians.

### **Choosing a City, Choosing a People**

All over the U.S., small towns and suburbs are being transformed as masses of new immigrants exit major metropolitan areas in search of jobs, cheaper housing, and better quality of life. In the Northeast, formerly white, down-trodden mill towns have been reborn as mini-ethnic enclaves.<sup>1</sup> In order to tackle the question, How do new immigrants to America’s smaller cities move from being “outsiders” to engaged community members?, I looked to Lowell, Massachusetts as an exemplary case of a medium-sized city that has seen significant change over the past 35 years due to a large in-migration by Southeast Asians and Latinos. Because the length of this study was limited to less than six months, I elected to focus my research on the Cambodian immigrant experience in Lowell. I chose the Cambodians because they represent the largest portion of the immigrant minority population in Lowell and are therefore the most visible newcomer group in the city.

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<sup>1</sup> See Utica, NY, Lewiston and Portland, ME, Lawrence, MA, Framingham, MA



## **The Research Method**

Beginning in November of 2007, I embarked on a four-month-long field-study during which I visited Lowell 15 times and conducted 30 interviews with local residents, community advocates, professors, and city planners. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to over three hours, with most lasting around 60 minutes. While I did speak with representatives from what the Cambodians call the ‘mainstream’ community, otherwise known as the city’s white majority, the bulk of the content in this thesis is pulled from semi-structured interviews I had with 17 Cambodian leaders and advocates whose ages ranged from mid 20s to late 50s. During these interviews I would ask the following questions:

- When and why did you come to Lowell?
- Where do you and your family live? Why this location?
- Do you have children? Do/Did they attend Lowell public schools? If so, what is your opinion of the school system?
- What is your work? How did you start doing it? How does your work affect the lives of Cambodians in the city of Lowell?
- What is your educational background? Is it similar to your peers/ siblings?
- What community organizations are you or your family active in?
- What festivals do you attend in Lowell? And Why?
- Do you belong to a temple or church? Which one and why?
- Who would you say are the present leaders of the Cambodian community? How do you interact with them?
- Are you a citizen of the US? If not, do you intend to become one?
- Do you follow politics in Cambodia? Why or why not?
- Do you plan to stay in Lowell? Stay in the US?
- Would you say that Lowell a good place for immigrants to live?
- What are the main issues facing the Cambodian community?

- Do you think that Lowell's multi-cultural arts programming and marketing have improved the lives of immigrants?
- Is there one question, which if you had the answer to, would greatly help your life work?
- What kind of change would you like to see in Lowell?

While I conducted these interviews, I also did a literature review on: the history and practice of refugee resettlement, the Cambodian Diaspora in the United States, the history of Lowell, the history of Southeast Asians in Lowell, the practice of narrative planning, multi-cultural planning, the creative economy, and the role of event programming in cities. I looked to books, scholarly journals, newspaper articles, on-line journals, on-line radio clips, documentary films, and archived oral histories for clues on these topics. Before and during my fieldwork, I intentionally spent very little time studying the theories of immigrant assimilation, because I did not want them to color my perceptions. I waited until after I had finished my fieldwork to investigate theories of social exclusion, integration, incorporation, and assimilation. Though this may seem like an odd choice, I think it allowed me to form with my own understanding of the situation on the ground and then build theory from practice.

I elected to do a qualitative study for both practical and personal reasons. First, the statistical data on the Cambodian community in Lowell is both inaccurate and incomplete. Second, a successful survey of this community would have to be done in person with a Khmer translator. Third, quantitative data would not be able to say anything about the experience of living in Lowell as a Cambodian or the transition from being a newcomer to an established resident. Lastly, as an Asian American who has been to Cambodia and worked with refugees, I wanted to have deeper interpersonal exchange with the population I was studying. In addition, I knew that one of my strengths as a researcher is an ability to have meaningful conversations with strangers.

## **Sample Bias and Omissions**

Regarding the respondents, I do not claim to have reached a representative sample of Lowell's Cambodian community, and the conclusions drawn in this thesis should be read with this in mind. I spoke with just 17 of the 30,000 Cambodians who live Lowell, all of whom were college-educated, English-speaking adults with professional positions that pay middle-class wages. Considering that the *Cambodian Community Health 2010: Community Behavioral Risk Factor Survey Results* report states that the median household income in Lowell is \$21,000 and 82% of the adults over 25 work as assemblers in the manufacturing sector, I can safely assume that the 17 people that I interviewed are quite exceptional. However, their exceptionalness is precisely the reason why I wanted to speak with them. I wanted to know: How did they achieve what they have as individuals and as community advocates? How did they come into the positions they have as visible leaders in their community? What unique perspective do they have given that their lives straddle both the Cambodian and 'mainstream' realms of the city?

The research sample radiates from networks associated with one of three people: Vong Ros, the executive director of the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association (CMAA), Rithy Uong, former City Counselor and Lowell High School guidance counselor, or Mehmed Ali, director of Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center for the Lowell National Park. Given that all three are members of major institutions, I probably got a decent sense of who was doing what in terms of community advocacy. However, it should be noted that I interviewed no Cambodian women over the age of 33 and no men under that same mark. Perhaps this points to a coming era of female leadership in this community. This study cannot affirm such a statement, but it should be noted that my sampling method did not lead to my meeting any young male leaders or older female leaders.

One more thing to note is that this thesis is very much a product of my own analysis. While I have done my best to construct a narrative about the Cambodian immigrant experience in Lowell and their struggles for empowerment, I have naturally focused on issues that I was attracted to: political empowerment, redevelopment, gentrification, globalization, and the role of art in society. There are plenty of other stories above and below the surface that could be synthesized from conversations with

Cambodian leaders in Lowell. This is just one of them. I humbly offer it in hopes of generating more understanding or at least discussion on how to build a more inclusive multi-cultural city.

## **Preview of Chapters**

This thesis, or collection of stories, is divided into three parts. In Part I (Chapters 1 and 2) I set the local context. In Part II (Chapters 3-8) I offer profiles for six key Cambodian community leaders in order of descending age. In Part III (Chapters 9-11) I summarize findings, draw conclusions and offer suggestions for future action.

Chapter 1, *A Town of Many Stories*, lays out two histories. The first history might be called the ‘Official History of Lowell,’ or the ‘Planner’s History of Lowell.’ This story begins in 1822 with the founding of Lowell as an industrial mill town. The plot builds as waves of European immigrants flock to the city. At the climax, the textile industry begins to slowly exit the northeast, leaving Lowell to suffer 60 years of disinvestment and population loss. This situation is resolved in 1977, with the creation of a new Lowell National Historical Park. The second history presented in this chapter could be called ‘The Cambodians Come to Lowell.’ This one begins with an influx of Cambodian refugees into the U.S. in the 1980s, after the Khmer Rouge genocide. The climax comes with Cambodians mass migrating to Lowell for jobs in the computer manufacturing industry, and the city struggling to absorb their numbers. Conflicts are diffused with the Cambodians being labeled the new Irish and part of Lowell’s ‘Immigrant City’ tradition. I close the chapter by showing how the Cambodians have not been well-incorporated into the city and by questioning the validity of the Lowell comeback story. I say that Lowell needs to update its official history to include its newest residents. I argue that the Cambodians should be empowered to write their own narrative, but until that happens, cultural arts and festivals have been their best platform for expression.

In Chapter 2, *Image, Identity, Culture, and Struggle*, I present my interpretation of the struggle that Lowell’s Cambodians now face in the post-modern context. I describe how the city is trying to re-brand itself as a cosmopolitan urban center or ‘Destination City.’ I then dissect the meaning behind the city’s many nicknames and the selective use

of them for different purposes, showing how the ‘Immigrant City’ moniker is used to maintain good city relations in the face of demographic change. After that I discuss the role of cultural events for the Cambodians and the barriers to more empowering acts of civic engagement. Then I lay out the importance of understanding Lowell as a ‘Cambodian City’ and give a brief community snapshot.

In Chapters 3 through 8, I present six profiles of Cambodian community leaders. These profiles highlight the perspective of the first and second generation of leaders.

- Chapter 3, *The Councilor & Counselor*, describes Rithy Uong’s experience as a city councilor, political organizer, and guidance counselor at Lowell High School.
- Chapter 4, *The Bridge Builder*, recounts the birth of the Cambodian festival culture and how its founder, Samkhann Khoeun, impacted the entire Lowell community.
- Chapter 5, *The Driver at the Sharp Turn*, offers a comprehensive view of the Cambodian community’s issues through the eyes of CMAA executive director, Vong Ros.
- Chapter 6, *The Youth Advocate*, provides a window into youth and family issues and the frustration Sayon Soeun, the executive director of the Light of Cambodian Children organization, feels when navigating Lowell’s politics.
- Chapter 7, *The Voice of the Next Generation*, demonstrates how a local teen, Sambath Bo, became an advocate for her generation and a player in the cultural economy.
- Chapter 8, *The Young Woman at the Table*, offers clues as to how Duey Kol, special event coordinator at the National Park, might influence the city’s production of cultural programs and festivals. This chapter also presents the Planning Department’s latest vision for downtown redevelopment.

Part III, Chapter 9, begins by summarizing the findings from all 17 of my interviews, highlighting major themes. In Chapter 10, I give my final thoughts on Lowell as an 'Immigrant City,' the use and power of narratives, festivals, and cultural programs. I close by saying there is a need for better Cambodian civic representation in Lowell, beyond all the soft programming. Lastly, in Chapter 11, I close with some broad ideas on how to build upon the work that is already being done in the community.

# **Part I: The Context**

## **History, Narrative, People, Culture, Identity and Representation**

Stories and story telling can be powerful agents or aids in the service of change, as shapers of a new imagination of alternatives. Stories of success, or of exemplary actions, serve as inspirations when they are re-told... The 'organizing of hope' is one of our fundamental tasks as planners, and one of our weapons in that battle is the use of success stories, and the ability to tell those stories well, meaningfully, in a way that does indeed inspire others to act (Sandercock 2003, p.192).





## Chapter 1: A Place of Many Stories

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### Lowell's Reputation

In 1995, I was introduced to the city of Lowell while sitting on the sofa at my sister's tiny apartment in Frederick, Maryland. We were not discussing the merits of preservation as a means to revitalization nor were we analyzing the effects of global economic restructuring. We were speechless in fact, eyes glued to the television, watching a tragic but well-produced HBO documentary, called *High on Crack Street: Lost Lives in Lowell*.

Eight years later, having just finished a year of Americorps service during which I taught dance in an after-school program in Providence, Rhode Island, a mentor suggested I head to Lowell to seek work with a Cambodian dance troupe. Recalling the image of Lowell as it had been presented on HBO's 'Crack Street,' I was a little taken aback by the suggestion. In any case, I didn't pursue the job lead with the organization, which I later found out was the Angkor Dance Troupe. Instead, I took a roundabout journey through Southeast Asia, during which I spent a few eye-opening weeks in Cambodia. Upon returning, I found myself back in Providence working at an architecture firm. However, this was not the last I would hear about Lowell, nor was it the last time that I would think about Cambodia.

In fall of 2006, I found myself in Professor Dennis Frenchman's 'Introduction to City Design and Development' course at the MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning. Midway through the semester we were discussing two of the professor's favorite topics, 'Event Places' and 'Narrative as a Means to Development' when once again the city of Lowell became a subject of consideration. In this academic setting, Lowell was presented as a case-study of successful revitalization, where community activists, politicians, planners, government institutions, designers, and private investors turned a down-and-out mill town into a national symbol (Frenchman 2003). Dennis Frenchman, himself, had been part of the design team in the late 70s that wrote what is popularly known as the 'Brown Book,' a plan for the creation of a Lowell National Historical Park as an ode to America's industrial legacy and associated working class.

## **Early History: The Seat of Industry**

Founded in 1822, Lowell was America's first great industrial city. Situated along the banks of the Merrimack River, Lowell claims the title as the nation's first paternalist, planned industrial community (Lowell Historic Canal District Commission [LHCDC] 1977). Physically and socially engineered to maximize profit and production, Lowell's textile mills first employed young, single farm girls from the New England countryside. When the mill girls went on strike in the 1840s, successive waves of unskilled, 'off the boat' Europeans supplanted them and transformed Lowell "from a Yankee factory village into an immigrant industrial city" (Mitchell 1988, p.3). The Merrimack River Valley soon boasted the highest proportion of foreign-born residents in the country (Kolack 1997).

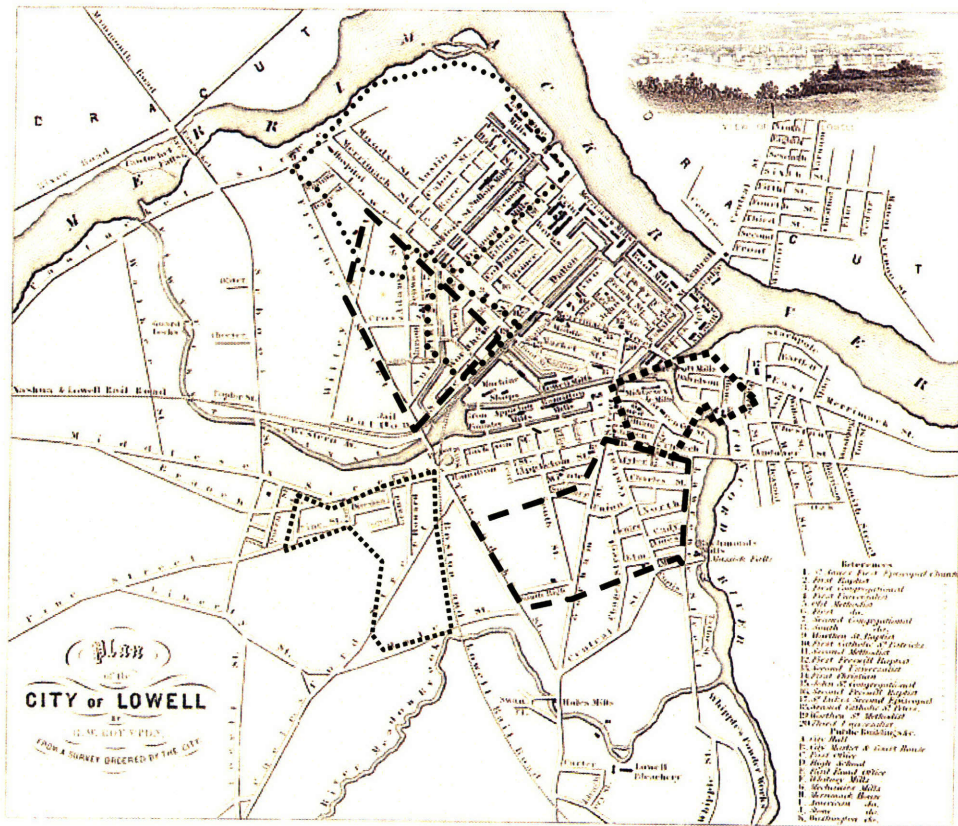
The first immigrants to arrive in the valley were the Irish. Originally hired as temporary labor to dig the city's canals, they settled in work camps just west of the mill district proper. Segregated from the rest of the city, their shanty camps eventually evolved into a more permanent neighborhood called the Acre. The Irish eventually found employment inside the mills, as did the French Canadians, Greeks, Portuguese, Poles, and Eastern European Jews. As these new groups arrived, they followed the Irish example and also carved out their own satellite neighborhoods around the mill district (Lowell National Historic Park & Tsongas History Center 2002).

New England mill towns like Lowell, prospered until the end of World War I, when the textile industry migrated south in search of cheaper labor and lower production costs. When the mills started closing, the city's economy unraveled. The depression hit early in Lowell, starting with the postwar price deflation in 1921 and lasting until the Second World War, which offered just temporary reprieve. In the years between 1920 and 1960, the city's population shrank from 112,000 to 92,000 (Cox, Coggins, & Baacke 2003). By the mid-70s, Lowell hit bottom. When the unemployment rate rose to 13%, one of the highest in the nation (Gerson, 2003), Lowell came very close to total economic collapse (Pagano & Bowman 1995). Abandoned mills decayed along the neglected canals. The wrecking ball took a few of these old skeletons, and parking lots and uninspired public housing sprung up in their place (Frenchman 2003). Feelings of self-loathing, shame, and embarrassment ran rampant throughout the community.



Lowell's Yankee mill girls (spinners)

Source: Center for Lowell History



Historic map of Lowell with boundaries of satellite immigrant neighborhoods

Source: Center for Lowell History

## **Top-Down Revitalization and the Return of Civic Pride**

In an entrepreneurial burst of genius, Lowell's visionary principal turned superintendent, Patrick J. Mogan, who directed the Model Cities Program in the late 60s, came up with an idea to create a national park in the city. Mogan imagined the park would both preserve Lowell's industrial heritage and also act as a learning laboratory for local youth (B. Lipschitz, personal communication, November 16, 2007). Native son Paul Tsongas took the idea to Congress, where he convincingly lobbied for the creation of a Lowell Historic Canal District Commission (LHCDC). Charged with the task of doing a feasibility study for the park concept, the LHCDC hired a consultant team of designers, architects, and project managers to assist them. In 1977 Tsongas put the 'Brown Book' before Congress and argued that Lowell's mills, canal system, workers housing, and other institutions were indeed historically significant. The 'Brown Book' asserted that the city's urban form and uncommon ethnic diversity were byproducts of a unique time in American history and should be collectively honored.

In 1978, the Lowell National Historical Park opened and soon gave the formerly derelict city a new identity. Lowell became the paradigmatic symbol of the American Industrial Revolution, which helped restore civic pride among residents. Professor Frenchman, one of the authors of the 'Brown Book,' said in an interview that the plan did exactly what it was supposed to do (February 20, 2008). It reframed the image of the city and offered a vision upon which to build a preservation movement. Though the 'Brown Book' was never a comprehensive city plan, it provided a blueprint for at least decade of Lowell's redevelopment.

When federal dollars began flowing into the city, private investors took notice. Two entities took control of the finances. A new preservation commission made up of elected representatives was charged with disbursing the federal funds. In a parallel effort, the newly formed Lowell Development and Financial Corporation (LDFC) became the city's quasi-public lending institution. By the late 80s, over 100 buildings had been renovated and hundreds of millions of dollars had been invested downtown (Frenchman 2003). Lowell became a national the model for successful public-private development (Pagano & Bowman 1995). The Park had ushered in a new epoch of growth. Some residents even claim it was instrumental in attracting high-tech manufacturers to Lowell

during the ‘Massachusetts Miracle’ of the 80s (Kopkind 1992). While this assertion is debatable, the opening of the Park marks a turning point for the city and offers a place from which one can launch a planner’s critique.

The Park was the first of several ‘top-down’ efforts to transform Lowell from a down-trodden eyesore into a ‘Destination City.’ After the push for physical rehabilitation, the focus shifted toward building entertainment and cultural programs. In the late 80s and early 90s, with support from a re-engaged historic commission, the Tsongas Center for Industrial History and the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center opened to offer the educational experiences that Patrick J. Mogan had originally conceived of when he proposed the idea of creating a National Park. The Tsongas Center provides hand-on opportunities for youth to learn about the Industrial Revolution, while the Mogan Center strives to tell the city’s ‘human story.’ A cluster of other art and heritage museums have since opened up within walking distance of the Park’s visitor center. In addition, the city also claims two minor league sports teams and two performing arts theaters. These are the fruits of 20 years of Tsongas-led development.

### **The Arrival of a New Working Class**

Something barely mentioned in the planning literature about this era of redevelopment is that the city of Lowell was simultaneously undergoing major demographic transition. While the official commissions were plowing ahead with their efforts to commemorate and celebrate the city’s past glory, the population was changing right underneath them. Colombians and Puerto Ricans started coming to Lowell in the late 60s and 70s. They numbered around 8,000 at the time that the ‘Brown Book’ was drafted (Stanton 2006, p. 72); however, as poorly integrated newcomers, many of whom operated obsolete machinery in the nearly dead textile mills, they did not find an easy place in the newly-framed image of the city. As a result, they were more or less overlooked in the first phase of the Park-initiated redevelopment process. The old European immigrant story didn’t apply well to their situation.

When Southeast Asians arrived in the late 70s and early 80s, they had a slightly easier time blending into the publicly-accepted immigrant narrative. The Cambodian community, in particular, seems to have followed a growth trajectory that closely

resembles that of their European predecessors, which has granted them a sort of model-minority status among Lowellians. The Cambodian integration into Lowell is touted as just one more of the city's melting pot successes. According to Dennis Frenchman, the original Park strategists did not write the 'Immigrant city' or 'Working People' narrative anticipating the arrival of the Latinos or Southeast Asians (personal communication, February 8, 2008). However, I found in several interviews with people from the 'mainstream' that there exist two myths about the Cambodian migration to Lowell that overstate the role of the local men in charge. One is that the first Cambodian came to Lowell because the city had promoted itself as welcoming to immigrants. The second is that former city councilor, Chet Atkins, personally recruited the Cambodians to repopulate the city and create a new workforce. However, the Cambodians I interviewed never made reference to either of these occurrences, and after reviewing the literature, I conclude that there is not enough evidence to support either of these statements.

### **Forming a Cambodian Cluster**

The more widely accepted reason that the Cambodians came to Lowell is that they were sponsored and placed there by the Boston branch of the American Fund for Czechoslovak Refugees (Higgins & Ross 1986, Gerson 2003, Das 2007, Pho 2007). Local churches and Mutual Assistance Associations (MAAs) also assisted with their resettlement. The arrival of the first 100 or so Cambodian families in Lowell coincided with the passage of the 1980 U.S. Refugee Act. Prior to then, the U.S. did not have an official policy toward international migrants fleeing persecution other than to take in displaced persons (DPs) fleeing Communist or Fascist rule. Soviets and Eastern Europeans were the first to enter the country under DP status in the 40s and 50s. Cubans fleeing Castro were similarly welcomed in the 60s (Haines 2007). In the mid to late 70s the Vietnam War, Laotian Civil War, Cambodian Civil War, and Khmer Rouge genocide forced hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asians out of their homelands. This well-publicized crisis, in part a result of U.S. foreign policy, was the impetus for the passing of the 1980 Act which adopted the United Nations Protocol's legal definition of refugee and the right of asylum (Das 2007). According to this definition, a refugee is a "person fleeing his or her country because of a well-founded fear of persecution due to

nationality, race, religion, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group” (Haines 2007).

According to the 2000 census there are now roughly 172,000 Cambodians living in the United States, 131,000 of whom entered between 1979 and 1986 (Das 2007). The first arrivals in the late 70s were directly sponsored by voluntary agencies that had assisted previous groups of displaced persons. In 1980, the newly established national Office of Refugees and Resettlement launched a project to more thoughtfully disperse Cambodians across the U.S. Designed to avoid another ‘Cubans in Miami’ situation, the Khmer Cluster Project sought to direct small groups of Cambodians to host cities other than the already saturated Southern California ones, where resistance was mounting against their growing numbers. The motivation behind all this was to decrease unanticipated secondary migration to a single town or city. Boston was one of a dozen receiver cities in the Cluster Project. It was selected for its favorable job market, affordable housing, ample social support services, and a demonstrated tolerance for outsiders (Chan 2004 & Das 2007).

Lowell, however, was not on the Cluster Project short list. The growth of the Cambodian community there was due almost entirely due to secondary migration. In 1983, they numbered about 1,000. By 1990 they had grown to around 18,000 (*Washington Post* August 12, 1991 in Chan 2004). There were a number of attractors behind this increase. For one, the computer manufacturing sector had just laid down its roots in town and in the region, and companies like Wang Laboratories, Raytheon, and Digital Equipment offered steady employment for Cambodians as circuit board assemblers (Pho 2007). Other magnetic forces were the availability of affordable housing in the neighborhoods like the Acre and the opening of two Buddhist temples by highly respected monks. Lastly, the state of Massachusetts had an uncommonly progressive policy orientation towards new refugees thanks to Governor Dukakis and his activist wife, Kitty (Chan 2004, Das 2007, and Pho 2007). Once the size of the Cambodian community had grown to a substantial mass, entrepreneurial Cambodians came to the city to start businesses that catered to the group’s specific needs. Grocery stores, restaurants, service agencies, and other retail establishments were opened in the



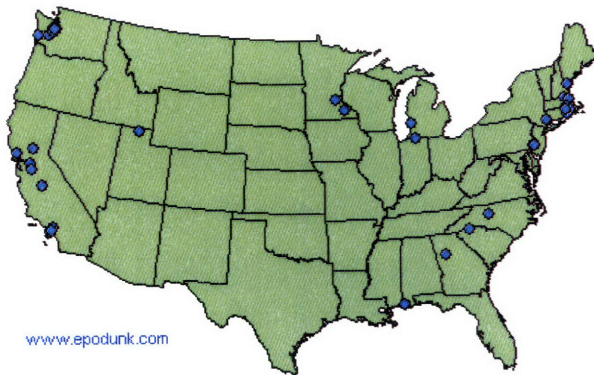
Cambodian neighborhoods. The presence of such businesses helped create a cultural cityscape that was both familiar and comforting to new migrants.



*Cambodian refugees arriving in Boston*

© James Higgins, 1986.  
Southeast Asians: A New Beginning in Lowell (Lowell, MA: Mill town Graphics)

#### Cambodian Communities



[www.epodunk.com](http://www.epodunk.com)

*Cambodian Communities in the U.S.*

Source:  
<http://www.epodunk.com/ancestry/Cambodian.html>  
(accessed December 12,2007)



*New Asia Market*

© Amy Stitely, 2007





*Triratanaram Temple*  
© Amy Stitely, 2007



*Triratanaram Temple*  
© Amy Stitely, 2007



*Bopha's Bridal Shop*  
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## **Accommodating the New Diversity**

However, the first fifteen years of getting established in Lowell were not easy ones. Throughout the 80s and 90s, the city struggled mightily to accommodate their newest immigrants. What the ORR had tried to prevent from happening with the Khmer Cluster Project had taken place in Lowell. City agencies and institutions were caught off-guard by the Cambodian secondary migration. The school system and the police department had to be the first institutional responders, since youth accounted for around 50% of the Cambodian population in the city (Das 2007). Local health care centers soon followed suit.

In 1987, parents of Latino and Southeast Asian children had to file a civil suit against the School Committee and City of Lowell in order to get them to desegregate the elementary schools (Kiang 1996). When schools became over-stressed by the rapid influx of new youth, minority students were sent to makeshift classrooms in community centers and churches. Once these were full, children were simply sent back home. Parents soon realized that this system was detrimental to the children's performance in high school, and they rose up in protest. However, without an elected representative or a critical mass of registered voters, they found that the only way to bargain with authority was to sue. The suit ended in an out-of-court settlement where the City agreed to meet the parents' demands. A busing system and central registration center were the two big outcomes of this struggle. Incidentally, the current embodiment of the central registration center is now directed by a Cambodian American woman who moved to Lowell with her parents during the year of the civil suit.

In the 90s, two charter schools opened as alternative options to the regular public system which, though desegregated, still struggles to usher students through to graduation. The Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School (LMACS) opened in 1995. Run out of Middlesex Community College (MCC), the school grew out of an after-school dropout prevention program started in 1989. LMACS enrolls roughly 100 youth, all former dropouts or near dropouts, in a non-graded college preparatory curriculum. The idea is that with a 12 to 1 student to teacher ratio, faculty can better assist teens facing challenges like poverty, domestic abuse, pregnancy, substance abuse, and abandonment (Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School 2004).

For younger children, the Lowell Community Charter Public School (LCCPS) offers a unique curriculum designed to teach respect for the opinions and cultures of others. Founded in 1999 with the goal of creating better community relations between Latinos and Cambodians, the LCCPS now serves 900 youth. On top of the regular state academic curriculum, LCCPS students study: character and ethics, American immigrant history, local history, and the culture, language, and history of the Southeast Asian and Latino people (Lowell Community Charter Public School 2008). Starting in kindergarten, students enroll in either Spanish or Khmer classes. This bilingual program is one reason that the school has a long wait list for enrollment (R. Eng, personal communication, February 15, 2008).

The Lowell Police Department (LPD) began its self-reformation in the late 90s when youth and domestic violence escalated to levels beyond the force's control. The department, under Superintendent Ed Davis, launched a number of new initiatives that responded to the changing needs of the city. The LPD opened two outreach units, staffed by minority civilians, to handle cases of domestic violence, sexual assault, and youth crime. In addition, police and minority community members started a race relations council to address the issue of racial profiling. The council has taken the lead in facilitating better communication between the police and immigrant groups in the city. Their model is being replicated by other departments nationwide (S. Kuhn-Leng, personal communication, February 29, 2008). Lastly, one of the department's more recent programs, "Operation Middle Path," connects youth offenders with one of the Cambodian community's most respected monks, the Venerable Sao Khon, who teaches meditation and Buddhist dharma as a way to avoid conflict (Thompson 2007).

This melding of eastern and western approaches has also been successfully applied in the provision of healthcare services. The Metta Health Center, one of six community health centers located downtown, specializes in culturally competent health services for Cambodians and Laotians. The clinic offers refugee health assessments, nutrition counseling, mental health services, acupuncture, and massage therapy. They have a meditation room, a consulting Buddhist monk, and a consulting Kru Khmer, or traditional healer (LCHC, 2006). In addition, Metta acts as a community information center (S. Peou, personal communication, February 27, 2008). As was the case with the

police department outreach programs, the Metta Center is held up as a model for getting health services to hard-to-reach populations.

### **Progress but Not Success**

Once the short-lived Massachusetts tech bubble burst at the end of the 80s and Lowell entered another economic downturn, the Southeast Asians became an easy target for Euro-descendants to blame for the city's misfortune. The Cambodian assemblers were the first to be laid off when the tech companies started downsizing (Kopkind 1992). However, when the bottom dropped out of the tech industry, the number of small immigrant-owned businesses increased. In the summer of 1998, students and faculty from UMass and a team of high school students surveyed all of these businesses and found close to 400 in operation, 33% of which had been launched since the tech bust (Farrant 2001 & 2006).

Though such figures could imply that Lowell's immigrants are steadily moving towards entrepreneurial self-sufficiency, a 2002 door-to-door survey of 381 Cambodian households suggests otherwise. The survey, which offers some of the best data on this otherwise underreported population, showed that the average Cambodian household income was \$21,000 and that 35% of Cambodian adults were either unemployed or unable to work due to disability. Among the employed, 82% were still working as assemblers in the manufacturing sector (Lowell Community Health Center 2002). These statistics run counter to all the enthusiastic declarations that the Cambodians are a good ways up the ladder of economic mobility. A closer look at the Cambodian dropout rate and failure to politically incorporate further undermine these model-minority and fast-assimilation myths.

The low educational attainment of Lowell's Cambodian youth continues to be a major issue despite the efforts of the school system to reform in the past 30 years. Khin Mai Aung and Nancy Yu of Asian American Legal Defense Fund (AALDF) spent the year of 2004 studying the performance of Cambodian youth in Lowell's public school system. They found that although Lowell's reported dropout rate among Asians had decreased between 2000 and 2003, it was still higher than the state average and a major cause for concern among Cambodian community advocates (2007, p.92). After

interviewing key informants, Aung and Yu concluded that there are a host of connected reasons why Cambodians youth do not finish high school. First, Lowell High School is both overcrowded and under-resourced and also lacks a representative group of Cambodian faculty to support and mentor Cambodian youth. Second, many Cambodian parents are linguistically isolated, uneducated, and unfamiliar with the American school system. Third, poverty often forces youth to seek employment rather than continue their education. Last, the discontinuation of the bilingual education program in 2002 has contributed to the inability of many Cambodian youth to pass required state English and math competency tests; these failures have subsequently led to early withdrawal. Given these realities, Mai and Yu conclude that Lowell's school system further reformation.

Regarding civic participation, Professor Jeffrey Gerson of UMass Lowell, presented a paper at a conference at Brown University in 2003 that showed how the Cambodians are not politically incorporated in Lowell, despite early signs of their being so. Gerson pointed out that by the end of 1999, the Cambodians appeared to have reached several milestones along the continuum of incorporation and were comparatively ahead of their time. As evidence, Gerson listed the successes of the CMAA, the Metta Health Center, the two Buddhist temples, the Race Relations Council, the Angkor Dance Troupe, and the Southeast Asian Water Festival. He then underscored that the 1999 election of Rithy Uong to the Lowell City Council was probably the community's crowning feat.<sup>2</sup> Uong was the nation's first ethnic Cambodian elected to a political office. After listing all of these triumphs Gerson's paper then changed directions. In the second half, he showed how homeland politics and community in-fighting had on numerous occasions undermined these hard-won achievements and how the Cambodians as a group were always less stable than had been assumed.

Five years since that paper was presented, it is not clear what will happen next for the Cambodian community. The CMAA has since downsized and moved into the Acre, Rithy Uong ended up resigning from office in the middle of his third-term, the police are still racially profiling, and after all the institutional reform in the 80s and 90s, minorities are still grossly underrepresented in the school system, police department, and other city agencies. Some local residents have said that the Cambodian community in Lowell will

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<sup>2</sup> More elaboration on Rithy Uong and the Water Festival in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively

inherit the city from their hard-working European predecessors. Because they put in their time at the factories, the Cambodians will eventually rise to the top of the social pyramid (O' Sullivan 2003). As of this moment, they are indeed just barely ahead of the city's other ethnic groups in the slow climb to the self-determination. Without a doubt, the Cambodian community has put down roots in during their first 30 year tenure in Lowell. However, given the current local, national, and global economy, and the barriers between them and the seats of political power, Lowell's Cambodians still have a long journey to empowerment.

### **Challenging the Renaissance**

Given that there is an official Lowell narrative— a tale of technology, mill girls, immigrants, boom, bust, more immigrants, more technology, a park, a renaissance, and a melting pot—incongruous issues like social exclusion, political manipulation, persistent poverty, institutional discrimination, and residential segregation can easily be hidden behind a mask of constructed identity. Writers and academics have seen the flaws in the official narrative, the 'Brown Book,' the Tsongas plan for revitalization, and its most recent derivative, the plan for a new cultural economy. Having taken their critiques to the press, publisher, and blogspace (Kopkind 1992, Stanton 2006, Farrant 2007), old Lowellians are now on the defensive.

In September 2007, when UMass professor Robert Farrant openly criticized the Lowell renaissance in the *Boston Globe* for its selective benefits, proud proponents of the comeback narrative were fast to rebuke him (Wirzbicki). Within days, locals rose up to defend the city's honor via letters to the editor and on-line discussion blogs. The most reactive responses accused Farrant of being a 'blow-in' local with little ground to stand upon, while more tempered voices proclaimed that the immigrants in town were doing just fine.

Ultimately, Professor Farrant, who sees himself as a role model for community academic engagement and a bit of a local muckraker, stood by his quoted assertions, declaring that there are indeed two Lowells, one that has felt the joys of urban revival and one that has not. When we spoke a few months later, he elaborated:

The historian in me, as opposed to the cheerleader, can't neglect that in point of fact, if you look at census tract data, employment numbers, or virtually any other measure, health disparities, cases of asthma, or whatever, there is this real distinction between the downtown and [the immigrant neighborhoods]<sup>3</sup>...

Farrant states that there are actually more than two Lowells. The new immigrant groups all live in very distinct parts of the city. Though Farrant has statistically compared these discrete neighborhoods, he says that "a walk around town with your eyes open" would lead to the same conclusions; "You don't have to be a Nobel Prize-winning demographer to figure this out."

As a professor of regional economic and social development with expertise in U.S. history, labor, global development, industrial history, Farrant is trying to understand the challenges Lowell's newcomers face today and how they differ from those that the Europeans faced in the past. His research shows that there is a major difference between the availability of work then and now, and that "there's no possibility in these mill cities for generational upward mobility today like there was at the end of World War II. That 'American Dream' no longer exists." The slow growth of Lowell's service economy and the further loss of manufacturing jobs in the last decade exacerbate this condition. Though many new African immigrants and some Southeast Asians have found employment niches at the bottom of Lowell's home health care industry and also the school system, Farrant says that there just aren't enough jobs for people with low education.

Using his monthly feature column in the *Lowell Sun* as a platform, Farrant has been vocal in his skepticism of the current Hamilton Canal District plan that seeks to turn the last derelict part of the downtown into a residential-retail, yuppie lifestyle district. Farrant said that he is puzzled by the rhetoric that surrounds this project and many others that focus on "capitalizing on Lowell's historic past." Considering the fact that most of the people who came to the city in the last 30 years have absolutely no connection to that

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<sup>3</sup> Unless noted otherwise all quotes from Robert Farrant in this chapter are from personal communication, January 22, 2008.

past, Farrant feels it's time to stop clinging to this notion of "building Lowell's future on the industrial revolution and venerating the mill girls... It's not the only narrative."

### **Creating Spaces for New Narratives**

In the past fifteen years, the National Park's cultural programmers, the disseminators of story and history, have made attempts to update the Lowell narrative to be more inclusive. The Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center houses an extensive boxed set of transcribed oral histories that have been collected over the past twenty years, interviews with a range of people from Lowell's rainbow of ethnicity. I found, however, that these documents are not easily accessed. It took a great deal of initiative to sort through the Center's unorganized materials during their limited operating hours. The Center also put together a Cambodian Neighborhood Walking Tour, complete with numbered map and site descriptions. At the beginning of my research, I found this obscure on-line document, printed it out, and then followed its directions. I discovered that it was a bit outdated; a few of the landmarks had been razed, changed owners, or changed uses. Furthermore, the descriptions about what happened where didn't seem to jibe with what people were saying in my interviews.

Beyond the Park's efforts to draft new narratives, the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association, Light of Cambodian Children, and other community organizations, with help from the University and colleges, are crafting their own oral history projects. Today, these stories seem to be stored within the community. As far as I know, none have been incorporated into the Lowell story, though I suspect that there are drafts of them buried somewhere in the Mogan Cultural Center.

In addition to these somewhat underground efforts to document the new immigrant story in writing, one of which is currently being penned by faculty at UMass Lowell, the Park and the City have invested a substantial amount of money and energy in what Professor Jon Mark Schuster called 'urban ephemera'—temporary exhibits, festivals, performances, demonstrations, and public celebrations. For the Cambodians, these special events have acted as a platform for expression. In fact, one of their festivals is named "Cambodian Expressions." In terms of what gets expressed, the Cambodians have taken a cue from the Park in that their events are heavily focused around the



preservation of traditional or 'folk' culture. The people responsible for the generating the 'Cambodian ephemeral' in Lowell have been first and foremost concerned with generating intra-community understanding and making sure that the younger generation knows where they come from. Secondly, these events aim to promote cross-cultural understanding and better city-wide relations. Lastly, these events provide venues for externalizing the Cambodian presence.

While the ephemeral certainly does a lot for the Cambodian community, the risk of investing too heavily in 'festival' is that it may not provide any return in actual empowerment. This thesis began as an investigation into Cambodian civic participation in the city, because of their reputation for scanty political engagement. In the field, I found that the sphere in which the Cambodians are best incorporated is that of art, culture, and festival. By stating this, I do not mean to imply that there are not important actions being led by community leaders to increase voter turnout, decrease domestic violence, increase youth opportunity, and improve access to jobs and services. I met many of the people working on these issues. However, like the Park's oral history projects, these organizing and advocacy efforts are minority activities, unsupported by the larger citizenry. The cultural events, on the other hand, have city-wide buy-in. Given this fact, one of the questions that has emerged is: Might festival act as the first stepping stone to garnering greater political power? Or are these two acts discrete and unrelated?



*Loft Two Seven Conversion*

© Amy Stitely, 2007



*One Stop Condo Shop*

© Amy Stitely, 2007

## **Chapter 2: Image, Identity, Culture and Struggle**

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### **Getting Creative in the Wakes of the Boom & Bust**

By looking at one ethnic community in one medium-sized city in the United States, I hope to illuminate a few of the major urban development challenges we face as a nation. Forty years since the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act and 50 years since the beginning of America's deindustrialization, the small city of Lowell, Massachusetts, struggles to remain economically viable in a post-modern economy. Along with the rest of New England's mill towns, Lowell today stands as the mongrel grandchild of the long past American industrial revolution. What to do with such a lineage? How to keep up with the times? A visit downtown offers some clues.

Over the past decade, the city's keepers have been busy preening Lowell for the 'Creative Class' coming out party—zoning in an arts district, erecting a multistory parking garage, streamlining their permit process, and recruiting retailers for the anticipated influx of the live-work population. The fruits of such labor fostered the opening of a new museum, a few galleries, coffee shops, and restaurants; however, by far the most striking byproduct of this effort is the overstock of converted studio-loft space in and around the downtown. Large, tastefully designed banners hang from many of the old industrial buildings, advertising airy “lofts”, “condos”, and “studios”. A prospective resident has the option of following these banners in self-guided condo-discovery journey or simply consulting the “one-stop condo shop” that is located downtown. Yet not far below the sandblasted sheen of gentrification, the city struggles to gracefully emerge after over thirty years of major demographic transformation.

## **An Identity Crisis: What's in a Name?**

Lowell has always been an image conscious place, boasting a handful of catchy nicknames. In reference to its proud historical beginnings, Lowell is traditionally known as the 'Birthplace of the Industrial Revolution', the 'Mill City', or the 'Spindle City.' In recent years, new monikers have emerged in efforts to modernize the town's identity. Upon winning the 1999 'All America City' award, Lowell had a new title upon which to capitalize. Though this National Civic League award is not terribly exclusive in its commendation (up to ten cities have won such acclaim every year since 1949), Lowell organizers, civic departments, artists, and otherwise have exuberantly incorporated this hard-won title into publications, websites, vision statements, and program names, so much so that the words 'All America City' were often mentioned by those I interviewed in the Cambodian community.

The latest wave of marketing follows along with the larger trends in American redevelopment, promoting Lowell as a 'Destination City.' The 'Destination City' buzz emerged in the late 90s with that of the 'All American City.' With these two new identities also came an official upbeat slogan, "There's a lot to like about Lowell," that has survived to this day. By current definition, a successful 'Destination City' is one that attracts visitors to build a tourist economy that hopefully leads to new business creation and a growing resident base. However, 'Destination City' has a double meaning in this case, as Lowell has always been a destination for new immigrants since the 1820s and continues to be one today. One of the town's oldest unofficial nicknames, shared with down-river sister city, Lawrence, is that of 'Immigrant City.' Not surprisingly, the 'Immigrant City' nickname never came to surface during the last thirty years of strategic image re-branding. Yet the unique feature of this small satellite mill town—the aspect that distinguishes it from any other place in the New England—is that it is home to an estimated 30,000 Cambodians (Lafleur 2005), the second largest Cambodian enclave in the nation, behind Long beach, California.

Lowell's Cambodians constitute the largest fraction of the minority population in the city, just barely surpassing that represented by the total combined Hispanic population from Columbia, Puerto Rico, and other countries in Latin America. Cambodians account for somewhere between 1/4<sup>th</sup> and 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of total population in Lowell,

depending on whom you consult. At Lowell High School they presently make up 38% of the student body (McDermid 2006). Over the past 30 years, the post-1965 influx of immigrants to Lowell, led in time by the Puerto Ricans and now in numbers by the Cambodians, have profoundly transformed what was a white, working-class mill town into an international, culturally significant city, but somehow the impressiveness of this fact has not been fully recognized by the civic bodies charged with re-branding the image of Lowell for the next century.

The irony here is that if the city were to look into an undistorted mirror, she would see that the face of Lowell had long ago changed, and that transformation did not come about by the hand of a marketing strategist. Furthermore, if the city were to joyfully embrace its current Khmer-Latino-Afro-Brazilian identity, then it would make a real commitment to nurturing and developing that part of itself, rather than looking out to the creative class to build its next economy.

Lowell stands at the crossroads that many small and medium-sized American cities will arrive at over the next forty years, as more immigrants opt out or get priced out of the old metropolitan gateways, like New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. Lowell, for a number of reasons arrived at this crossroads earlier than others, feeling the pressures of large scale ethnic diversification earlier than other similarly sized cities in the United States. However in New England, particularly around the outer ring of Boston, Lowell is just one of several mill towns with a clustered, critical mass of new immigrants from one sending country. While sections of Lowell have come to resemble Little Phnom Penh, parts of Lawrence have evolved into Little Dominica. Framingham now boasts a significant Brazilian population, and there are six blocks along Main Street in Worcester that have grown into a kind of Little Saigon (Ross 2003).

### **Spinning Tales: Heritage, Culture, and Diversity**

The point of this thesis is not to crowd all of these places and people within them into a simplified and uniform model of assimilation, but to illuminate the specific challenges that Lowell, as a city, and Lowell's Cambodians, as a community, face as they move forward in a shifting economic and demographic landscape. With global, national, regional, and local economic forces pulling upon the city and its residents, political and

financial power brokers in Lowell have managed to keep the place afloat by employing a combination of economic development and planning tactics over the past thirty years. They've tried all the standard recipes: historical preservation, heritage tourism, cultural tourism, sports arena building, industry recruitment, workforce recruitment, immigrant recruitment, and most recently artist and commuter recruitment. Underlying all of these efforts is the push to constantly re-brand or re-frame the city so that outsiders will invest in it and build more prosperity. In tandem, the celebration of heritage and culture has been a concurrent part of this scheme. One of the questions this thesis attempts to answer is: What has been the value of these combined actions of 'projecting out' and 'looking back' for the new minority-majority in Lowell?

As the images of 'Spindle City', 'All American City', and 'Destination City' are projected outward to attract tourists, a new resident base, and hopefully new industries, the local narrative of 'Immigrant City' is celebrated, intellectually deconstructed, and publicly discussed via a number of exhibitions, programs, and special events offered through the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center at the Lowell National Historical Park and or the University of Massachusetts Lowell. It is on this side of narrative and identity, in the less spectacular, but positive tale of successive immigration, that the Cambodian community, and the other minority ethnic groups in town, have found themselves.

The effects of this folding-in of the present with the past can be seen as both positive and negative. On a positive note, the 'Immigrant City' narrative, which was in truth written in reverence to the old working-class Europeans who made their way in, up, and out of the old textile factories, became an ode to Lowell's tolerance for 'otherness,' which in the end created a less hostile environment for the large numbers of Southeast Asians that came to the city by the tens of thousands during the 80s and 90s. Although there were certainly a few reported incidents of hostility from Euro-descendants toward the new 'exotics,' they were isolated events and publicly shamed. It turned out that violence between resident groups tended toward acts of 'newcomer on newcomer' rather than 'old-timer on newcomer'—an unexpected set of issues. Yet, overall, every Cambodian I spoke to concurred that there are certainly more racist places to settle than the 'Immigrant City.'

## **Culture as a Way In**

Another positive evolution that grew out of the city's melting-pot narrative is that Cambodians have found a way into Lowell's civic life. By capitalizing on the town's obsession with culture, heritage, and celebration, and launching their own festivals, programs, and events, Cambodians breached the wall that once separated them from what they refer to as the 'mainstream community.' Understood in planning terms, the production of Cambodian cultural programs has facilitated their building 'weak ties' with major institutions like UMass Lowell, other colleges, the National Park, and local media producers. In particular, the tie to UMass is significant. Not only has the University fueled many community-based initiatives with money, technical assistance, and human capital, they also give the Cambodians a voice by giving minority community members the opportunity to produce their own radio programs. The other kind of voice they receive through such ties is a printed one. Professors at UMass are constantly publishing articles and books about the Cambodians and other new immigrants in Lowell. In addition, Professor Robert Farrant, writes a monthly article in the *Lowell Sun* that often critiques short-sighted plans and actions that overlook the current low-income population in Lowell.

Beyond simply connecting the Cambodians to vocal allies with resources, these cultural events also have larger sociological and political purposes. The plays, exhibits, movies, projects, and performances bring a level of visibility to the Cambodian community that forces the 'mainstream' to recognize their presence in the city. In addition, these events serve cross-cultural educational interests. At their highest level, they endeavor to promote greater understanding both out in the 'mainstream' and within the three generation of Cambodians in Lowell.

To this second point, the planners' assessment is that the cultural programs also act as builders of 'strong ties' within the Cambodian community and within the Cambodian family unit. Two pioneering programs that evolved to serve these ends were the Angkor Dance Troupe and the Southeast Asian Water Festival. Both were born out of one man's desire to connect Cambodian youth to their rich heritage and reduce intergenerational strife. Other drivers behind these programs are the desire to instill greater ethnic pride and facilitate community healing. To what degree all of these higher



level objectives are achieved has not been measured, nor would that be an easy task. However, my gut assessment of them is that cultural programs, though significant, cannot act as a societal panacea. This does not mean that they should be discounted, for one of the things that these kinds of programs do very well in Lowell is provide opportunities for minority leadership development, which may potentially translate into building a larger mass of civically active Cambodians.



Khmer New Year Poster 2007

Source: Lowell Community Charter

**Barriers to Civic Engagement**

My original thesis question was about creating more Cambodian civic engagement in Lowell. What I quickly found out is that there are major cultural barriers to getting the Cambodian population to vote, organize, speak to authority, run for office, or attend public meetings, not to mention assume community control over their built environment. For one, there are major Cambodian cultural barriers that work against their engaging in such activities, and on top of these, Lowell’s existing political infrastructure gives little incentive to do so.



Because the first generation of Cambodian refugees fled the rule of an oppressive Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime, many Cambodians in Lowell still associate politics with negative outcomes. Having witnessed the execution of those who spoke out against the DK regime a large fraction of the Cambodian community has no interest in voicing opinions at local meetings being visible at the ballot box, let alone challenging the actions of local government. In the 1980s when the Latinos and Southeast Asians had problems with the school system, the Latinos led the call for reform. Now, the Asian American Legal Defense Fund speaks on their behalf when necessary. According to former city councilor, Rithy Uong, his compatriots came to the U.S seeking the basic right to live peacefully, so for now, they are satisfied to go to work, get money, have a car, and that's all: "They don't trust politicians that much" (O'Sullivan 2003, p 17).

Uong and other organizers have taken up the cause of educating Cambodians about the importance of becoming citizens and exercising their right to vote. Their message has most successfully reached the second generation who came of age in the U.S. The Cambodian American Voter League (CAVL) estimates that around 2,800 of the 30,000 Cambodians in Lowell are registered voters (Reid 2005). Sidney Liang who is director of CAVL, says that registration is the "easiest part." Getting them to vote is a bigger challenge, because Cambodians recall the repercussions of associating with the 'wrong' political party in their homeland. Even still, the number of Cambodian voters is growing every year, as the community ages and more Cambodians run for office.

However, Lowell's at-large system of representation for both the city council and the school committee makes it difficult for an ethnic minority candidate to get elected to political office. The lack of ward representation, on top of low minority-voter turnout, has made it very unlikely that a minority candidate wins a seat on any elected councils. Rithy Uong was the first and only Cambodian representative. George Ramirez, holds the same title among the Latinos. Currently, neither ethnic group is represented. Professor Robert Forrant at University of Massachusetts Lowell said that the bulk of current city councilors come from the wealthiest neighborhood, Belvidere, which is "virtually all white and [home to mostly] probably third and fourth generation French Canadian and Irish immigrants." (personal communication, January 22, 2008). Given this fact, the odds are against a Cambodian candidate from a Cambodian neighborhood winning an election.

## Is there a Cambodian City?

Given these facts, it becomes clear that the *reality* of living in twenty-first century Lowell as a Cambodian may not fully jibe with the upbeat narrative of the old ‘Immigrant City.’ For one, it is not certain that Lowell’s Cambodians are going to move up through the political ranks as their European predecessors did. In fact, a closer look at the Cambodians’ predecessors, the Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Colombians, shows that they actually never found a foothold in this ladder before they started dispersing to other locations. Another thing that is still unclear is whether or not the service economy, which currently accounts for 25% of Lowell’s total economy, will expand to the point that jobs in that sector provide livable wages. Another unknown is whether or not the much anticipated nanotech sector, which is supposedly just beyond the horizon, will ever rise up and bring the dawn of another technological miracle. In either case, the ‘Cambodian City’ narrative is still being written, which means that the ‘Immigrant City,’ narrative may be ripe for revision.

One of the goals of this thesis is to illustrate places of convergence and places of contradiction between the ‘Cambodian City,’ the ‘Immigrant City,’ the ‘Destination City,’ and the ‘All American City.’ However, in order to begin such an analysis, one has first to know something about how others have tried to construct a narrative for the ‘Cambodian City.’ A brief literature review shows that the story is a work in progress. Regarding Cambodians in general, the most popularly written-about topics are the horrors of the genocide and the mental health issues that survivors suffer. Regarding Cambodians in Lowell the literature has become deeper and more nuanced over time. Here I highlight some of the bound milestones:

- In terms of books, James Higgins 1983 photo-documentary book, *Southeast Asians: A New Beginning in Lowell*, is the earliest piece of literature devoted to the topic. His collection of striking black and white portraits with first-person captions, gives a glimpse into the lives of early Cambodian settlers in the city. Higgins was the only work of significance I found on Lowell’s Cambodian enclave.

- During the early to mid-90s Peter Nien-Chu Kiang and others wrote several chapters and articles on the Latino and Cambodian parents' movement to desegregate and reform the Lowell Public School System (Kiang 1996). Kiang's work was part of a larger body on multi-lingual and multi-cultural education practices (Aguilar San Juan 1994).
- Since race relations was another hot topic of the 90s, Lowell's Cambodians were referenced frequently in books about building a less violent city. Books of this era often quoted Massachusetts gubernatorial candidate John Silber saying, "Why should Lowell be the Cambodian capital of America?" (Namias 1992 & Johnsonn 1995).
- After 2000, a couple of books were written on the pan-religious identity of America. In these books Lowell was referenced for its Cambodian temples and their magnetic effect on practitioners of Theravada Buddhism (Eck 2001).
- In 2003, Sucheng Chan became the official expert on the modern Cambodian American community. Frustrated by the lack of literature striving to do anything beyond portray Cambodians as victims of a genocide, Chan published *Not Just Victims*, a collection of 12 oral histories with Cambodian Community Leaders. Samkhann Khoeun, then executive director of the Lowell Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association, is one of the 12 leaders profiled.
- In 2004, Chan followed up her oral history book with *Survivors*, her own narrative of the Cambodian experience in Asia and the U.S. She references Lowell several times in the book; however her focus is on the entire Cambodian-American experience so the chapters are topical.
- In 2006, Cathy Stanton's *The Lowell Experiment*, took a deep, critical look at the Lowell National Historical Park, the public history movement, and the Park's reinterpretations of labor, immigrant, and women's history. Though, Stanton intended to spend more time reporting on the connections between the Cambodian community and the National Park, she ultimately

found there were not enough points of intersection between the two entities. She was nevertheless quite scathing in her critique of the Park's positivist, revisionist version of history and how the Cambodians and other minorities are incorporated within it.

- In 2007, Mitra Das's *Between Two Cultures* gave a detailed account of the challenges Cambodian women face in Lowell, highlighting the difficulty in taking on a modern, western female identity. Das shows how the process of adaptation is personal and varied.
- In 2007, *Southeast Asian Refugees and Immigrants in the Mill City*, an edited volume of interdisciplinary essays was put forward by professors and researchers who work and/or live in Lowell. Together the essays penetrate the details of issues such as civic engagement in Buddhist temples, ideas on the value of education, transnational politics, power relations, religion, and the concept of social capital.

This total volume of books, not to mention numerous articles written on everything from political incorporation to the success of dance programs, demonstrates the complexity of Lowell's Cambodian City. While scholars writing since 2003 have begun to paint a detailed portrait, there are still too many gaps in the image to assemble a cohesive narrative.

One way the Park and the City of Lowell in general has dealt with this complexity is to simply fold the Cambodians into an image that is familiar. The Lowell National Historic Park has gone out of their way to incorporate the city's newest arrivals into the traditional 'Immigrant City' narrative. Their brochures say that the Cambodians and Latinos have been "as essential to industry as their predecessors a century before" (2002). State representative Kevin Murphy has gone so far as to call the Cambodians "the new Irish" (O'Sullivan 2003).

While these declarations are meant to honor the Cambodians for reversing Lowell's population drain, reviving decaying neighborhoods, and acting as hard-working laborers in struggling industries, the fact is that the Cambodians are no more the Irish anymore than Lowell is the same place as it was in the 1840s. While seeing the

Cambodians as just one more immigrant group rolling through America's first industrial city may help old-timers digest the ubiquitous presence of the darker-skinned masses, an accurate Cambodian City narrative—one that begins in 1980 and accounts for all the new realities that immigrants face in this era of global economic uncertainty—could bring new awareness to policy makers on how they should proceed from here.

### **An Updated Community Snapshot**

The first thing that should be recognized in any narrative about the Cambodians is that they are refugee survivors of the Khmer Rouge genocide, which took the lives of roughly 2 million people, an estimated 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the country's population (Hinton 2006). Due to the aggressive and intentional efforts by the Khmer Rouge regime to dismantle family life, the majority of Cambodians who came to the U.S. between 1979 and 1985 arrived without their families intact (Das 2007). The refugee population contained a disproportionate number of orphans, widows, and single-parent households, usually led by women. The broken family unit has posed some serious challenges to the process of integration and also community development. On top of this issue, another challenge for the Cambodian population was that the majority of them arrived without education or professional skills. When the Khmer Rouge assumed power, they specifically targeted and tried to eradicate the educated and merchant class. As a result the Cambodians, like most of the recent refugees from the Asia and Africa, entered the United States with major deficits in human and social capital. This is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Cambodians which makes their achievements in Lowell even that more impressive. Their unique past and the unique obstacles they had to overcome to build their community in Lowell should not be overlooked in Lowell's feel good history of its inhabitants.

The 'Immigrant City' narrative does not do a good job of digging underneath the surface to look at some of the messier realities of living in a city with true diversity. The success stories about Lowell and the town's uncommon ability to absorb immigrants do not touch upon the deeper social problems that these 'newcomers' struggle with. In the case of the Cambodian community, one of the darkest and most taboo of these issues is the way that widespread emotional trauma acts as a barrier to living healthy productive

lives in the U.S. The trauma buried within Lowell's community has trickled down to directly and indirectly affect the livelihood of all three Cambodian-American generations. The 2002 Lowell Community Health Center survey reports that 25% of the local Cambodian population over 25 suffers depression<sup>4</sup> and that the eldest generation especially women over 50, carry the heaviest proportion of this distress.<sup>5</sup> In interviews, I found that people often alluded to the eldest generation's reluctance to engage in the political process and overall fear of authority. Respondents also stated the first generation's distrust of one another, coupled with their longing to return to Cambodia, has weakened ties within the Lowell Southeast Asian community.

The middle generation, those who immigrated as youth and are now in their 30s and 40s, has a different set of issues to contend with. They were moved around by their parents and faced different kinds of resistance from each new school system. Once settled in Lowell, they had to endure the slow transformation of the city's civic institutions, as schools and police were reformed to accommodate their cultural differences. Children of single-parent households or working parents had to raise themselves and their siblings on top of having to navigate the American teenage experience. As teens, they had to break from the first generation's oppressive protectionist parenting practices and create their own culture. Such uprisings against traditional value systems led to familial conflict and in the worst cases, domestic violence. Feelings of isolation and lack of support contributed to high incidences of dropping-out with a youth runaway and gang problem. These issues persist to this day.

The youngest generation, in their 20s and below, was born and raised in the U.S. and now struggles to hold on to their heritage, support their elders, advance their careers, and climb up the social ranks. Their struggle is to resist falling into the cycle of persistent poverty and the fate of becoming just another low-income minority group. The third generation has more support now that the generation before them has at least some presence in the school system, the community college, and the police department. The youth have after-school programs and the young adults have mentors who fought battles

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<sup>4</sup> The rate of depression among adults in the U.S. is 6.6% according to the Journal of the American Medical Association, as reported by Lowell Community Health Center.

<sup>5</sup> Cambodian Community Health 2010 estimates 43% of Cambodian women over 50 have symptoms of depression

on their behalf. Those who have not slipped through the cracks of the education system struggle to finish college in the face of pressures to start their own families. Those who enter the professional working world take on several jobs, and if time permits, leadership positions in their community. Tasked with taking care of their parents, starting their own families, and advocating for their community, the middle and youngest generations carry a heavy burden. Tokenized by the mainstream and in turn criticized by their elders for being too modern, their task is to find real traction in their hometown without losing everything that their predecessors fought so hard to retain.

Having now summarized three decades and three generations in three paragraphs, I have at best scratched the surface of the 'Cambodian City' narrative in Lowell. Nearly 30 years have passed since the first Cambodian families settled in Lowell. Asian American Studies expert, Sucheng Chan would assert that they are beyond victim status. Now that their numbers have grown to 30,000, the Cambodians are a significant force in the city. What can we learn about their struggle for representation in this identity-conscious mill town? And what alternative public measures might emerge from a fuller understanding of their community?

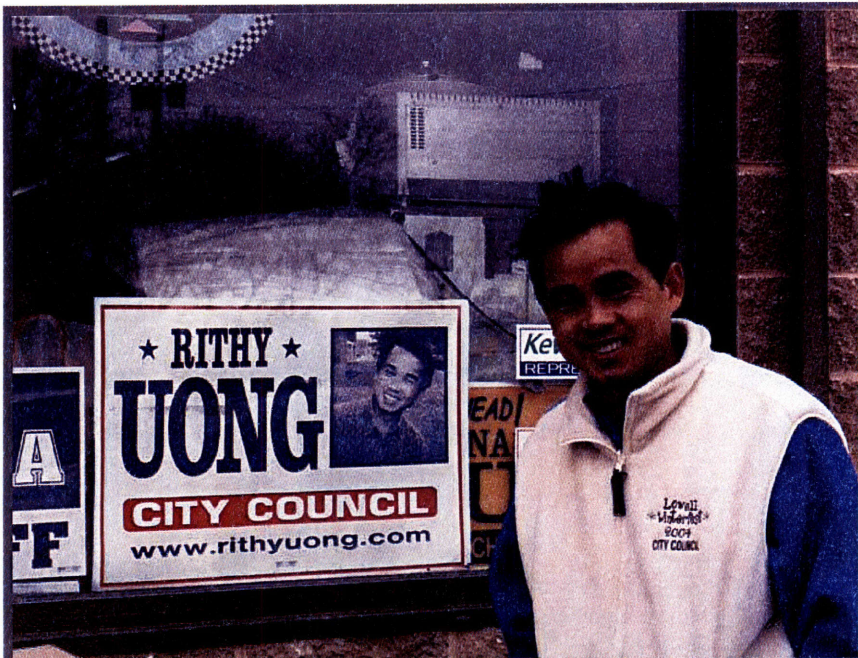




## **Part II: The People**

### **Six Profiles of Leadership and Change**

Wisdom, as an African proverb has it, comes out of an ant heap. Practical wisdom, in Aristotelian thought, is concerned with the concrete, with particulars. To know a city is to know its streets, we might say. And who knows those streets better than those who live in them and use them? Who knows the needs of a village better than the villagers? (Sandercock 2003, p.79).



*Rithy Uong by his campaign poster*

Source: UC Irvine archives  
<http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb838nb4zb/?brand=calisphere>  
(Accessed May 21, 2008)



*Lowell High School*

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## **Chapter 3: The Councilor & Counselor**

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### **Chanrithy “Rithy” Uong**

Whenever I asked someone from Lowell’s ‘mainstream’, whether a planner, professor, or director of a community organization, about Cambodian civic participation, two topics would inevitably arise—the annual Southeast Asian Water Festival and the election of former City Counselor, Chanrithy “Rithy” Uong. Both of these events grew out of the late 90s, when the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association (CMAA) was being led by two engineers turned community advocates, Samkhann Khoeun and Rithy Uong. The then director and president of the board, respectively, both had large visions for what the Cambodian community might become in Lowell. As leaders of the CMAA, they concentrated on building bridges to the ‘mainstream’. While Samkhann developed social, art, and cultural development programs, Rithy advanced in the school system and the local government. Rithy was not only Lowell’s first minority city councilor, he was the Lowell’s first Cambodian certified teacher and the first Cambodian ever elected to an American political office. Having served on the council from 2000 to 2005, he stepped down in the middle of his third term due to an ethics committee flare-up around his promotion from guidance counselor to headmaster at Lowell High School. This incident was personally detrimental to Rithy and did not sit well with the Cambodian community.

I had the opportunity to speak at length with Rithy on a few occasions in his guidance counselor’s office at the center of the freshman academy. Walking into his fluorescent-lit, windowless office, I was struck by the numerous framed photos of him with important politicians and the prominently displayed “Rithy Uong - City Councilor” nameplate sitting on the shelves by framed photos of his children. The position obviously meant a great deal to him. As I talked to more people in the community and got to better understand the Lowell political climate, I understood why. Rithy’s election to council was a monumental feat that no other Cambodian (and only one Hispanic) has since been able to pull off. When we discussed the prospects of electing another minority councilman, his outlook was bleak, since the at-large system favors the ‘mainstream’ holding onto their stronghold.

## **Getting Settled and Climbing Up**

As is the case with all the Cambodians I met in Lowell, Rithy Uong overcame incredible odds to be where he is today, drawing on a combination of perseverance, good temperament, interpersonal skills, and good fortune. Rithy arrived in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1981 aided by the benevolent hand of the Catholic Charities, where he immediately went to work full-time as a factory assembler. After saving up some money, he set out for Boston to pursue an education, first taking ESL classes, then getting his GED and bachelor's degree in engineering from Boston University. Upon his graduation in 1987, he had the choice of joining an engineering firm or working as a social worker for half the salary. Rithy chose the social worker position and so began his career as a public servant.

After a year of working as the Cambodian community liaison in Chelsea, Massachusetts, he enrolled in an 18 month Masters in Education program at UMass Amherst. When Rithy was assigned for a year of student teaching at Lowell High School, the place was struggling mightily to accommodate its new immigrant students from Southeast Asia and Latin America. Seeing this, he decided to stay, and within two years was promoted to guidance councilor. In 1992, after a year in the position, Rithy went back to Cambodia to assist in the United Nations Free and Fair Election Program. Rithy stayed in his home country working at an NGO for three years before coming back to Lowell and re-assuming his position as a guidance counselor in 1997. Incidentally, during that same year Sambath Chey Fennel, a former CMAA community coordinator, became the first Cambodian-American to run for municipal office, unsuccessfully bidding for a spot on Lowell's school committee.

## **Becoming a Politician**

Two years after Fennel's first run, the board members at the CMAA were compelled to keep the Cambodian political momentum going. After some deliberation, they decided that their board president, Rithy Uong, had the best shot at winning. Rithy says that he was pushed into it by "those young guys."<sup>6</sup> He had never thought of himself

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<sup>6</sup> Unless noted otherwise, all quotes in this chapter are from Rithy Uong, personal communication, November 16, 2007 or January 8, 2008.

as a politician; he self-identifies as a community activist. The initial thought was that Rithy should run for school committee; however, his guidance counselor position made him ineligible for that office, so he set his sights on a City Council seat instead. Support for Rithy's election started in the Cambodian community and radiated out through the youth organizers in the high school. Mel King, one of Boston's most famous community organizers, also assisted in getting the campaign off the ground. Together, they ran a multi-racial, high visibility, coalition-building campaign.

Then a 'mainstream' woman, a physician's assistant, told Rithy she wanted to be his campaign manager. Rithy said, "She loved Cambodians, and her father was a racist. People thought she was crazy." With her in charge, things really amplified. She secured a campaign headquarters and had professional signs made. She took over Rithy's calendar, scheduled all his appearances, and organized a pivotal fundraising party in the affluent, mostly white Belvidere neighborhood. Rithy remembers that night clearly, feeling a bit awestruck in that fancy neighborhood with all those white people there to support him. When the Belvidere precinct returns came in on election night, Rithy finished second. Lowell residents were stunned. That night, Rithy made history. Recounting the story to me, his eyes sparkled, "We threw a big party for everyone. We danced all night. It was the happiest night of my life."

## **Representing the Minority**

In order to play the game, you have to sit at the table. For the five years that Rithy was on the council, he was able to bring his community's needs to the councilor's bargaining table. When he held the 5<sup>th</sup> swing vote on a decision, Rithy would leverage his position to his community's benefit. According to Rithy, during the years he was in office, more Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds went into minority neighborhoods and minority-led organizations than ever before. In addition, minority voter participation grew and minorities started taking positions in city agencies. For this short period, the white city council was accountable to the minority community. But when Rithy left, so did the benefits. Without Rithy at the table, the Cambodians fell out of the political game.

Following the end of Rithy's tenure, in 2005, three Cambodian-American men ran for local office. Sambath Chey Fennel re-emerged to run for city council along with Rady Mom, a political newcomer. Seasoned community advocate, Vesna Nuon made his third bid for School Committee. None of the three were victorious. In thinking about the aftermath of his career as a councilor, Rithy reflects,

My hope was to mobilize the younger generation to carry the work that was being done for them. I was carrying on the work that was done before me. That's why I succeeded. When I stepped down, I was hoping that people would run and that they would go out and work hard. But they didn't work hard, and they lost the election. I think that means they took it for granted. They thought because I got elected, another Cambodian could get elected easy. They were wrong. I kept telling them that... If you want to get elected you have to get out there and seek out, meet people. You can't rely on Cambodians to elect you. If that were the case, then they would have elected [you] already.

Unable to rely on the census to gauge the size of Lowell's minority community, I have had to rely on local estimates. In publications, different sources state that Lowell's Cambodian population ranges in size from 15,000 to 50,000. Locals estimate that there are 25 to 30,000 Cambodians in town, making them the largest fraction of the estimated 50 to 60,000 total minority population in the city. As stated earlier, Rithy was the first person from Lowell's minority population to win a seat in the Council. While neither of the Cambodian candidates succeeded him in 2005, a Latino candidate did. Similar to Rithy Uong, George Ramirez was the notable 'first' from his community to sit on the council. Ramirez's campaign was based on garnering greater government transparency, especially on the issue of development, and improving work force training to attract new industries. However, Ramirez's tenure ended up being even shorter than Rithy's. He left the council after just one term to take a position with the governor. Rithy criticizes Ramirez's choice to further his political career rather than serve as Lowell's minority community's representative, underscoring that "it is not an easy task" to win in Lowell's at-large system. Presently, no minorities sit on the council.

In the 1980s, the at-large system of city council elections was shown to reinforce under-representation of blacks and in some cases, Hispanics (Engstrom and McDonald 1981). Soon other studies contested this research (Bullock and MacManus 1987). In 1990, Susan Welch of the University of Nebraska reassessed the data for cities over 50,000 that had at least a 5% black or Hispanic population. Welch found that both blacks and Hispanics were best represented in cities with ward representation. Where blacks made up more than 10 % of the population, all cities with ward representation had at least some black representation on city councils, whereas a sizable portion of cities with at-large systems or mixed systems did not have any black representation. Welch also found that residential segregation caused lower representation in at-large elections across the board.

Extrapolating Welch's findings, I conclude that the at-large system is definitely causing under-representation of Cambodians and Hispanics in Lowell. Lowell is residentially segregated. According to conservative 2000 census data, Cambodians constitute minimally 11% of the city's population, and Latinos make up 14%, I conclude that if there were to be district representation in Lowell, both groups would most likely have a representative on the city council. However, when I asked Rithy and other Cambodian leaders if they would rather Lowell had ward representation, none said yes. They said that the current at-large system allows the city council to operate in a unified manner, without parochial ward arguments. They believed that a unified council made the city function better, and cited Lawrence as a case where ward representation impaired the city's efficiency.

## **Stepping Down**

The tale of Rithy's resignation is a controversial one. As Rithy recounts it, he was the victim of protocol and another city councilor's spite. The ethical law that Rithy allegedly violated was nicely summarized an article in the *Boston Globe*:

“In general terms, state law prohibits a municipal employee from having a financial interest in a contract made by a municipal agency of the same city or town. Someone working for a town or city can become an elected official of that municipality, but once elected, he or she cannot accept

another municipal job or a government promotion in the community. Even if a person gives up an elected post, he or she must wait six months before getting another local government job or a promotion” (Reid 2004)

In 2002, Rithy was promoted from guidance counselor to headmaster, a promotion that included a \$14,000 annual pay increase. In newspapers, the then superintendent said she didn't intend to put Rithy in an ethical bind and asserted that he was promoted based on his merits (Reid 2004). Rithy, meanwhile had already forfeited a \$15,000 annual city councilor's salary during his five years in office in keeping with this same conflict-of interest law. In his opinion, his was not the kind of promotion the law was intended to prevent. Otherwise, no one would have let him get the promotion in the first place.

Why did it take three years for this conflict to surface? Another councilman put Rithy's promotion before the ethics committee after he, himself, was prevented by the same law, from taking a new position at the vocational school. Rithy asserts that the other councilor's situation was a completely different matter. The other councilor did not even work for the municipality at that time. He was clearly changing his career trajectory, while Rithy, on the other hand, was building upon the educational career he was already pursuing prior to joining the council. In any case, the other councilor was not allowed to take the vocational school position and still sits on Lowell's city council to this day. Meanwhile, a demoralized Rithy stepped down from the council after the state Ethics Commission fined him \$6,000 and forced him to relinquish his headmaster position. Today, well over the mandatory six months has passed since Rithy left office, yet he remains a guidance counselor.

### **Still Engaged**

Looking at the present and the road ahead, Rithy tries to remain upbeat, though he is a little worn down. “I feel bad for my community,” he told me one afternoon,

“They are not united. People seem... The comfort level is too high now. You know, ‘I don't need you anymore’... I think [now] there is a resistance, a depression. Back then, there was a lot of discrimination, a lot of people looked down on us, we didn't have any minority representation,



anything we could do, we did – always. But now the comfort level is too high, so now we need to mobilize.”

Rithy says he is trying to take a break from organizing, but at the same time, he still maintains a certain level of visibility and power in the community. He is back on the CMAA board, trying to help them re-emerge after their near-collapse and change in leadership and he appears once a month on a Cambodian television to talk about social and political issues. In the future, he might run for state representative of the Lower Highlands district or for a seat in the Cambodian parliament, but in the mean time, he is trying to nurture the upcoming generation of Lowell teens: “The high school is the heart and soul of the city. The success of the school is the success of the city.”

As a guidance counselor, Rithy is well-acquainted with Cambodian family issues—kids running away from home, teen pregnancy, single parent children, kids missing school, and domestic abuse. He says, “Most people don’t know when their kids are not doing well.” The shortage of Cambodian faculty puts him in a position of mentorship, but he cannot reach every student. Lowell High School has around 4,000 students, making it the second largest in the state. Rithy and other community advocates say the lack of minority representation in the school system is problematic:

The school is 57-58% minority. This is a majority minority city but everything is still controlled by the white folks. The city employees are 95% white. When I say it like that it may seem like I’m racist, but I think we have to address the needs of the community... And anything that the city benefits from through these minority people leaves the city. The benefits don’t go to these people... We have to mobilize the community.

Rithy says that the Cambodians are unaware. They don’t know where benefits go or why they should want more. They don’t understand why they should participate in elections or take on other civic duties. They need some reason or issue to make them participate.

## **Where do Cambodians fit into the Plan?**

In the last election, in which no minority candidates ran, the campaigns were largely focused on gentrification and who fits the benefits from redevelopment. This seems like an issue that the Cambodian community might be concerned about as the largest minority population in the city. However, there is such a spatial and cultural disconnect between the Cambodian community and the city, that they do not see how downtown condo development has anything to do with them. Since their homes and businesses aren't downtown, and most don't shop or dine there, they likely didn't find the issue of gentrification relevant. Given that the Cambodian service economy functions largely independent of the 'mainstream' economy, maybe there is no relationship.

Rithy says the most acute issue the Cambodian community faces is the instability across the job market and the housing market: "A lot of people are losing homes now because they don't have a secure job." If a sizable middle class were to move into the lofts downtown, then perhaps some service jobs or construction jobs would be made available to the Cambodians. However, they would have to be vocal and demand these jobs as guaranteed benefits from the gentrification. Lowell Planning Department Director, Adam Baacke, said that Cambodian business owners will definitely benefit from the redevelopment, as loft-dwellers will patronize Cambodian restaurants and stores. My opinion is that Cambodian business owners would have to learn how to market to these customers in order to get them to cross over to the poor side of town. With support from the Economic Development Department, business owners might be able to expand their base. However, if the Cambodians don't go to the meetings and say, "What's in it for us?", then they may very well continue ignoring the downtown issues, at least until the gentrification spills over into their neighborhoods and causes a worse affordable housing crisis.

Aside from gentrification, if a Cambodian were on the city council, might different plans get generated that sought to address the issues that *are* central to the Cambodian community? Would a plan for better childcare or youth programming or workforce development be moving ahead?

## **Chapter 4: The Bridge Builder**

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### **Samkhann Khoeun**

When Samkhann Khoeun came to Lowell in 1995 to become the first Cambodian executive director of the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association (CMAA), he brought his “can-do” attitude with him from Chicago. Prior to his arrival in the northeast, Samkhann was a community organizer and program director the Cambodian Association of Illinois. He came to Lowell eager to tackle the “unique needs and challenges” faced by a Cambodian community five or six times the size of the one in Chicago. During his 7-year tenure at the CMAA, he boasts having grown the agency’s annual budget from \$450,000 to almost \$4 million and also launching of an ambitious range of educational and cultural programs. Perhaps his greatest achievement during his directorship was founding the first annual Southeast Asian Water Festival in 1997, an event which now draws over 60,000 celebrants every third weekend in August. Since his resignation in 2002, which is rumored to have been a bit controversial, Samkhann has continued to work on other projects. Still an advocate for greater social harmony, he now works as an advisor for disadvantaged and minority college-bound students at Lowell High School, and continues to organize Cambodian cultural events.

### **Engineering Solutions and Being a Bridge**

Like former city counselor Rithy Uong, Samkhann Khoeun was trained as an engineer, and his “multi-pronged, multi-faceted” approach to community development reflects this. In his mind, there is no problem that cannot be solved. Perplexing problems are just composites of many small issues, and so long as one can address the small issues, then one can find solutions. As an organizer and director in Chicago and Lowell, Samkhann tried to develop programs that would address the needs of the whole community, “everyone from elderly to children,”<sup>7</sup> along the whole continuum of the refugee resettlement experience. Looking at the community and their multitude of needs,

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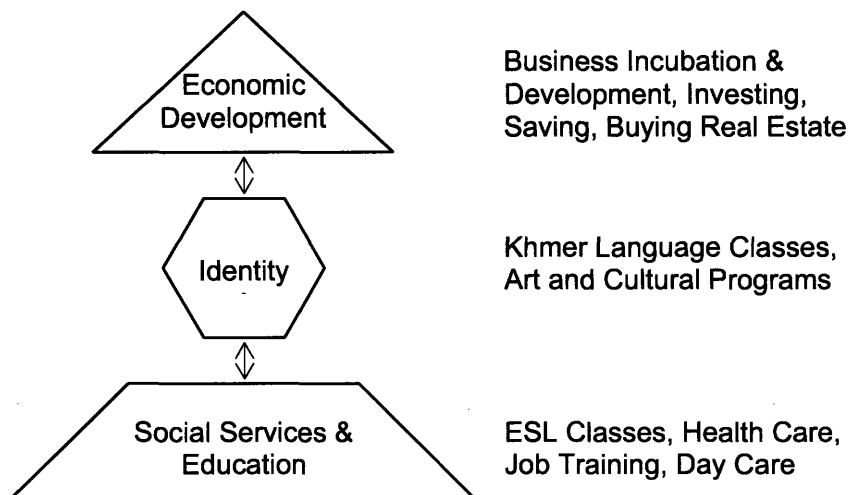
<sup>7</sup> Unless noted otherwise, all quotes in this chapter are from Samkhann Khoeun, personal communication, January 22, 2008.

he think to himself, “Here is the raw material. How do I develop a process?” Samkhann saw himself as a bridge:

A bridge between our community and the mainstream community. How can I be a good bridge? A better bridge? To enable the process of assimilation, integration, acculturation, and learning, so that this population can become self sufficient. Be able to be on their own. Not depend on public assistance and in turn also help their own family...You look at one person, but look in the context of the whole family.

By looking at the extended family, Samkhann asserts one can understand the full spectrum of needs faced by the Cambodian American population—elders are suffering language and cultural isolation, post traumatic stress disorder, and war syndrome; many adults and single parents work two jobs and on the weekends, leaving unsupervised youth to fall through the cracks of the public education system, small children are left without reliable caretakers, and so the whole community starts to fall apart. Understanding the community needs through this lens, Samkhann developed a three-pronged solution model in response. He calls it the “Three gems.”

### **The Three Gems**



Using this model, Samkhann designed programs to serve every generation and reduce the conflicts between them. He helped to open the culturally competent Metta Health Center to meet the needs of the elder Southeast Asian population. After-school, weekend, and summer programs helped youth to connect with their heritage. While parents would attend ESL or computer classes, their children would attend Khmer language, dance, or art classes. By this model, the CMAA could then start acting as “extended family,” supporting the individuals from “birth to death,” a sort of family for families.

### **Dreaming of a One-stop Shop**

As far as a venue, Samkhann had big plans for the Courier Building, the former CMAA headquarters, on Jackson Street, but he was forced to step down before any of it was realized. His vision was to develop a “one-stop center” to support the “Three Gems.” He planned on converting the old downtown mill building into a mixed use center to accommodate:

The social services—daycare, elderly services. Art and cultural activities with a library, museums, exhibitions, and then literacy development, capacity development, so that youths and adults to share and exchange experiences. Economic development, incubation place for businesses and business training, fiscal buyings, savings, bank accounts, everything. All those aspects. Those things all go together.

Of those things, only the health center survives in this location to this day. A tattered ‘CMAA’ banner hangs vertically from the building along with a ‘Komar Daycare’ and ‘Metta Health Center’ one. Not far the entry to the health center, propped up against the now vacant, but soon to be condo-ized, building rests a large, beat-up sign that reads: “Preservation Works!, Phase I Masonry and Window Repair, Grant Recipient: The Cambodian Mutual Association of Greater Lowell.” And a massive parking garage rises just across the street.

Professor Jeffrey Gerson’s unpublished paper on Cambodian American Political Incorporation reports that the “superficially stable” CMAA hit a major stumbling block in 2002 when board members started calling into question the feasibility of Samkhann’s

vision for expansion (2003). When Khoeun left, the CMAA found itself in serious financial straits. In 2007, the new leadership sold the Courier Building, opened a new, smaller facility in the Acre, and scaled back its program offerings substantially.



*Tattered CMAA Banner hangs from the Courier Building*

© Amy Stitely, 2007



*CMAA- Courier Building on Jackson Street*

© Amy Stitely, 2007





*Old Preservation Works! sign leaned up against the old CMAA building*

© Amy Stitely, 2007



*JAM parking garage going up across  
Jackson Street*

© Amy Stitely, 2007

## **Expanding Beyond the First Gem**

Applying the “Three Gems” concept meant expanding the mission of the CMAA, which had traditionally only focused on the first of those gems, the social services, or what Samkhann calls the foundation services. When the agency was established in 1984 with startup funds from the Massachusetts Office of Refugee Resettlement, its mission was to provide the most basic social and educational services that refugees needed to survive in the U.S. With the goal of getting people into jobs and off public assistance, the earliest CMAA on Perry Street was a place for ESL classes, skills training, and job placement assistance. Twenty-four years later, these types of services are still in high demand. In fact, today’s CMAA, with its reduced financial capacity, provides very little programming beyond ESL, GED, and health education. However, during the years that Samkhann was the executive director, he pushed the CMAA to grow and take on the other two gems of his community development model.

The third gem, the economic development piece, never quite took off. For a time CMAA tried to incubate small businesses (Silka and Turcotte 2007), but the success of this effort is not clear. The same could be said for those business development initiatives launched by CMAA’s outside partner organizations. There was a short-lived Asian American Business Association that grew out of UMass Lowell and also a micro-enterprise program that was run by the now defunct Cambodian American League of Lowell (CALL), but neither of these projects survived in the long run. The current executive director of the CMAA, former Fleet Bank executive, Vong Ros, is resolute on finding a way to promote Cambodian business development and to start a first-time home-buyer program, but he too seems puzzled on how to make this happen. What the past ten years illustrate is that the third gem has a clearly recognized value, but no one seems to know how to go about capturing it.

In contrast, the second gem, the cultural identity one, has been effectively mined, shined, and showcased for the outside world. When Samkhann Khouen arrived in Lowell, the Angkor Dance Troupe had been positively transforming the lives of Cambodian youth for over ten years. Formed in 1986 by Tim Chan Thou, a grandchild of Cambodian royal court dancers who were murdered during the Khmer Rouge genocide, the Angkor Dance Troupe’s mission is to preserve the Cambodian performing



arts tradition. They train youth as professional dancers, connect them to their cultural heritage, and provide opportunities for leadership development. Perhaps inspired by the Troupe's achievements, Samkhann also saw the potential that arts and cultural programs had to unite people across differences and bring recognition to the growing Asian community:

[At the CMAA] we created a number of cultural activities, including the Lowell Southeast Asian Water Festival, so we could showcase the art and the culture, not only just within the Cambodian community,...other communities as well, namely the Laotians, the Hmong, Vietnamese Americans, Thais. I could have just named it Cambodian Water Festival,... but [I thought] if we can do something together, bring big numbers, politically we can send a unique voice to the city.

When Samkhann first presented the Water Festival concept to the elders, they liked the idea but were skeptical. They grilled him with questions: "How do we get the boats? How do we do this? How do we do that?" To this, he responded, "You like the idea... Don't worry about where the funding comes from, where the boats come from. We'll get everything done." Two years later, he made good on this promise; the first Lowell Southeast Asian Water Festival happened in 1997. Eleven years later, it is a huge annual event that attracts people from all over the world.

*Southeast Asian Water Festival*

© Boon Vong  
[http://www.b-vong.com/journal/wp-content/uploads/2007/08/w\\_bvong\\_remix\\_lowell\\_water\\_fest\\_1.jpg](http://www.b-vong.com/journal/wp-content/uploads/2007/08/w_bvong_remix_lowell_water_fest_1.jpg)  
(Accessed May 21, 2008)



## **Finding Common Ground**

The festival was at first publicly and privately opposed by Lowellians, but with UMass Lowell on his side, Samkhann was able to convince the establishment that the festival was about finding common ground, not about “bullying up or taking over the city.” When Samkhann came to Lowell, he was immediately struck by the powerful Merrimack River and its semblance to the Mekong River:

In Cambodia, the Mekong was a source of light for the agricultural life... [it] had an impact on millions and millions of people. Here, the Merrimack River is a source of light too, but for the industrialization of Lowell. Lowell was the first planned industrial city in America. I used that as a way to get through to the other side. Hey, you know, we have this thing in common. Water is light... We are all human beings. We all depend on one thing.

Presented in this way, the festival was no longer threatening to the establishment. After the first year was a success, the City came to embrace the festival, or at least embrace it enough to capitalize on its existence.

Two years later, in 1999, the festival and Samkhann Khoeun played an important role in Lowell’s winning the ‘All America City Award’ from the National Civic League. In previous years, Lowell had been a finalist for the award but never won. The Cambodians I spoke with all feel that the Water Festival was the element that gave the city its winning edge in its 1999 bid. Samkhann, himself, actually helped to compose the city’s application and also presented in front of the jury:

The City of Lowell had tried a few times [to win this award] with their own programs – folk festival, city cop program, institutions, but the jury, the judges, didn’t see it as grassroots enough or innovative enough. It was like a top down; Here is what we do. Here is what we tell the community we are doing. It’s great for them and all that kind of stuff; whereas, the Water Festival really came from this immigrant community.

According to the National Civic League website, “The All-America City Award is the oldest and most respected community recognition program in the nation” (2007). Every

year since 1950, ten cities have been named ‘All-America Cities.’ Recognition goes to communities that:

...demonstrate successful resolution of community issues through collaborative effort. Award winning criteria include the following: active citizen involvement, effective and efficient government performance, maximized local philanthropic and volunteer resources, a strong capacity for cooperation and consensus building, community vision and pride, inter-group relations, community information sharing, and intercommunity cooperation (2007).

Lowell proudly advertises its status as an ‘All America City.’ This hard-won title helps to further distinguish Lowell from dysfunctional mill towns like Lawrence and Springfield that still haven’t seen a renaissance. Though it has been nine years since Lowell was named an ‘All America City,’ the public relations campaign is still running strong. Visit any number of websites that profile the city, and the title inevitably shows up somewhere. Ask a local ‘mainstream’ person if Lowell is an accommodating place for immigrants, and the title is likely get tossed up as evidence of the city’s uncommon inclusiveness. I also found Cambodian-Americans bring up the title when needing to distinguish Lowell from more racist places.



*ONE Lowell webpage banner*

Source: <http://www.onelowell.net/>  
(Accessed May 21, 2008)

## **Being Cambodian in the All-America City**

When I asked Cambodian respondents if Lowell embodies the kind of positive qualities that the receipt of such an award signifies, their responses have been mixed. All of them said that Lowell is less overtly racist than other places, but they denied its being progressive to the extent that is advertised. Overall, the age of the respondent strongly correlated with his or her level of dissatisfaction with the Lowell's civic structure. The older men in their 40s and 50s who ran for political office or held positions in the city agencies were the most critical, while emerging leaders in their 30s tended to be more forgiving. When I asked Vesna Nuon, the 43 year-old, three-time candidate for School Committee and vice-chair of the Zoning Board of Appeals, if Lowell lives up to its reputation in terms of dealing with diversity, he paused for a moment then replied, "They are progressive when they have to be, when the spotlight is on. They try. They try" (personal communication, January 21, 2008). He then went on to say that after so many years working as a community advocate, when he raises issues with the police, they now listen. However, at the end of the day, after twenty-something years living in Massachusetts, Vesna says he still feels like an outsider and "a second class citizen."

Moving down the generations, the current president of the CMAA board of directors and coordinator for the Lowell Public Schools Parent Information center, Dr. Phala Chea expressed similar feelings. She said that many Cambodians still "feel somewhat isolated from the 'mainstream' in Lowell... We have been here for twenty years, but sometimes we do not feel comfortable, not wanted" (Personal communication, January 3, 2008). Phala went on to say that the City, particularly the Police Department and School System, understands the need to partner and collaborate with the Cambodian community. However, in general, Cambodian organizations have difficulty getting the recognition, support, and funding that they deserve from the City. She cited the Water Festival as an example: "We feel the City views it as 'their festival,' the 'Asian Festival'." Consequently, the City does not provide any police security, assist with permits, or offer the kind of benefits and acknowledgment that get granted to the Folk Festival. Water Festival organizers have to fundraise in order to hire their own police officers and pay for everything themselves. Phala, who is now the festival board

treasurer, laments that every year, “at the end of the event, we are always broke” (Personal communication, January 3, 2008).

Sayon Soeun, the current board president for the Water Festival and executive director for Light of Cambodian Children, seconded her sentiments:

The Water Festival is known nationwide, and politically the City has not supported the Water Festival that much at all. It played a huge role back ten years ago when they won that award ‘All America City.’ What does the Water Festival get? Not any funding. Actually, the city is charging us more fees (Personal communication, January 17, 2008).

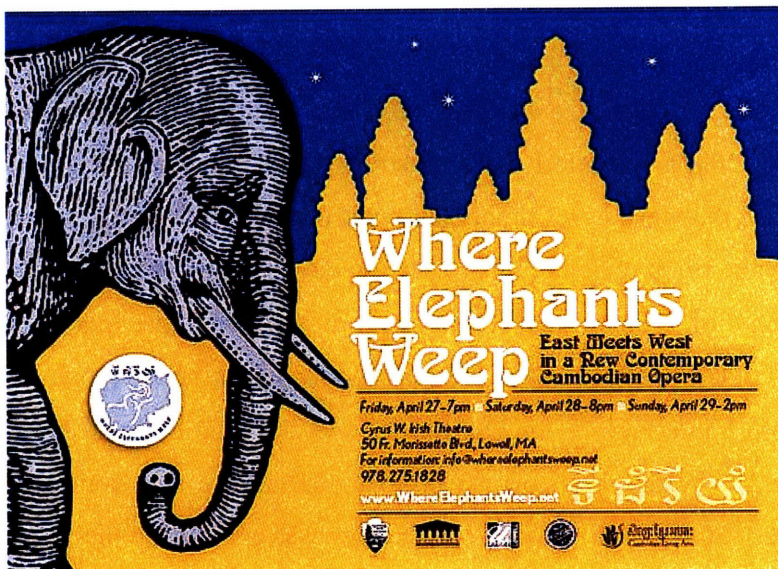
Sayon, however, along with Water Festival event coordinator, Sambath Bo, are working to raise this issue at the city level, using their positions on the oversight committee and board of directors for the Cultural Organization of Lowell (COOL). COOL is a private, non-profit citizens’ arts advocacy group that is trying to inclusively build the city’s cultural economy. At this point the efficacy of COOL at actually shaping city policy is still yet to be determined, but in any case there is at least potential for change.

Beyond the festivals, Cambodian respondents offered other instances where they felt they got overlooked by other City agencies. In 2006, when the Lowell Police Department received their first \$800,000 ‘Shannon Grant’ to fight gang and youth violence, 80% of the funding went to police overtime. Of the remaining 20%, none went to the Cambodian agency that was already working on those issues (Nuon, personal communication, January 21, 2008). Similarly, a mainstream-led immigrant advocacy group is reported to have used the work of a Cambodian voter outreach program to write grants for their own city-wide voter registration project; however, when their funding came, they didn’t share any of it with that Cambodian program (Nuon, personal communication, January 21, 2008). When such exclusions happen, a small group of Cambodians, many of whom I interviewed for this thesis, will stand up and call ‘foul play.’ Sometimes their outcry yields a change in protocol during the next round of action. For instance this year \$20,000 of Shannon Grant money was awarded to the Light of Cambodian Children youth program (Nuon, personal communication, January 21, 2008). However, maintaining this kind of pressure from the outside is hard work, and it falls on the shoulders of just a few people.



## A Second Success

After Samkhann Khoeun left the CMAA in 2002, he maintained his devotion to the cultural arts. Everything he does, at the high school and with cultural programs, is taken on with the goal of creating a more harmonious community: “What we are trying to do here is find out what we have in common... regardless of the cultural, social, the language difference.” In 2004, he started a week-long annual program in April called ‘Cambodian Expressions’ that coincides with the Cambodian New Year and also the month that the Khmer Rouge took power. Past programs highlighted the work by Cambodian filmmakers, artists, musicians, playwrights, dancers, and composers. In 2007, he brought *Where Elephants Weep*, the first contemporary Cambodian rock opera, to Lowell for its world premiere. Like the Water Festival, the opera is the sort of event that everyone in town felt really great about. In fact, I’d say, topically, the opera came up either second or third behind the Water Festival in conversations I had with ‘mainstream’ Lowellians. It was a wildly successful undertaking. All three performances were completely sold out, and everyone benefited from the publicity—the composer, the performers, the city, COOL, the National Historical Park, Cambodian Expressions, and Cambodian Living Arts.



*Where Elephants Weep* postcard

Source: [http://www.sangsalapak.org.kh/whatson/uploaded\\_images/elephants\\_weep-777779.jpg](http://www.sangsalapak.org.kh/whatson/uploaded_images/elephants_weep-777779.jpg) (Accessed May 21, 2008)

Yet for Samkhann, the real success of *Where Elephants Weep* lay in the deeper transformational effects it had on his community and also the 'mainstream' in Lowell:

I learned how to share the responsibility, learn how to make our need, a community need, become a city need. They will look good, make the city more well known, therefore economic development, therefore publicity, etcetera, would follow. Of course it also gave a little pride and good feeling to the Cambodian American themselves... This is the best kind of event. I know a couple younger people. They felt a renewed sense of pride being a Khmer-American. That's unique. That's priceless. Same thing with mainstream.... With that 90 minutes of the opera, they walk away with a better understanding... I wanted to make sure that we do understand each other. That we have, after we walk out of there, we have this sense of urgency of wanting to work together, wanting to explore, wanting to share, and our collective humanity, that kind of stuff.

The Water Festival, his first undertaking, was born out the same drive to reduce misunderstanding. After the festival helped Lowell to win the All-America City Award, Samkhann says he saw a change in the collective attitude the 'mainstream' had toward the Southeast Asian community. In the media, people started singing a different tune:

*The Lowell Sun* started to write articles embracing the Asian American as part of the social fabric. Whereas before, the front page was always: 'This shooting here. This shooting there. Why are these immigrants here?' They threatened to call the FBI, the DEA, you name it,... Even the judge said, 'go back to where you come from,'... even the elected officials as well. In my opinion, its not that they have any hate against immigrants or others. Its just the whole aspect of 'not knowing.' Fear of the unknown.

There were always two purposes behind the cultural programs. One was to strengthen the identity within the Cambodian community, and the other was to reduce fear and misunderstanding in the 'mainstream.' The Water Festival has become a venue for unifying the Southeast Asian Diaspora. Every third weekend in August, people from all over the world come to Lowell in order to celebrate, perform, and reconnect with friends

and family. People who haven't seen each other since they left the refugee camps find one another along the banks of the Merrimack. *Cambodian Expressions*, in April is geared more toward a local audience. The events offered during this month strive to create more the dialogue between the generations and also between the 'mainstream' and the Cambodians. For Samkhann, these events are a non-confrontational way of breaking down barriers:

I use the art and the cultural activity as a means to achieve that [connection], because I feel that when people are more educated and more aware of the community population, it's better to deal with. Instead of, 'Here's my needs, and I demand you to do such and such and so forth.' I'm not the kind of person who wants to confront that. I use it [art and culture] as a more diplomatic way.

Since leaving the CMAA and joining the school system, he has changed his way of doing things. When he launched the Water Festival, he thought he needed to bring the community to the mainstream, "knock on their doors" and push for recognition. Whereas, now he has reversed the flow of his model: "Now that I'm with the institution, now I sort of say, 'Why don't we open the door? Reach out to the population to do this?' bring the existing infrastructure, the 'mainstream' infrastructure, such as the universities, the national park, the cities, the school here, closer to the community."

### **A half-full glass with more to fill**

There are three closing questions that I tried to ask all of my respondents: Is Lowell a good place for immigrants to settle? What still puzzles you after all this time? and What is your vision for the future? Samkhann, like his colleague former city counselor and guidance counselor, Rithy Uong, wonders how to maintain momentum, continue building "the collective dream, the collective inspiration, the political will of the mainstream and the community as well to want to make things better. Not to be complacent with 'well, we have done enough and that's all there is.'" He says he sees the Cambodian American situation in Lowell as a "half full glass" with more to fill:



A full glass would look like a community or city with institutions which represents all of the stakeholders, the citizens. For example in the city of Lowell, just here in Lowell High School, we have Asian American students make up about 33%. When you look at the personnel, it's not that. Look at the City of Lowell, it's the same thing. We're talking about at least a quarter population is Asian American. Look at the police force, look the city employee, look the agencies in the city – Community Teamwork, ONE Lowell, the University, Lowell National Park, you name it. You look at the roster of the people in managing positions. They are not there.

However, ultimately his critique is less biting than some of his colleagues in that he appreciates the 'Immigrant City' narrative:

I think Lowell is unique. It has been a gateway for immigrants and refugees for a long time... It has its own pros and cons, ups and downs. There's a lot more to learn, a lot more to do, a lot more to work on, but I have seen a lot of positive change... people being more open and willing to learn and willing to give a try, a chance for things to happen.



*Flyers at Bangkok Market*

© Amy Stitely, 2007

## **Chapter 5: The Driver at a Sharp Turn**

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### **Vongsaranak “Vong” Ros**

When Vong Ros took over the directorship of the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association (CMAA) in 2002, the organization was in serious financial straits. Coming from Fleet Bank’s Small Business Development Department, Vong had the right skills and sensibilities that the CMAA needed to get out of its tight spot. Whereas his predecessor, Samkhann Khoeun, had pushed the CMAA to its programmatic limits, Vong takes a more calculated approach. Others say he is too conservative and should push the agency to do more, but Vong asserts that the organization needs to first build a solid foundation so that they can do more in the future.

### **Generational Change**

One Cambodian fifty-something, whom I will call Seng, said that the next generation means well, but they are too assimilated into the mainstream to comprehend the underlying complexities of their community. Seng described the ‘let’s work together’ philosophy as a reflection of their well-intentioned ignorance:

The younger generation, they grew up here. They went to high school here and to the college here – mainstream. When they went to school, they missed a lot of things in the community.... So they assimilated, but as they get older, they seek their own group. They want to come back to help, but they lost all their original culture. So that is a problem, and its very dangerous (Personal communication, February 27, 2008).

Seng said that the problems that are invisible to younger Cambodians are like an abscess: “If it is ignored, sometime it’s going to rupture” (Personal communication, February 27, 2008).

Yet one of the points that Seng misses is that the younger generation also has their own set of underlying issues that have grown directly out of those suffered by the previous generation. Lack of a clear identity is just one of those transferred issues. What’s interesting is that Seng, in his fifties, called himself a member of the bridge generation, because he could relate to the needs of seniors (60 years and older) and of the

younger generation (30s). Yet Vong and others in their 30s are a different kind of bridge generation. Having been born in Cambodia and passed their adolescence in the U.S., they are cross-cultural in a different way from Seng's generation. They may be more removed from the seniors, but they can relate better to the issues that the second-generation faces (28 and younger). In short, the generational rifts and connections are complicated in the Cambodian community. When I asked Vong what generation he is from, he replied, "I have no idea."<sup>8</sup>

Six years since he became the executive director, the CMAA has seen both physical and ideological changes. They have a younger, more diverse board of directors, and recently relocated to a new building in the Acre neighborhood. Having just completed a strategic planning session, where health and small business development emerged as top priorities, Vong says that they are in a "regrouping" phase. Yet, he knows he cannot afford to move too slowly. Reflecting on the challenges he faces, Vong says,

The organization is at a four way stop, and we have to make a sharp turn. Because we're not flexible as a community, the sharp turn is very hard. When we were at the previous block, we should have seen that we had to (CMAA, 2007)Vong now carries the burden of moving the Cambodian community to a higher level of citizenship. His predecessors got the community secure and settled. His task is to get them organized.

The stated mission of the CMAA is to "improve the quality of life of Cambodian-Americans in Lowell" and to help "refugees and their families reach their full social and economic potential" (CMAA 2007). The organization was founded in 1984 with funds from the State Office of Refugee Resettlement in order to meet the immediate needs of the newly arrived refugee population. Upon first opening, the CMAA offered English as a Second Language (ESL) classes and job training programs. Over the past twenty some years, their program offerings have fluctuated with the funding cycles. They have taken on everything from voter outreach to youth development, depending on leadership and resources. At this moment, the CMAA operates on roughly \$700,000 annually, which is

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<sup>8</sup> Unless noted otherwise, all quotes in this chapter are from Vong Ros, personal communication, February 27, 2008.

considerably less than the \$3 million they had during the late 90s (Lafleur 2004). While they still offer ESL and General Education Diploma (GED) classes, current in-house programs are largely health focused, though there is also a young parents program.

## **Health and Business**

With a business developer's sensibility, his eye on the outside world and his feet grounded in the neighborhood, Vong asserts that Cambodians must "rebuild their human capital" in order to grow. The first milestone, in his opinion, is the Cambodians attaining good physical and mental health. The community's physical ailments are tangible—heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity—thus easier to talk about and imagine overcoming. Mental health problems, on the other hand, are impossible to quantify. They have yet to be fully and openly acknowledged in the community, and western-style therapy may be inappropriate in this situation. In thinking about the scale of this issue Vong states:

A lot of Cambodians, if you go to a doctor for mental health, you would be incapacitated, because so much would come up. Everybody would be hospitalized. If I let everything out, I would be hospitalized. Every generation feels it.

Until someone figures out how to deal with mental health on a community-wide scale, individuals are left to deal with the issue on their own terms. The CMAA, in the mean time, continues to push forward the physical health agenda and is trying to develop a business assistance program.

Vong stays abreast of the latest trends in business and economic development and is constantly trying to find ways to apply such knowledge to his own community. Drawing from his time at Fleet Bank and also his experience sitting on the Board of the Lowell Finance and Development Corporation (LFDC), he is always puzzling over how to narrow the gap between what is happening "out there" and what is the Cambodian reality. In conversation, he talked about the disconnect between the city and the Southeast Asians and the myth of Lowell's "oneness," pointing out that Cambodians have yet to see any benefits from the \$1 billion of construction happening downtown and

that local minorities are not being trained for potential new industries. Minority business ownership has always been held up as evidence of the success that immigrants have achieved in Lowell. While the prevalence of such businesses in the Acre and Lower Highlands might give outsiders the impression that the Cambodians have “made it” in America, Vong is apprehensive about their future:

In the past, there were a lot of companies, machine shops, those kinds of things, but those kinds of operations are moving out to China and other parts of the world that are cheaper. These are issues. You look at it at a macro perspective. We’re in a tough situation... There was a big growth in Asian businesses 1997 to 2002. When jobs left, people started their own businesses. It served its purpose for a while. Now when people see a small restaurant doing well, they open one and flood the market. Businesses have been serving just the Asian population, but they need to market to the mainstream population. That is the opportunity. They’re not doing that. Our community business leaders are not investing and saying, ‘What am I going to do in 5 years if my product is [obsolete]? What of the younger generation, are they eating the food that I’m selling now?’ That’s just to sustain things, but growth wise, ‘What kind of investments do I need to make?’

In other words, the Cambodian community is not prepared to face the next economy. Will they adapt and grow *with* the city or continue scrapping for survival at the margins?

### **Spatial Separation**

When the CMAA vacated the Courier Building on Jackson Street to re-open at their present location in the Acre, they forfeited territorial rights to what could have been a Cambodian stronghold in the downtown. The old brick mill building was gifted to the CMAA in 1997. At the time, Samkhann Khouen was planning to convert the building to a mixed use Cambodian community center with healthcare, retail, a museum, and housing. By 2002, it was clear that the renovation and maintenance costs were beyond the means of the organization, but they couldn’t find a buyer until the end of 2006.



Presently, the Architectural Heritage Foundation, a not-for-profit historic preservation development firm, is in the process of converting the building into apartment lofts. Located within the Jackson-Appleton-Middlesex Urban Renewal Area (Jam Area) and next to the newly assembled Hamilton Canal District, this old building will eventually find itself in a gentrified hot spot if the city's planning department forecasted correctly. With the new municipal parking garage going up across Jackson Street, it seems like the Architectural Heritage Foundation got into the redevelopment game at just the right moment.

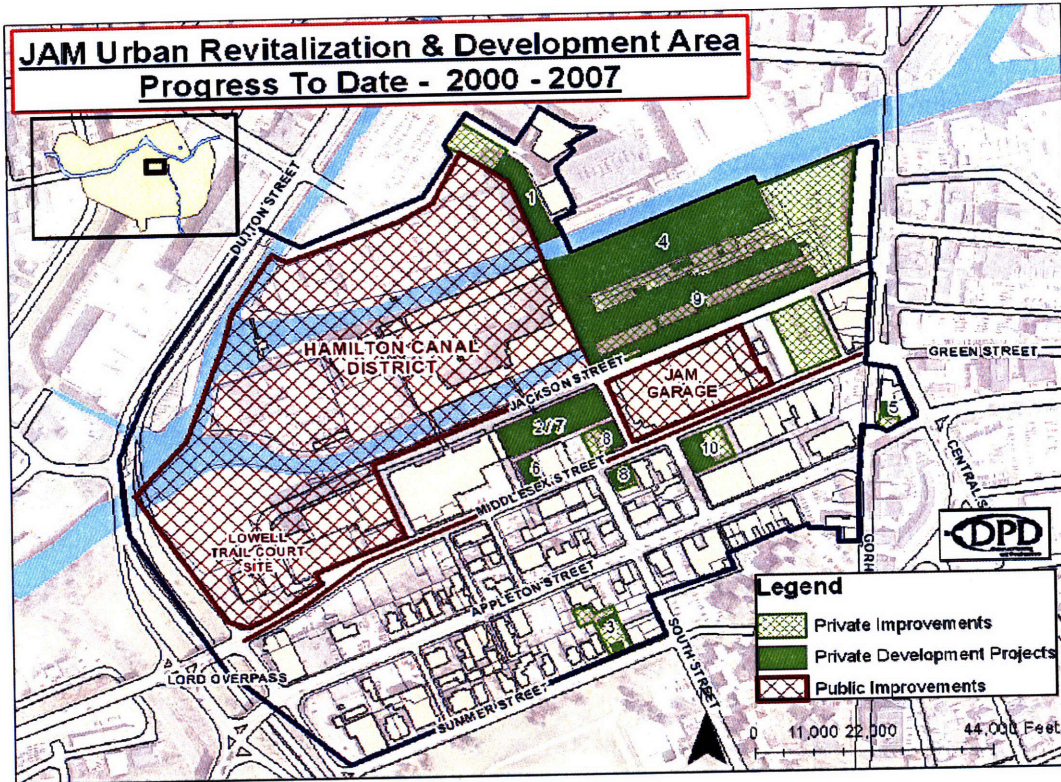
Though Vong says that the CMAA's new location in the Acre is superior to the old one, because it put them closer to the Cambodian community, I cannot help but wonder if the organization lost out on a major opportunity to capitalize on a well-situated asset. Then again, not knowing the details of the sale, perhaps they did the best they could under the circumstances. Either it was a smart transaction or a desperate one. In either case, the CMAA is no longer physically rooted in the downtown, which means they are now further out of sight and out of mind.



*New CMAA headquarters*

© Amy Stitely, 2007





Source: Lowell Planning Department  
<http://www.lowellma.gov/depts/dpd/projects/jam/2007ProgressToDate>  
 (Accessed May 21, 2008)



JAM Garage rental sign

© Amy Stitely, 2007



## **Moving Forwards (or Backwards)**

The Cambodians I've interviewed, especially the elders, expressed concern over the CMAA's relative weakness compared to the 80s and 90s. According to them, the CMAA used to be a force to reckon with. Former president of the board, Rithy Uong, says that in the late 90s the CMAA played a front role. Looking back he recalls, "the newspaper used to come to us all the time, but not now;... it used to be that if anything happened in the city, we were always informed" (Personal communication, January 8, 2008). Incidentally, Rithy rejoined the board recently to help Vong build some capacity, but he is one of only a couple first generation guys that have stayed on with the organization. Vong accepts this and also their criticism, but in response, asserts that all was not perfectly well under the previous administration either. In regards to the CMAA's slow evolution, he elaborates:

To put it in a different perspective, we learned... that the way that we were running our business in the past was not efficient or actually correct... We didn't have the technical skills—that was the hard part—to make sure we operate in the black, make financial decisions as well as program decision. Those are the things that we, as a organization, when I first came in, never even talked about. There were a lot of problems. There was a lot of internal fighting politically.

The CMAA's political fissures along homeland party allegiances were referenced by several people I interviewed. To his credit, such issues have subsided under Vong's directorship. He flattened out hierarchy within the organization to ensure full buy-in from the staff at all levels. Now they act as ambassadors to the wider community. His hope is that if the CMAA can send a unified message to the outside world, then perhaps the Cambodian community will follow their lead. Vong says he is encouraged by recent commentary on Cambodian radio and TV:

The thing that I am very happy to hear is that people are speaking more on unification. Instead of in the past, people tended to blame,... they would point fingers at this political party or this individual or this group, but now

we are looking at ourselves and saying, ‘Hey wait a second, maybe we should work together a bit little more.’

As mentioned earlier, the CMAA board has also undergone a facelift. With both female and mainstream representation, this relatively young group brings a host of professional skills and also strategic networks to the table. In Vong’s mind, they have a lot of potential, but some older leaders in the community remain skeptical.

### **The Importance of Cultural Events**

Vong does a pretty good job mitigating the generational chasms. He listens to his elders and tries to find a balance between his views and theirs. He says he respects them and appreciates them, despite their having different opinions. One particular issue that they clash on is the importance of cultural events. When I asked Vong what role such events played in improving the lives of Cambodians, his immediate response was, “None,” but after a pause he continued:

Well it does in a way. It serves a purpose. It reduces a lot of stress, especially for elders. It’s a way, especially for the elders, to hold on to what they used to have. That is something I value. The younger generation doesn’t understand. It is a gathering. It’s a social event. Of course it is, but it has a deeper meaning, especially for older population. It symbolizes the end of the harvest....so it means something... It’s security that their kid is not going to forget where they come from.

Vong’s elders want him and the CMAA to be more active in cultural events like Cambodian New Years and festivals. He says that they want him “to be the face.” Vong, being a bottom-line kind of guy, doesn’t see how these kinds of things are going to create jobs, get people healthy, or get them in school. Nevertheless, he listens when they tell him that he is “screwing up” and so does what he can out of respect. In speaking on the older generation, Vong praises their strength, “They were able to survive. They fought so much in the past. They are very tired. I get frustrated by not getting help from them, but I can understand. They have fought enough.”

## **Trying to Get Organized**

There is a heavy burden weighing on the CMAA since, at this point, there is no main organizing body for the Cambodian community. The lack of such an entity has left the Cambodians estranged from policy makers. In the past, when the CMAA acted as a point of convergence, the ‘mainstream’ knew exactly where to go when they needed to reach out to the Cambodians in Lowell. Today this population is a much less cohesive. They have grown in number, accumulated wealth at uneven rates, spread out geographically, given birth to a new generation, and splintered into many different factions. The diversity of the community—in age, income, education, ideology, and affiliation—makes it difficult to organize around common goals. This lack of organization is problematic because it allows the ‘mainstream’ to more easily write-off the Cambodian population.

Recently the Boston Globe did a story on the lack of representation from the minority community on the search committee for a new Lowell superintendent of schools. When Vong was to comment, he told them he was “baffled,” but speaking with me later on, he further elaborated:

I don’t know why I said that. I am not baffled in terms of why the political leaders don’t include underrepresented populations, because there is no political consequence. In one or two articles, they’ll get bruised a little bit, but in the next article people will forget about it.

The challenge before the CMAA then is to convince Cambodians and other under-represented minorities in Lowell that they should demand more from their leaders. This means getting people to vote and take positions on local issues.

Voter apathy is widespread across the entire U.S., but within the Cambodian American community it is especially pronounced. The oppressiveness of the Khmer Rouge regime left survivors deeply suspicious of the political process. In their view, political visibility equates with vulnerability to later retribution. This perception, which has been passed down to younger generations, is a major barrier for organizers. When someone like Vong takes an activist or advocate position, he is going against this cultural

norm, breaking out of the fear of victimization. When I asked Vong why more youth weren't engaged with the CMAA, he responded:

I don't think our community educates the younger generation on our community, what kind of responsibilities they have. Parents culturally were taught to stay away from trouble. Just go to school, go work, and worry about yourself... Like me taking this job, my mom, it stresses her out. She thinks, 'What if somebody comes and they get upset at you and they come and hurt you?' Those are the types of things that put them back where they used to be. A lot of Cambodian households say, 'Don't get involved. Don't do this. Don't do that.' That is the message that they [the youth] are getting.

Given this reality a few questions then follow: Is this a major explanatory factor in why the Cambodians in Lowell have not sought better electoral representation? If so, will this cultural distrust of politics eventually subside as new generations are born? What should organizers, and particularly the CMAA, be doing in the mean time?

## Chapter 6: The Youth Advocate

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### Sayon Soeun

When I interviewed participants for this study, I chose to limit my scope of inquiry to questions about post-resettlement. I chose to do this for a couple reasons. First, I thought it intrusive to ask people to share the intimate details of the suffering they endured in Cambodia because of my sense of their pain. Also, there is quite a bit of media that recounts the brutality of the Khmer Rouge genocide. Second, I was more interested in probing into the situation that this community presently faces as they become settled and seek a position of empowerment. My instinct was to keep my investigation focused on the now. However, once I began talking with people, I realized that this was a somewhat absurd restriction, as the past is never far behind the present, and that this truth applies for Cambodian-Americans in Lowell as surely as it does for any group of people. Though I did not dwell upon the genocide in my interviews, I found that it still shadows the first two generations who have made their home away from home in Spindle City.

When I first met Sayon Soeun, the executive director of the Light of Cambodian Children youth program and board president for the Southeast Asian Water Festival, we did not talk about his life in Cambodia. I later found out via newspaper archives that he was kidnapped by the Khmer Rouge around age six and trained as a child soldier. According to *The Boston Globe*, Sayon does not recall his real name or birthday, but he remembers the executions, forced labor, widespread illness, and starvation (Cantrell 2008). He fled to Thailand in 1979, where he was given his current name and matched with an adopted family in Connecticut. Since arriving in the U.S., Sayon has worked hard to overcome the trauma from those early years. Now in his late thirties, he runs one of the Lowell's leading Cambodian youth programs.

Our conversation began with Sayon telling me that he came to Lowell when he was 19 or 20, and to this day he is not sure why he decided to stay. The large Cambodian population was probably one of the things that drew him in, but he says that aspect took some getting used to. As an adoptee in Connecticut, Sayon did not have any "strong support" from other Cambodians. He recalls meeting with a translator when he first

arrived, but beyond that, very limited interaction with fellow compatriots. A friend of a friend's wedding brought him to Lowell in 1991. He says, "Although I don't completely understand why I moved here, I found I fell in love with Lowell."<sup>9</sup> When he first arrived, Sayon settled in the Acre, as so many new residents with limited English proficiency have done before him. He recalls, "It was rough at the beginning," but seventeen years later, Sayon is now firmly established as one of the city's leading youth advocates and community spokespersons.

Sayon's trajectory from college student to executive director was fairly straightforward. While at Middlesex Community College he had a work-study assignment as an assistant math teacher at the in-house charter school. After getting his sociology degree from Merrimack College, he assumed an Americorps community organizing position at Coalition for a Better Acre (CBA), a neighborhood community development corporation. Sayon thereafter joined the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association (CMAA), acting as their youth case manager and later, their youth program director. He left the CMAA to spend three years at the Lowell Police Department (LPD) acting as their youth violence prevention coordinator. As director of the Light of Cambodian Children youth program, Sayon leads from a place of experience.

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<sup>9</sup> Unless noted otherwise, all quotes in this chapter are from Sayon Soeun, personal communication, January 17, 2008.



*Youth and Gang Signs*

© Amy Stitely, 2007



*Youth walking back to the Acre after school*

© Amy Stitely, 2007

## **Lowell's Cambodian Children**

Light of Cambodian Children, Inc. (LCC) is a ten year-old organization built on the Buddhist principles of love, compassion, justice, peace, and forgiveness. Founded by Cambodian college students in the New England area, the organization's mission is to help Khmer youth in the U.S. and in Cambodia attain the education and life skills needed to become self-sufficient (Theam 2005). Though LCC was originally founded to serve Cambodian youth, their program enrollment is currently at 60% Southeast Asian, 30% Latino, and 10% "other race." LCC offers four programs, some of which draw from Sayon's experience in other organizations. These include a summer camp, a mentoring and advocacy program for first time youth offenders, a folktale and theater program, and a college field trip program. In addition, LCC gives out three \$600 scholarships a year to Cambodian youth to help pay for textbooks and room and board.

The Future Stars Sport and Leadership summer camp was a CMAA project that Sayon co-directed in the late 90s. The camp was begun as a response to gang violence and a spike in youth murders. The idea behind the camp was that if youth aged 6 to 14 spent six weeks playing on teams together, they would be less likely to harm each other in later years. Beyond this purpose, the camp offers an alternative space for youth who might otherwise roam the streets and is a haven for Cambodian girls who would usually not be allowed to leave the house during the day (Rohr 2004). Future Stars Camp counselors are teens and young adults who act as role models. Besides sport, youth must participate in leadership development games and activities.

The LCC Mentoring and Advocacy Project works to reduce recidivism rates among first time misdemeanor juvenile offenders. This program builds on some of the lessons Sayon learned while at the Lowell Police Department. Using a combination of eastern and western philosophy, in addition to family therapy, he and his staff try to address the environmental and also emotional issues that lead to youth crime. When the Lowell Police Department found that 100% of Cambodian youth offenders were at some point listed as runaways or missing children, they had Sayon find out why these children ran away from home. Through talking with youth, he found that:

Southeast Asian girls were among the highest percentage of runaways.

However, the research suggests that they were not intentionally running



away. They went on missing because for some reason they didn't want to go back home... Why they didn't come home is that when they asked to go out with their friends, they were set a time limit to get home. [Their parents said] '9 o'clock, you be home.' And they didn't. So, when they didn't make it home, and they didn't call, they were afraid to come home, and they stayed at a friend's house. So they were not intentionally running away. They were just afraid to come home because they may have been afraid of getting beat up by their parents. That is what one data showed.

Sayon said that such findings may have been behind the creation of the Lowell Police Department's Family Services Unit which handles domestic violence and community relations; however, the grant that funded his position ended, so he was not certain what outcomes his research produced. In any case, Sayon has built his own programs based on an understanding that:

Youth have one issue. Elderly have another. The two are parallel. You cannot really focus on youth and neglect the parent. In my culture, parents still play a huge role... We tell our youth that communicating with your parents is key. Another thing we do is educate the parents, [say] I respect your belief and I respect your family way of disciplining you kids, but loosen your grip. They need some social time.

However, Sayon says that "every family is different," so they have to work on a case by case basis. Some parents are not overly strict; they are overly lenient. Because many parents in their 40s and 50s survived the genocide, materialism is very important to them, so they spoil their kids with gifts. They think, "I need to buy them a car, I need to buy them really expensive diamonds and jewelry, to make sure that my class is not being put down." Such actions set up a dynamic where youth can easily take advantage of their parents and also "fall into the cracks."

The rift between youth and elders led LCC to create the Cambodian Folktale and Theater Project. This project is intended to improve communication across the generations, and help youth understand where they come from. A third motivation for the project is to write, publish, and circulate folktales that might otherwise be lost. Youth

were trained in interview techniques and then sent out into the community to collect the stories. They then illustrated the stories and translated them into both Khmer and English. The stories were compiled into a book called *The Tiger and the Elephant*, which was published in 2007. LCC hopes that it will be a useful tool for improving literacy in addition to preserving the stories from past.

The folktale project and the mentoring project are examples of how the LCC has taken a western model of youth development and adapted it to serve their own needs. Sayon says that over the past twenty years, people have learned to navigate between the old and new systems. Sayon says, “We had some really bad experiences,... because we did not have enough knowledge to practice the way that the system was set up in the west. We continued to practice in the old traditional way, which had a huge conflict with the western system.” Traditionally parents were not involved in their children’s education. They did not know they were expected to help with homework, talk to counselors and teachers, make sure everything was well. Parents thought their role was “to work 2 or 3 jobs, and provide food and shelter for the children,” and that teachers were to help students with their homework. However, Sayon says that over time this attitude has shifted, as the Lowell public school system hired more staff, personnel, parent liaisons, teachers, and guidance counselors of Southeast Asian descent.

Other city agencies have been slower to hire more Cambodians. The lack of Cambodian police officers was brought up as a major problem by at least five people I spoke with. The relationship between the mostly white police department and Cambodian youth has not been good in the past. Gang activity is one part of the problem, and racial profiling is another. Complicating things further is the distrust many Khmer Rouge survivors feel towards uniformed figures of authority. The police have made some efforts to try to mend this gap, creating a race relations council, a family services unit, and community policing initiative. The race relations council, considered a cutting-edge model by other cities, got mixed reviews from Sayon:

The Race Relations Council was formed when Ed Davis was here basically to strengthen our relationship...between law enforcement and the citizen, especially minority who are having this great fear of law enforcement. I know the City, particularly the LPD, benefit a lot... Is it

benefit to the minority community? Not really. Is it benefit to the mainstream community in terms of resources coming into the city? Yes, I think they benefit a lot. Why? I don't know.

### **Sitting on Boards to Deliver Benefits**

The question of who benefits from what initiatives came up several times in our conversation. Beyond LCC, Sayon sits on many boards of directors. He is board president for the Southeast Asian Water Festival, and a volunteer board member for One Lowell, the Lowell Heritage Partnership, and the Pollard Library. In addition, he sits on the oversight committee for the Cultural Organizations of Lowell (COOL). As a Cambodian who sits at a lot of decision-making tables, Sayon has seen his share of projects that are directed toward one goal, but somehow miss their mark. His opinion is that while boards and committees are transitioning toward being more representative and are trying to do well by the minority community, the lack of true outreach prevents things from being implemented successfully.

This lack of outreach is what motivates Sayon to be so involved, “to try and push for more Cambodians and minorities to play a role in these different aspects.” He says that the pool of minorities who are sitting on Lowell’s boards is growing, in part due to his recommendations. “However,” he says:

The problem is this, for example, I am the president of the Southeast Asian Water Festival. Their thought is if they get me, then I’m not only representing Cambodian, I’m representing Laos, Vietnamese, Thai because our Southeast Asian Water Festival board of directors is made of that population. They think they are killing five birds with one stone.

In terms of the city’s cultural activities, Sayon has a lot of sway as member of the COOL oversight committee. COOL is in the process of becoming Lowell’s main agency for managing special events and cultural programs. As an oversight committee member, he is advocating for a complete overhaul of their board so that funding can be more fairly distributed among groups who produce events. However, he knows that the oversight committee has limited power over COOL’s future. The executive director can ultimately

approve or ignore the committee's recommendations, and the city council has the same option.

When I asked Sayon who was driving Lowell's cultural policies, he said that the Lowell Plan hired Mt. Auburn Associates to study how to better market the city and build a stronger cultural economy. Whether or not the report produces change is yet to be determined. Though the Mt. Auburn Associates strongly suggested the minority population be more involved through the steps of implementation, Sayon was concerned that only one minority organization was mentioned by name, the Angkor Dance Troupe. This kind of editing might be harmless in the long run, but it is nonetheless frustrating, because it is indicative of how mainstream planners interface with the minority population. The most visible and most vocal groups get recognition, while less visible ones get overlooked. This is precisely what Sayon seeks to correct.

When I asked him if Lowell's focus on multicultural programming improved the quality of life for the immigrant population, Sayon said, "I'm not sure about if it makes a difference for the minority population or the minority community in the city of Lowell. It definitely makes a difference for the city image. I think the City has benefited greatly from these different activities." He then cited the role of the Water Festival in Lowell's winning the All America City award and underscored that the benefits only went one way. The Festival helped the city's image, but the city hasn't turned around and supported the festival. This is the kind of thing he hopes that the new restructured COOL will be able to address

### **"Politics and me, it's not"**

Given all of Sayon's maneuvering and advocating I thought he might be a good candidate for future political leadership; however, he quickly shot down that idea, first telling me that he was not yet a citizen and then telling me he didn't like politics. Since Sayon was the only person I interviewed who did not have American citizenship, I asked him what was holding him back. His response was telling:

It's a good question. I don't even know myself. You know what, because I've been involved in so many activities, it's just not my first thought. Thinking 'hey, you've got to get your application in now' rather than

thinking about ‘how could I come up with some solution for these institutions or programs and activities?’ I’m just too busy for others than myself...

Sayon went on to say, “Politics and me, it’s not. You know I’m not a good politician even if I try. It’s something that I don’t—although I work a lot with the politicians, give them recommendations and suggestions—I’m just not actively involved.” A few minutes later, Sayon elaborated further when I asked him, “What is the one thing that most puzzled you in your work?” He laughed a little and replied:

I think the response has to do with politics again. I still puzzle, being a guy who has knowledge enough, I am puzzled about people saying one thing in public and implementing differently. For example,...if I go out there and say,... ‘We’re doing everything. We are working with this group and blah blah blah blah to help make your community better and serve your community,’ but then it doesn’t really work behind the scene. [pause] You know what I mean? That’s why I can never be a politician. Because when I say, ‘I’ll make sure that street, on the corner of John Doe Street, the building will be up next year,’ I would say, ‘That has to be up.’ But some people say, ‘That has to be up,’ but then ten years later, be the same thing.

Well, if I could understand how it works behind that political scene, then it might help me out, to better bring resources and work with resources, because I’m a little bit, kind of, candid, nice, and straightforward. If you ask me to be involved in the oversight committee and you want my input, I say it the way I see it, as is. But if you come in here and invite me to say a few things, but say, ‘You also can’t say this, because you always have to say it’s great,’ [pause] I understand that sometimes in the public, you have to say differently than in private in your own meeting; of course I don’t want to go out there and bash the LPD or the City. We can’t do that. But, at least while we’re saying one thing in the public, we should also have a discussion privately among our group and say, ‘Look, you know this is

something that's a great deal. We need to solve this for real. We can't just say it in public for the next decade. We want to see it happen.'

I don't know maybe people invited me to sit on all these different things, because they started to like my frankness or bluntness about it. I don't know. And they are really looking for real change. I hope so.

In terms of what Sayon's ideal vision is for the future, he said he looks forward to seeing two things: more minority people playing different roles in the city and youth in his program becoming key players as providers, acting as guides to the younger generation and being civically active.

Though Sayon prides himself on his simplicity and straightforwardness, I found him to be quite complex. Though he claims to be apolitical, Sayon is unusually savvy, skilled at reading situations and then responding appropriately. He chooses words carefully and speaks with subdued confidence, and he has an uncommon ability to relate to youth and adults of both genders, the police, politicians, and others in the mainstream. Beyond mentorship, one of Sayon's greatest gifts to Lowell's Cambodian youth is his willingness to talk openly about the Khmer Rouge genocide. Given that most Cambodian parents do not share these memories with their children, Sayon is an uncommon source of information for the second generation and an inspiring model for overcoming past trauma.

## **Chapter 7 – The Voice of the Next Generation**

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### **Sambath Bo**

It has been challenging getting representative voices for this piece. Accessing Cambodian youth has been nearly impossible thanks to the COUHES/IRB process which mandates that minors get permission from their parents before agreeing to sit for an interviewer such as myself. When I asked subjects to refer me to other the leaders in the Cambodian community, they usually draw from a limited list of 6-8 men in their forties and fifties, many of whom are friends with one another. Community leadership and civic activism are marginal activities for most Cambodians; however, among women and among youth, such activism is even less widely practiced.

Through Mehmed Ali, director of the Mogan Cultural Center for the National Park, I met Sambath Bo, a 25 year-old firecracker of young woman who works as an associate producer for the Lowell Telecommunications Corporation (LTC). Born in Houston, Texas, she is the lone voice of the American-born generation in this document. With a degree in Philosophy, Critical Thinking and Communication from UMass Lowell, Sambath has been documenting Cambodian cultural events on film since she was a senior in high school. She started out as an intern in the LTC video-recording public meetings at city hall. When she was 19, she took command over all the live media coverage of the Southeast Asian Water Festival. Now Sambath is on the board of directors for the festival, acting as the event coordinator. Her duties include such mammoth tasks as fundraising, public relations, permits, outreach, and vendor recruitment. In addition, Sambath sits on the board for the Cultural Organization of Lowell (COOL).

### **Standing up for the Modern Aspect of Cambodian Culture**

Sambath has obvious intrinsic leadership capability, but she seems fairly unaware of this. She seemed genuinely surprised to hear that other people in the community consider her an up and coming Cambodian leader. Like some of the other women I met, Sambath shies away from the label of civic leader or activist. She says that she is just doing the work that needs to get done. Her role in the Cambodian community and in the greater Lowell community, though perhaps not self-defined, is one of advocate. Sambath

is the only young Cambodian who sits at the agenda-setting table. For the Water Festival, she lobbies on behalf of the younger generation, pushing for more programming that highlights what she calls “the modern aspect of Cambodian culture,”<sup>10</sup> citing hip-hop, street-urban style, gangster style, and modern dancing as examples. Sambath says a lot of people in her generation complain about the strict traditionalist tone of the festival and the older people who are responsible for it, but no one wants to step up and do anything about it.

Sambath had to fight with the committee to allow a Cambodian rap group perform at the festival. The committee feared that the group would incite a riot, but Sambath pressed on, asserting in her blunt style:

You guys are gonna get old and pass away, and I am still going to be here. I'll have to live with this festival. You guys have to deal with that, and you need to include the modern aspect in the festival.



*Seasia at the Water Festival in 2002*

Source: Seasia website  
<http://www.seasiamusic.com/welcome.htm>  
(Accessed May 21, 2008)

In 2003, the committee allowed the first Cambodian rap group to perform at the water festival. Local talent, Seasia, was predictably a hit with the youth but offensive to the elders. To top things off, they swore on stage and a fight did break out just after their performance. According to Sambath, fights always break out during the festival. Given that gangs from all over the country are in the same town at the same time, this is not too

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<sup>10</sup> Unless noted otherwise, all quotes in this chapter are from Sambath Bo, personal communication, January 19, 2008.



surprising; however, such incidences give the City more justification for withholding support for the festival. But conflicts aside, Sambath has managed to keep hip-hop on the program schedule, which is a win for the second generation.

### **An Exception to her Peers**

Sambath is unique in that, as far as she knows, no other people her age or younger do any kind of community organizing work. She cannot even get her own friends to come out for the events she puts together. She says they are more wrapped up in surviving – graduating, dating, getting a job, a car, a house, and other material goods. When faced with the choice of either going to the nightclub or to a community event, her friends usually choose the nightclub. This kind of apathy among this age group is not unique to Cambodians, but it is worrisome. One wonders if there will be anyone to help Sambath build on the work of previous generations.

Aside from having the kind of outwardly-focused personality that is suited to taking on such projects, Sambath is also unique in that she has been able to flow in and out of the mainstream political and civic life. A high level of exposure to the mainstream community has provided her with a window into the deep discriminatory feeling many have towards the Cambodians. At LTC, one of her jobs is to provide live coverage for all the meetings held by the City Council, Zoning Board of Appeals, Planning Board, and School Committee. When asked about this experience, she says:

I see the politics and... I hear the motions that they pass and how which motions benefit which community and the comments they make on the floor—blatant comments about my community that are being taped live... Seeing that, well it just gives me frustration,... because I can see why they perceive us that way. Being there makes me more conscious of all the disparities and the issues and the unfairness.

Yet Sambath is quick to say that these meetings were not the defining reason she became active in her community. She states that unlike most of her friends, she was always the type to get involved and volunteer. And, she has always read the newspaper.

Though I believe that there is something deep inside Sambath that drives her to work on behalf of her community, I can not help but wonder what circumstantial factors helped lead her to this destiny. And then the question follows: how can the home, school, neighborhood, community, or municipal environment be manipulated so as to produce more Sambath Bo's? What structural and cultural barriers prevent young Cambodians, especially young Cambodian women, from becoming engaged in their community?

Whether or not Sambath knows it or not, her interest in community politics was probably somewhat related to the fact that while she was in high school, her guidance counselor, Rithy Uong, was serving on the city council. Though she never mentioned his having any influence in her becoming involved in community politics, Rithy was proud to tell me that spunky Sambath was his former student. When I asked Sambath if City Council meetings proceeded in a less discriminatory manner while Rithy was in office, she said no. In her opinion, things were worse back then. Noting that gang activity in Lowell was at its height during that era, Sambath recalls councilors using derogatory tones when talking about how to deal with "*those* people." She also remembers councilors laughing when Rithy spoke and constantly interrupting him to say that they couldn't understand him. Sambath thought that they actually did understand him but they pretended not to so as to dilute the strength of his statements. It was in these moments that the frustration would rise within her. She would wonder if she was the only one who saw these things.

Another thing worth mentioning is that Sambath does not typify the traditional Khmer young woman; she is more assertive and independent than most of her peers. Sambath had to develop thick skin to deal with discrimination she faced from inside the Cambodian community due to her being half-Thai. As a result, she does not blindly follow the traditional rule of respecting one's elders. If they disrespect her, she doesn't stand for it. Sambath is also unique in that she did not buy into the group mentality as an adolescent. Her mother, who Sambath believes suffers post-traumatic stress disorder, passed on to her children a deep distrust of others. As a result, Sambath was, for better or worse, pretty isolated as an adolescent. She did not experience true friendship until after she went to college. Once there, Sambath says she made lots of non-Cambodian friends, adding that most of her female Cambodian friends never finished their degrees.

## **What's up with the Adults?**

When I asked Sambath to tell me what is the thing that most puzzles her about the Cambodian community and her work, she put forth two issues without hesitation – unifying the community and developing new leaders. Regarding the first point she says:

The thing that I wonder about is why the parents, I mean not the parents, the adults just can't get along when they are going for the same cause. They feel the injustice. Why can't they use that as something to bring us together? We would be more powerful if we came together as one, instead of all these fractioned groups that are asking the city counselors or city manager for the same things."

What she most would like to see in the future is a Cambodian Center, a place where all funding would go to for the entire community and where all services and programs could be consolidated. In my understanding, the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association (CMAA) is close to being that. However, Sambath was quick to say that the CMAA, or more specifically the current embodiment of the CMAA, is not what she has in mind. When I asked her if the CMAA represents the Cambodian community in Lowell, she replied in her spitfire way, "They represent what's wrong with the Cambodian community. That's what I see." By that she was referring to their fall from glory, where they nearly imploded due to infighting. In her mind, the CMAA is now "basically an empty organization with a face." She also criticized their hiring practices, saying they fill positions based on cronyism not merit, noting that the older leadership is not going anywhere.

In pondering what kind of change might come in the future as the older leaders retire, Sambath does not have a clear vision,

I wonder where are these younger leaders? What's up with that? Like, we don't have any up and coming, or maybe I don't see it, Cambodian leaders... That puzzles me. I am looking... I am looking myself currently, because I want somebody to come and get involved in my projects, because it's too much for me sometimes, you know. And I feel obligated to stay and stick around.

Sambath can see herself moving on to other things and eventually leaving Lowell if the right opportunity comes along, but she keeps taking on more responsibility and getting involved with more organizations. Plus she would feel a lot of guilt if she left her family and community. She says that not many people leave Lowell and if they do they just go join another Cambodian community in Florida or Long Beach.

As to whether or not there is a leader that could unify the Cambodian community, Sambath feels hopeful: “ I think there is someone out there who can fluidly move between the old tradition and the new tradition. People joke around saying, hey, you could be the one, and I’m just like, yeahhhhh, [laughter] I’ll think about that.”

## **Chapter 8: The Young Woman at the Table**

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### **Doeun “Duey” Kol**

Doeun Kol, at 27 years of age, has held more professional titles than most people in their 50s. Known by her friends as Duey, and her elders as Douen, she is an exemplary case of an upwardly mobile second generation Cambodian American, and an apt poster child for Lowell’s upbeat, positive ‘Immigrant City’ narrative. Born in a Thai refugee camp, Duey and her family were resettled in Chelsea, Massachusetts in the early eighties, along with a host of other Southeast Asians who have for the most part moved up and out to either Lynn or Lowell. Graduating from Simmons College in 2003, with double majors in sociology and management and a minor in finance, she spent a year in the insurance industry before serendipitously finding her way to Lowell to pursue what she calls “more meaningful” work. Duey had been introduced to Lowell by college girlfriends and an ex-boyfriend who all hailed from the ‘Birthplace of the Industrial Revolution.’ Her first visit was for a Water Festival. She moved there in 2006 to assume her current position as one of two special events coordinators for the Lowell National Historic Park.

### **Becoming a cultural event planner**

In 2004, Duey broke into the city’s cultural event planning ranks, taking a part-time position as Samkhann Khoeun’s assistant organizer for the first Cambodian Expressions festival, an annual event that occurs every April in concordance with the Cambodian New Year. This position, which had been casually emailed to her by a friend, ended up opening door after door for Duey, eventually landing her in her current position at the National Park. Samkhann was one of the people that referred me to Duey, proudly calling her his “protégé” (Personal communication, January 22, 2008). During her first year with him and Cambodian Expressions, Duey’s management skills caught the attention the then director of the Angkor Dance Troupe, who was looking for a successor. She then became the third and also one of the youngest of the troupe’s managing directors. In exchange for free performances, the National Park gives the Angkor Dance Troupe free practice space on the third floor of the Patrick J. Mogan

Cultural Center which is conveniently situated across from Lowell High School. While Duey was acting as the troupe's managing director, her office was across the way from Mehmed Ali, coordinator for the Mogan Center. When Ali needed a part-time assistant, Duey was an obvious candidate. Always open to new challenges, Duey agreed. By working in the Mogan Center, directing the dance troupe and organizing Cambodian Expressions, Duey had built up an impressive resume in just two short years. When the position of assistant special events coordinator opened up at the National Park, she applied. Out of 47 candidates, Duey put forth the highest-ranking application and thus became the first Cambodian to be hired by the Lowell National Park Service, 26 years since Cambodians first settled in the city.

Within a year, Duey was promoted from assistant coordinator to logistical coordinator. She is now the point person for the Lowell Folk Festival, which is the city's and the park's largest cultural event of the year. In 1987, 88, and 89, Lowell hosted the National Folk Festival. The event was so successful in those three years that the city decided to host its own folk festival after the national one migrated to other venues in 1990. Since then, on the last weekend in July 200,000 people have converged on the city to enjoy the traditional food, music, art, and dancing of various world cultures. In terms of local attendance, the Folk Festival ranks number one among the 'mainstream' community in terms of attendance and number three among the Cambodian community, behind the Southeast Water Festival and Cambodian New Year Celebrations at the temples. It was big news when the park decided that a young Cambodian woman should be in charge of the Folk Festival. Duey recalls the press surrounding her promotion:

It was pretty much sensationalized, in terms of the first Southeast Asian descendant to be coordinating the major festival in Lowell. That is a big deal. Plus, I was the first Cambodian to be hired by the park service here... Initially I didn't quite get it. How big a deal it is. But when I'm in uniform now and I walk around, and people are like, 'Oh you're federal. You're park service. The park runs a lot of stuff in the city.' I'm starting

to feel a little bit what it means to be in this role. And in a way, it feels heavy.<sup>11</sup>

There is a bit of a burden on Duey as the only Cambodian-American of an estimated 30,000 who has penetrated one of the largest institutions in the City. In terms of capacity, the National Park and UMass Lowell are the institutions with the greatest access to financial resources. In the past, these two major institutions have combined forces to directly and indirectly support cultural and educational programs for the Cambodian and other immigrant communities. With Duey as the Park's event coordinator, a whole host of new partnerships might emerge between the Park and the community that she is presumed to represent. In talking about the potential for such things, she is optimistic for the most part:

I work with some really great people who've been here for over twenty years. They want me to grow with the organization and the future that we're heading toward. And being more inclusive—we're trying to, the superintendent understands [voice trails off]. I guess it's tough, you can't quite blame them... Once you're in the system, you kind of understand the complexity of how hard it is to change the system, particularly one that is so hard to negotiate on the federal level. A lot of us are permanent employees. Once you start you stay with it, if you choose to. The benefits are really decent, so that people have no incentive to leave once they're in. So how do you recruit the newer generation if you still have your workforce there that is still viable?

### **Updating the Park**

Beyond the issue of diversifying the workforce, Duey excitedly reported on other initiatives that the Park is pushing forward, including updating the public history exhibitions, developing a 'leadership institute,' and implementing a new transportation system. In terms of updating the history, Duey assured me that there are serious efforts already in the works:

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<sup>11</sup> Unless noted otherwise, all quotes in this chapter are from Duey Kol, personal communication, February 28, 2008.

It is something that the park is very concerned with in terms of succession planning, and seeing that our programs and our educational interpretive programs are reflective of our community here. I mean, we don't want to be telling these stories about what Lowell is about and not have the people who *are* the stories not in agreement with us.

Catherine Stanton, an ethnographer who spent four years studying the Park and how well it responded to Lowell's current economic and demographic changes, published *The Lowell Experiment* in 2006. Her analysis was fairly critical, in a nutshell stating that the Park prefers to promote a safe and tidy narrative of working-class solidarity rather than tackle the more difficult issues of "equality, exclusion, class relationships and so on" (226). Though Stanton gave a nod to some of the efforts that the Park, particularly the Mogan Center, takes toward bringing new ethnic groups into the public history, she was generally unimpressed by their tendency to "showcase" ethnicity above all else. Stanton noted that groups that are open to performing or demonstrating their culture, like the Cambodians, have found a niche in the Park's programming, but other groups that are less inclined to such displays, like the Latinos for example, have yet to really find their place in the Park's narrative (2006, p. 79).

Whether or not the decision to update the Park's exhibitions was in any way motivated by her critique is uncertain. Nevertheless, Duey reported that University is now executing a "multi-year ethnographic study" so that the Park can better document the lives of "newer immigrants and what has happened in Lowell since 1970 or whenever our story stopped [the Park's], or began [the Cambodian's]." I contacted one of the lead researchers on the project, assistant professor of history, Christoph Stroebel, to try to get an idea of where the project is heading. He described the project as two-sided. First, his team is writing a book-length report that details the history of ethnicity in Lowell from the time when it was a Native American settlement to the present. Second, they are focused on telling the story of "two neighborhoods and 10 to 15 ethnic groups that have been neglected in the writing of the history of the city," with the Cambodians included. Beyond the production of that report, Christoph said it is hard to say how the study will be used by the park. But for his team of researchers, the hope is that it will "create some awareness" (Stroebel, personal communication, January 10, 2008).



The other major Park initiative that Duey spoke of was the ‘leadership institute,’ a project that is still in its draft form, aimed at trying to figure out “how to create more [leadership] opportunities for people of color.” Duey asserts that in the next few years, many of the city’s current leaders are going retire or vacate their positions. Seeing this on the horizon, Mehmed Ali is spearheading this effort to appropriately fill the gaps that will soon open up once the ‘old guard’ moves on. Currently, the Park is looking at two things: what happens when a leader leaves an organization and how to be proactive not reactive during a leadership transition. Mentoring will likely be a big component of the ‘leadership institute,’ though Duey predicts that the name might change.

Future leadership was singled out as an issue by the other respondents I interviewed, in that there is a dearth of minority youth with the skills and education to take on leadership positions. Sambath Bo, the current event coordinator for the Southeast Water Festival pointed this out, and Duey followed suit. Despite the fact that Asians, in this case Cambodian-Lowellians, are popularly known as the model-minority in terms of educational achievement, both young women said that attending college was not the norm in their experience. Duey went on to observe that even though Cambodian-American leaders have clustered and built a network in Lowell, she still has trouble finding young people with the professional skills necessary to assist with her projects at the Park and beyond. She added that Lowell has a higher concentration of college-educated Cambodians than other places in the country.

### **Fitting into the Matrix of Redevelopment**

Lastly, Duey spoke of her and the Park’s role in the next phase of Lowell’s revitalization and her excitement about being part of “this new project that the city is working on that will literally transform the city.” She said, “I see how I fit in the matrix of things,” and then went on to explain that that Lowell Planning Department was working with the Park on a strategy to better connect the city with one of the urban renewal districts:

We have massive plans. The city is spending about a quarter of a billion dollars on the Hamilton [Canal] District... creating the new downtown and businesses, so things are happening there. And we're looking at alternative transportation for the park.

The Park's main information center, which butts up against this new district, now has a trolley that goes from there to two other historical sites. There are feasibility studies underway to see about extending this trolley to serve downtown, the commuter transit station, the University, and major arts and sports venues. If things go as planned, the Park would play a role in creating what Duey called "more of like a San Francisco model" for getting around town. In addition, the Park is also planning on extending their boat tours to connect the Concord and the Merrimack Rivers. Duey also noted that the Park intends to buy at least two green buses.

Presented in this way, I started to see how the pieces of the Lowell "Destination City" fit together, incorporating the National Park, the Planning Department, the commuter rail station, tourism, cultural events, and the new Hamilton Canal District. According to a Department of Planning website, a successful Hamilton Canal District would achieve the following in this order (paraphrased unless in quotes):

- Safely connect commuter rail pedestrians to the downtown.
- Create a mixed-style "signature site" that complements the historic fabric.
- Provide housing for residents "seeking an urban experience" within walking distance to Boston's commuter rail.
- Create a pedestrian-friendly neighborhood with "active first-floor uses."
- "Acknowledge the historic canals as a significant amenity on the site."
- Bring 'eyes on the street' and reduce crime.
- Increase the tax revenue and employment base.
- Integrate with the rest of the city's redevelopment projects.
- Support and reward developer investment.
- Incorporate energy efficiency and sustainability strategies where possible.

In short, if successful, the remodeled Hamilton Canal District should act much like a New Urbanist lifestyle site for Boston commuters or locally-based professionals who want to live in a safe, historically significant, pedestrian-friendly, architecturally-engaging village that provides ample cultural entertainment.



*Rendering of the redeveloped Hamilton Canal District*

Source: Lowell Planning Dept

<http://www.hamiltoncanal.com/document-library/public-docs.aspx>

(Accessed May 21, 2008)

What is still not clear is what any of this has to do with Lowell's ethnic communities, other than the fact that they might find some new audience members at their cultural events or new patrons in their restaurants. James Errickson, the Urban Renewal Manager for the Department of Planning, said it would be great if Brazilian and Cambodian businesses spilled over into these new renewal districts, but, to date, the department has not created any intentional policy or development program to support this. Adam Baacke, the head of the planning department explained that these downtown renewal areas, like the Jackson-Appleton-Middlesex (JAM) and Hamilton Canal, have lain vacant for some time. The city needs outside developers, like the Architectural

Heritage Foundation and Earth Realty Company, with significant capital to help regenerate them. The strategy of the planning department, given their limited resources, is to create a regulatory environment that looks attractive to such investors. They achieve this by streamlining the permit process, modifying the zoning codes so that developers need only one permit for projects in the renewal zones.

When I asked Baacke if there was any tension between planning efforts that serve the downtown and those that serve the neighborhoods, he said that they look at the two independently, because the needs are different. The downtown plans are meant to attract outside investment, while the neighborhood plans are meant to make neighborhoods more livable. When the Planning Department did their multi-lingual survey back in 2002, Baacke said the data showed that neighborhood people were most concerned about “bad development”—unattractive, poorly sited, cheaply constructed buildings. Since then, the department has tightened the zoning codes to discourage such practices. Baacke summarized that for downtown the department has eased zoning restrictions to bolster the market forces, where in the neighborhoods they had done just the opposite (Personal communication, February 2, 2008).

In the neighborhoods, small businesses districts that were started by immigrants in the 90s are very successful in terms of generating rents. These districts have different planning needs than the ones downtown. When I asked Sophy Suon, a Cambodian American woman working in the City’s Office of Economic Development, how the department responds to the needs of minority business owners in these neighborhoods, she told me that they do not offer any programs that specifically target such entrepreneurs. However, minorities are free to enroll in their small business technical assistance program (TAP) and apply for \$5,000 start-up grants, like everyone else. When I asked if minorities actually take advantage of these programs, Sophy said that some Brazilians and Africans do, but, despite her outreach, very few Cambodians participate. In the past five years, Sophy recalled only three or five, adding that “it’s hard, because in the Cambodian community there is no such thing as free money. They don’t believe in it” (Personal communication, January 28, 2008). Given this fact, it seems that the planning department’s efforts are perhaps not relevant to the city’s Cambodian community.

To further test this assumption, I asked Duey Kol if the Cambodian community was aware or even interested in any of the grand plans that the Park was hatching with the City. Her response was diplomatic:

I guess if you are going to isolate the Cambodian community and say do they or do they not care about what is happening in the city, it's hard to say. But the community, as a whole, in Lowell is very much interested. We have had lots of public hearings and open meetings about the planning, and even in the middle of a snowy evening or on the weekends when we held them, we would get over hundred people to come in.

When I pressed her further on whether any immigrants were part of this band of hundreds, Duey explained that these meetings are largely inaccessible to them. For one, language presents a barrier. In addition, most Cambodians, including Duey, work 2 to 3 jobs, so even if they care about the issue, they still have competing obligations that prevent them from attending.

### **Having a Young Cambodian Woman at the Table**

With the Cambodian community largely absent from the dialogue about Lowell's next wave of revitalization, young leaders like Duey who have managed to penetrate the city's institutional infrastructure end up acting as their advocate. This notion of representation gets muddied by the fact that Duey, like others in her position, has her own set of allegiances and networks that she brings to the table. That means it is probably wrong to assume that at this time, she could possibly represent the interests of the entire Cambodian community given her limited time in Lowell and her direct attachments to specific groups like the Angkor Dance Troupe. However, at the same time her being from out of town might work to her advantage in terms of being able to move between the splintered factions within the local Cambodian community.

In addition, the fact that Duey is young and a woman puts her in good company, as I found that many of the up and coming leaders both in Lowell and in the Cambodian community are also women. As I sought interview subjects for this study, I found that there were not many Cambodian-American women in visible leadership positions that

were over the age of 35, but under that limit, the opposite was true. I spoke with a handful of young women who have assumed positions in the police department, the school system, the planning department, major financial institutions, and other community organizations. In most cases, these women also sit on the board of directors for Cambodian non-profits and ‘mainstream’ ones as well. It will be interesting to see how this leadership impacts the city over time. I know at least one of these women respondents is considering running for city council in ten years or so, saying it has been one of her dreams since she was a teenager. Other women are less politically inclined and focus instead on offering up their professional skills to struggling organizations. Others are highly committed to family and youth issues. In any case, within this group of young women lies a tremendous amount of potential for building capacity. Another interesting point that one of my male subjects made is that the strongest of these female leaders are still buffered from the criticism and conflict that exists within the Cambodian community. If one of these women wanted to take a larger leadership role, she could be the unifying force that leads the Cambodian community into its next phase of growth.

Though Duey may not be thinking of herself in these terms yet, her very presence at the Park and at the official cultural planning table is significant. In 2006 and 2007, during the production and planning phases for the much celebrated Cambodian rock opera, *Where Elephants Weep*, Duey had the park superintendent endorse her to work part-time on the event, donating in-kind services. Through this motion, she not only increased the amount of man-hours that went into the event, thereby helping assure its success, she also made sure that the production was culturally correct. Representing both the Angkor Dance Troupe and the National Park, Duey was one of 15 people on the steering committee, of which only a few were Cambodian. Samkhann Khouen, her former boss and mentor, was the co-director of the opera. Duey said it was interesting “sitting at the table representing the Park Service,” having once been this “young Cambodian girl” who did whatever he “dictated.” Nevertheless, it turned out that it was better for him and everyone else that she was at that table, since she was only one of a few on that committee who was Cambodian:

I had a vested interest in terms of presenting our culture on a major stage. I wanted to make sure it was done correctly. I was heavily involved with



the production team and the artistic, given that a lot of the actors, the company itself which was about 50 large,... only two of the people in the company were Cambodian.

She insisted on a weekly class on Cambodian culture and forced the company to fit it into an already tight schedule. Looking back Duey recalls, “it was one of the hardest negotiations.” The director was in support of the idea but said there wasn’t enough time. But Duey remained insistent, arguing that:

Maybe the stage stuff won’t be as great, but at least the process, how we get there—it’s much more important for us. Because when you leave, what do we have left? Not just a product. We want everyone feeling invested and a part of this whole thing.

Finally the company agreed to devote a three-hour block to cooking demonstrations, learning folk dances, and things like how to greet people correctly. These elements were then brought into the opera, so that in the end the dancing and gestures were “more Cambodian” as was the opera.

Sayon Soeun, the chair of the Southeast Asian Water Festival, has already requested that Duey take over the coordination of this major event as well. Though Duey would love to take that on, she had to decline this year, because she was getting spread too thinly between the Folk Festival and finishing her master’s degree in Community Social Psychology. Next year though, she is likely to take him up on the offer if the Park approves. Explaining that she is already a volunteer for the Water Festival and that the Park is already linked to the event, Duey says it should be a natural transition for her and for everyone else. To date the Water Festival board has generally told the Park, “this is what we need,” and so they respond by assisting with setup for the Friday night candle-floating ceremony, offering boat tours, rangers, and children’s activities. In the future, should the Water Festival come at least partially under the purview of the Park and Duey, one can anticipate there will be some major changes. With such an endorsement, the festival might finally evolve into the kind of city-supported event that so many Cambodian organizers think it should already be.

## **Upholding Tradition**

When I consider Duey with all her obvious managerial talent, natural leadership, and commitment to her community, there is a small part of me that wonders if her talents might be better applied in more empowering venues than cultural programming and festival. Is it that the current situation in Lowell offers little opportunities beyond festival to really impact the public sphere? In other words, if culture is the city's commodity, then gaining control of the cultural programming might be the most strategic move a person could make in Lowell. If that is the case, then Duey is well on her way to a place of great stature. However, there is so much more going on in a city beyond cultural events, and there is so much going on in the Cambodian community beyond heritage preservation. In Duey's case, I wondered if there had been a serendipitous job opening to coordinate a major voter outreach campaign instead of an the Cambodian Expressions festival, would she have signed on for that opportunity? Is it that Cambodian leaders are committed to preservation of a culture or that preservation of culture is the cause that is readily available for leaders to plug into?

In Duey's case, it seems that her mother's being a classical dancer, and her being one too, influenced her path. When I asked her about the role of cultural programming for herself and community, her response was quite similar to that of Samkhann Khoeun:

I think when you're an outsider coming into this culture that is so unfamiliar and so contrasting to your own culture, you want to find things that are familiar and things that are not controversial as well. So I've always seen art, dance, and music as that common ground. That is why I'm drawn to it. I feel it's an easy way in to begin these really hard conversations.

Seen in this way, cultural activities have a lot of goals to fulfill. Beyond promoting understanding, they must preserve a link to the past, both before the Khmer Rouge and after. Duey says it can be a lot of pressure to maintain and uphold traditions. First, these festivals, particularly Cambodian Expressions, provide a space for Cambodian survivors to deal with their trauma, given that most do not have the language to communicate such things to their children. Second, the festivals are an outlet to celebrate the culture that



somehow survived in spite of the Khmer Rouge's efforts to suppress it. Third, they become a method for keeping youth connected to an identity that might otherwise be lost. And on top of all that, these festivals are a way to promote Cambodian civic engagement and youth leadership development. Duey says all this can be quite complicated:

When you are trying to uphold tradition, in a way you are taking one version of it. I mean it's the Lowell version. People always complain that it's not quite like the way it's done in Cambodia. [I want to tell them] That's because you have an event planner that is Cambodian American... A lot of the elders say 'I remember when it was like this in Cambodia.' I'm like, 'if you go to Cambodia now, because I've been in and out for the last couple years, I will tell you, it's not like that anymore. But they don't believe you.

Hence generational disagreements inevitably occur over the correct interpretation of Cambodian culture—elders saying youth are out of touch and youth saying the same thing in return. Duey says that the generational divide, though not unique to Cambodian immigrants, is one of her greatest concerns. She says that the older generation didn't communicate much about their difficult past to the younger generation. Duey worries that without the space or language for those conversations, the past may be inaccessible to future generations who are born here in the U.S.

## **Paving the Way**

At the end of a long and engaging conversation, I asked Duey if she thought Lowell is a good place for immigrants to settle. Her response was one of the most affirmative ones I heard during my fieldwork:

I think so. Not only for immigrants, for all newcomers... When I go on these trainings, particularly when I'm representing the Park and meeting other folks that also work for the National Park Service,... a lot of people know about Lowell, and the Lowell story, and our accomplishments. We're doing a lot of things that are right... I know that when people are looking in the U.S. at places they want to go to try to create new things or look at lessons learned or programs, they often look to Lowell as a model, as a leader in a lot of these changes. Particularly, when you're looking at revitalization of the city or when the Cambodian community came together and elected the first city counselor. There's a lot of good "first stuff" that Lowell has really paved the way for.

What is interesting about Duey's reply is that it is very much the kind of response that I would expect from someone within the city's infrastructure. In fact, the things that Duey mentions are all ingrained into the official published narrative. Perhaps her youth, her position, and her career path have granted her a markedly different experience in Lowell than so many others I've spoken with. However, in pressing her further, Duey indicated that she still struggles:

I know change is slow, but how do you assist that, how do you move things along in a way that makes sense for the community? A lot of us do a lot of different types of work based on our roles and responsibilities at our organizations, but how do we come together more toward a shared vision of creating a more just society? I feel frustrated a lot. Like why am I always the only one at the table that represents this perspective?... I get frustrated a lot about being tokenized, I guess. But at the same time I do feel that there has to be one person who kind of paves the way...

Being that one person, or more accurately, that one of a small group of persons is quite exhausting. In the future, Duey looks forward to “a world where people, at least in this community, feel empowered instead of being apathetic to all these issues and complaining all the time.” Saying that “it takes a whole community to want to change,” Duey wonders how this small group that she is part of can build a bigger movement where more people want to do more together.



## **Part III: Taking Stock and Moving Forward Findings, Conclusions, and Ideas for Action**

Operating in an always political climate has at least three implications for planners. One is the impossibility of ignoring politics, and thus the need to develop political skills. Another is the need for choices: choice in terms of arenas of practice, as opportunities arise or are foreclosed. But the major choice concerns the vision of the good society to which planners might dedicate themselves. (Sandercock 2003, p.212).



*Cambodian racing boats docked for the winter*

© Amy Stitely, 2007

## **Chapter 9: Summary of Findings**

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During the interview process I asked each of the 17 Cambodian community advocates a set of compulsory questions. I opened up each interview by asking them to tell me how they arrived in Lowell, then followed up with questions about their work, life path and social networks. I then asked them to comment on the role of multi-cultural arts and programs and their feelings about Lowell as an ‘immigrant city.’ I closed the interview by asking them about their struggles and dreams. After analyzing the interviews, I found that responses to the following 8 questions were significant:

- When and why did you come to Lowell?
- Are you a citizen of the US? If not, do you intend to become one?
- Do you follow politics in Cambodia? Why or why not?
- Do you plan to stay in Lowell? Stay in the US?
- Would you say that Lowell a good place for immigrants to live? Why?
- What are the main issues facing the Cambodian community?
- Do you think that Lowell’s multi-cultural arts programming and marketing has improved the lives of immigrants?
- What kind of change would you like to see in Lowell?

In summary, response patterns to show that:

- All respondents believe Lowell is a good place for immigrants.
- The majority of the respondents are well-settled and do not intend to leave Lowell or the United States.
- Intra-community and inter-generational conflict is the most commonly-cited issue of concern.
- Lack of representation, voting, and overall civic engagement is the second most commonly-cited issue of concern.

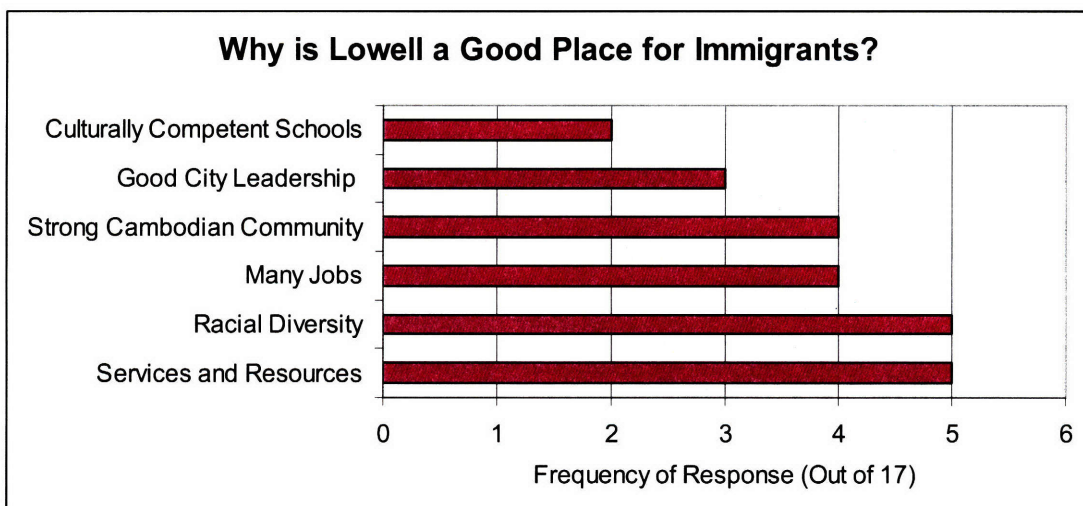
- Youth are the third most commonly-cited issue of concern.
- Cambodian cultural arts programs are seen as important tools for improving community relations, preserving tradition, and building pride. They also promote the image of Lowell as an interesting and diverse city.

### The “Good” Immigrant City

Having embarked on this research feeling skeptical of the upbeat Lowell ‘Immigrant City’ narrative, I must report that 100% of Cambodian respondents stated that “Lowell is a good for immigrants to live.” Reasons cited generally had to do with either access to opportunity or the overall progressive city culture. The four most cited justifications, in order of frequency, were:

- the plenitude of social services and resources for new immigrants.
- the high level of racial and ethnic diversity in the city (melting pot).
- the availability of jobs in the region.
- the existence of a strong Cambodian community that allows one to feel at home.

Other positive aspects mentioned were the city’s progressive and effective leadership and the high cultural competency in the public school system.





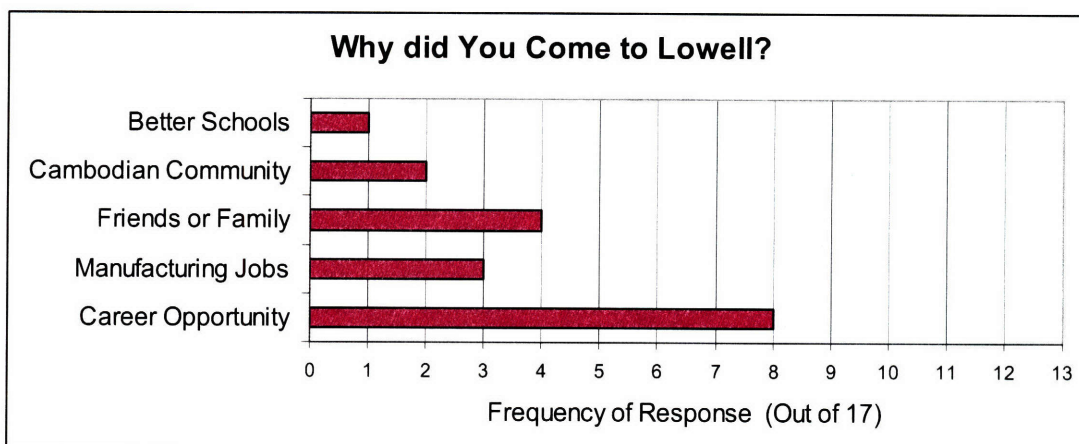
## **The Well-Established Cambodian Community**

A second finding is that, despite rumors that the Cambodian community in Lowell is more committed to their home country than the U.S., the respondents I spoke with are committed to the city. Only one of the 17 respondents is planning to leave Lowell and only one is planning to return to Cambodia. All but one of the respondents are American citizens and registered voters, and only one is heavily invested in Cambodian politics. The vast majority of the respondents intend to stay in Lowell.

<b>Respondents' Plans for Future</b>		
	<b>Intends to Stay in Lowell</b>	<b>Wants to Return to Cambodia</b>
<b>Yes</b>	12	1
<b>No</b>	1	12
<b>Maybe</b>	4	4
<b>Total</b>	17	17

Though initial attractors to the city may have been the abundance of affordable housing and low-skill manufacturing jobs, respondents are part of the contingent of highly motivated Cambodian business owners, professionals, and community advocates who are deeply rooted and invested in the future of the city. Of the community advocates interviewed, 8 out of 17 stated they or their parents came to Lowell for a unique career opportunity that grew out of the existence of the large Cambodian population:

- Two said their parents came to open businesses that catered to specifically to the Cambodian community.
- Two said they felt a call to service when they came to Lowell and saw the needs of the Cambodian community.
- Two came to found new institutions designed to serve their community.
- Two were recruited for professional positions at Cambodian organizations.

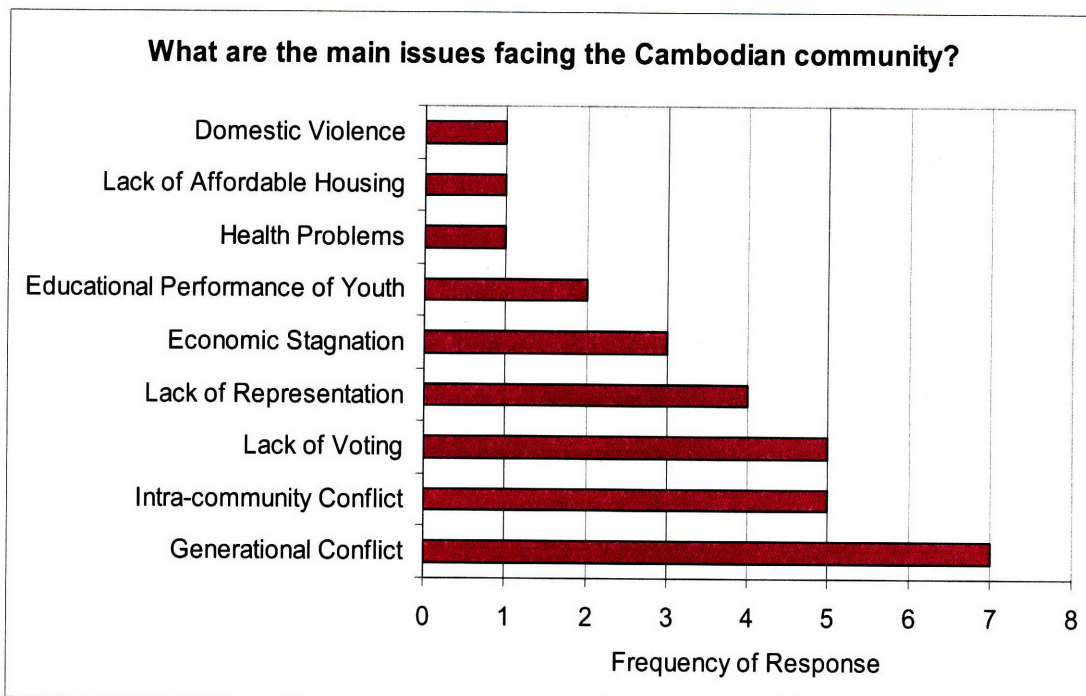


Such statements suggest that Lowell has evolved into a magnet for Cambodians with professional skills who want to want to serve their own community. This could mean that an engaged Cambodian middle class is emerging in the city. Other reasons cited for coming to Lowell were to be closer to friends and family and to live within a large Cambodian enclave.

### **The Disjointed Cambodian Community**

In trying to construct a cohesive Cambodian narrative in Lowell, I learned of the fractures across generations and across leadership that impair efforts to organize, mobilize, and build upon their successes. When I asked respondents to list the main issues that face the Cambodian community in Lowell, the two most often mentioned were the generational divide and lack of unity. The generational divide accounts for the lack of family communication and overall tension between parents and youth that has led to other issues such as: domestic violence, low youth educational achievement, and high incidences of youth runaways and youth crime. The first generation, culturally and linguistically isolated from their children and grandchildren, also feels the negative impacts of this divide. Members of the second generation who are now coming into positions of power are regarded with some suspicion by their elders. I heard first generation leaders complain of their being “too modern” or “too western” in their orientation.

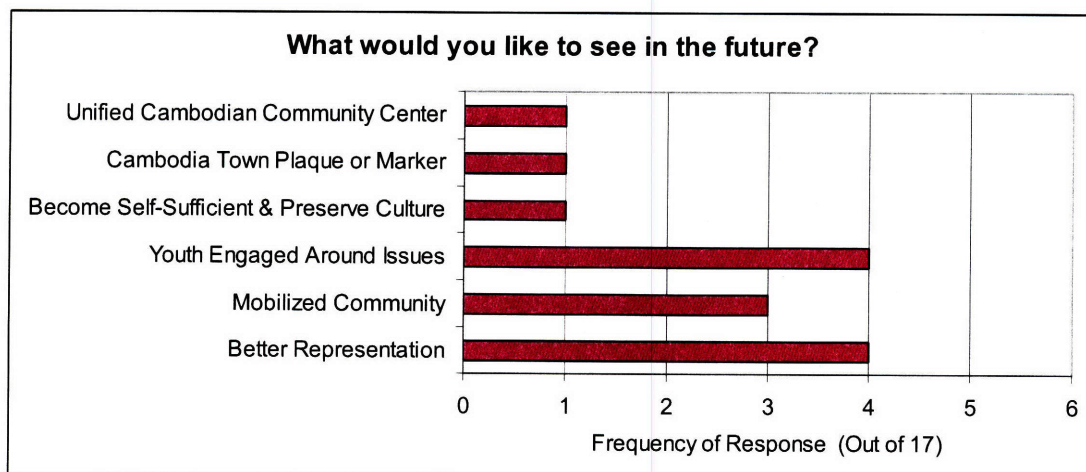
Beyond age, the other forces that divide are homeland politics and general distrust of one another. Though only one of the community advocates I interviewed said they were tied to a political party in Cambodia, several respondents talked about how such ties made it difficult for them to do their work. One of my older respondents recalled times when he tried to get a group together to do something in Lowell, and “before I knew it, some guys wanted to drag me overseas to Cambodia and run for office” (Personal communication, February 28, 2008). Another older respondent said that his reluctance to be involved with homeland politics prevented him from making connections with other Cambodian leaders in town, and his organization suffers as a result. However, leaders in their mid-30s said that the need for more unity is now a recognized community priority and foresee a coming era of more collaborative efforts.



## The Need for Representation and Engagement

Representation and political participation were mentioned many times as both challenges faced and goals to strive towards. Across the board, Cambodian community advocates said that without representation at the city policy making levels, they would constantly struggle. Respondents on the whole were proud of their community's achievements thus far in the city—their businesses, economic growth, home ownership rates, educational achievement, and institutions. However, all were frustrated by the inability to penetrate the invisible wall that blocks them from taking positions on the school board, city council, city agencies, police force, and schools.

Voter registration and turnout is a part of the problem, but overall lack of engagement around the issues is the underlying cause. There have been small efforts to increase awareness of the issues and get more Cambodians to be politically active, but only a few people are working toward these ends, and these few are not supported by a larger funding source or network. Other barriers are the cultural aversion to the political process that comes from a negative association with of governance and also the lack of ward representation in Lowell, which makes it difficult for a member of an ethnic minority to garner a city council seat. While four Cambodian men of the first generation have run for political office in Lowell, one of which was elected to the city council in 1999, 2001, and 2003, nobody spoke of any up and coming candidates. When I asked younger respondents if they would ever consider running, only one seemed enthusiastic about the prospect. For the most part everyone said that politics was not for them.



## **The Future of Lowell's Cambodian Youth**

There is a great deal of concern about the Cambodian youth, their educational performance, conflict with their elders, troubles with the law, and general lack of community engagement. Schools, summer camps, and youth programs are trying to find innovative ways to address these issues, but there is still work to be done. Respondents who work with youth said that in order to solve youth issues, one has to address family issues. Empowering youth is only part of the solution. The generational divide between parents and their children is vast. Several people said that parents are so heavily focused on “putting food on the table” that they lose track of their children. Poor communication and clashes over values have led to high incidences of youth truancy, dropping out, teen pregnancy, crime, and running away. The first and second generation is concerned about what will become of the next. While past efforts have focused heavily on making sure that youth are exposed to their traditional Cambodian culture, my assessment is that more energy should be devoted toward engaging them in current local issues.

## **Leaders Need More Support**

Another issue that was mentioned at least five times, but not in direct response to any one question, was the overwhelming lack of support individual respondents felt for their work. These sentiments relate to both the lack of large-scale engagement and lack of unity in the community. One issue is that peers, coworkers, and family members do not understand the commitment to community advocacy. There just aren't enough people who want to be involved. A second issue is that advocates themselves do not really support one another. Past and current disagreements and also competition that segregated advocates into different factions have compromised overall capacity to get things done. Even those who try to stay neutral find that they are unable to work across the dividing lines.

## **Underground Issues: Mental Health and Violence**

Lastly, I want to close this chapter by mentioning that compromised mental health is a significant issue that respondents alluded to but did not directly discuss. Disproportionate amounts of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) might be seen as the underlying causes of the Cambodian community's more overt issues like substance abuse, domestic abuse, family break-down, youth problems, and community-wide disengagement. However, because nobody spoke frankly about mental health issues with me, I am wary of holding them up in any kind of explanatory light. I mention them here at the closing because in my opinion, they do present real challenges for all Cambodians and ignoring this fact seems remiss.

## **Chapter 10: Conclusions**

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In terms of oppression, there are certainly worse places than Lowell, Massachusetts where a large group of Cambodians might find themselves. Considering the challenges of constructing what University of British Columbia professor Leonie Sandercock calls the mongrel city (2003), Lowell is doing well. In the face of global economic and local demographic change, the city has endured and mitigated the fear of otherness. Having built a reputation for an uncommon ability to absorb immigrants, this old mill town was reinvigorated and reborn with the arrival of a large Southeast Asian and Latino population. There were a few incidences of violence against the newcomer population during the late 80s, but these were isolated events that happened in the early phases of change,<sup>12</sup> and following such eruptions, spokesmen for the Cambodian community stood by the assertion that Lowell was a great place for refugees (Page 1986 and New York Times 1987). Nearly thirty years later, today's Cambodian leaders continue to express the same sentiment, despite the fact that they seem blocked out of political self-determination.

### **The Power of Narrative**

In order to understand how Lowell has maintained its image as an immigrant-friendly city, despite the limited presence of ethnic minorities in seats of power, I compiled a set of community narratives. This thesis began with the 'official history of Lowell.' This well-marketed story begins with mill-girls, continues with European immigrants, climaxes with economic bust, and finally resolves itself via the creation of a National Park and the Tsongas plan for city redevelopment. Second, I laid out the story of 'how the Cambodians came to Lowell.' This narrative was built from the literature review. It begins with the Khmer Rouge genocide, continues with the resettlement of Cambodians in the U.S., climaxes with their migrating to Lowell en masse, and closes with their being folded into the city's old 'Immigrant City' narrative. The third narrative I put forth could be called 'Lowell becomes a Destination City.' Here, I piece together

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<sup>12</sup> An 8 year old boy drowned in the Pawtucket Canal in 1987 and the Cambodian flag was burned on the site of a the North Chelmsford temple in the mid 80s.



information gathered from site visits, conversations with planners, culture brokers, websites, newspaper articles, and marketing. In this most recent narrative, the city's planners try to attract visitors, artists, and a new urban middle class by investing in culture: festivals, sports, marketing, and entertainment. Here we see an interesting confluence with the 'Cambodians in Lowell' narrative, as they become part of the advertised attractions in the 'Destination City.' By launching their own festivals, special events, and exhibitions, the Cambodians joined the mainstream effort to make Lowell a world-class city and, in the process, attended to their own needs.

Narratives are powerful tools that can be used to impel or deter action. The old official Lowell narrative, developed in the 'Brown Book' and concretized in the Lowell National Historic Park, has done a bit of both. The 'Birthplace of Industry' story reframed the image of the physical city, giving it new meaning, value, and justification for investment. The 'Immigrant City' and 'Working People' stories played more psychological roles. They honored the working-class immigrants who came to the city with nothing but the American Dream and thus reframed how residents viewed themselves. Later, these same 'Immigrant City' and 'Working People' stories played a crucial role in helping Euro-descended locals cope with the influx of darker-skinned newcomers from Latin America and Southeast Asia. The old 'Immigrant City' story found a second life. It was held up as evidence of the city's tolerance and understanding. People have gone so far as to call the Cambodians the new Irish (O'Sullivan 2003).

### **Updating the Cambodian Narrative**

While understanding the Cambodian migration as part of a long-standing immigrant tradition probably helps city-wide relations, such interpretations prevent the Cambodians and the other newcomers from developing their own narrative. Besides the fact that Lowell is quite different now than it was 100 years ago, the Cambodians have their own unique past and present. Perhaps explicitly recognizing how they are different from the old European immigrants would be a first step to new understanding. Just as the 1970s narrative reframed the old view of Lowell, an accurate Cambodian narrative could potentially reframe the view of immigration in America. A new narrative might shed



light upon the difficult issues immigrants face in the present and what role the city could play in addressing them.

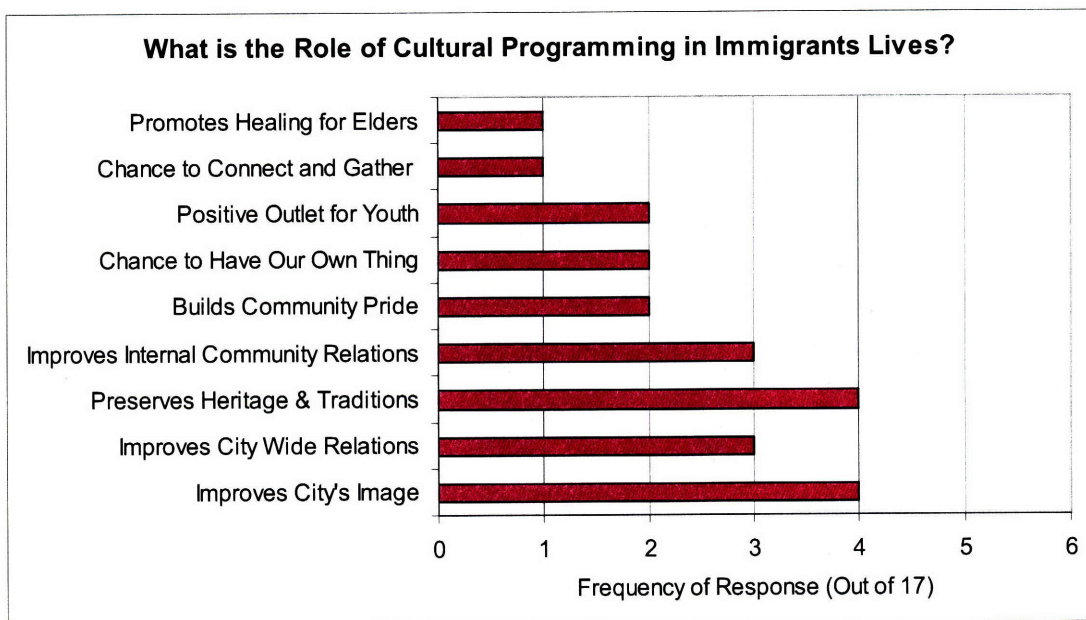
I put forth biographies for six Cambodian community advocates in an effort to get below the feel-good surface of the status quo ‘Immigrant City’ narrative. Presented in order of descending age and layers of generations, these personal stories demonstrate how none of the current Lowell narratives accurately represent the complexity of the Cambodian community.

- The Rithy Uong chapter highlights the challenges of securing political representation and Uong’s first-hand experience of the systematic discrimination.
- The Samkhann Khoeun chapter recounts the birth of the Cambodian festival culture and the years when the CMAA appeared to be at its strongest.
- Vong Ros’s chapter shows how the community’s challenges have multiplied over the years and how a comprehensive view from the center can be overwhelming.
- Sayon Soeun’s chapter gives a window into youth and family issues and how frustrating it can be to deal first hand with the politics of the city.
- The Sambath Bo chapter tells how a Lowell teen emerged as a leader in shaping the cultural economy.
- Lastly, the Duey Kol chapter offers clues as to what may come in the future with the national park, festivals, and Hamilton Canal redevelopment project.

While constructing these chapters I found that one of the challenges of writing a new narrative about the Cambodians that the story is still unfolding. Though the urge to reframe is strong, the reality of a shifting present tempers the effort. It is easy for planners to reframe the past, to look back, omit, rectify, and revere what they deemed important. Such interpretations are not so easily performed in the moment.

## Festival and Cultural Programs

As a tenuous solution to dealing with this need for new narratives within an evolving context, UMass Lowell and the National Park have hoisted the Cambodian community up onto Lowell's heritage and culture bandwagon and helped them carve out ephemeral spaces for self-expression. Using soft programming as a platform, Cambodians have become visible and vocal in the city's cultural space. At the festivals, performances, demonstrations, and exhibitions, they become unique, rather than just another immigrant group. As far as what gets expressed, the messages aren't cohesive and don't necessarily translate into a branding strategy. However, when all these messages get thrown out in the public space, even fleetingly, the Cambodians get the opportunity to tell their own story or stories.



In order to better understand how the festivals and cultural programs empowered the Cambodian community, I asked respondents how such events improved their situation in the city. The most popular answers pertained to relations, image, and heritage. In terms of bettering relations, respondents said that cultural programs helped younger generations and older generations learn more about each other. They acted as spaces for communication. Regarding external relationships, respondents said that cultural events

help demystify the Cambodians for the ‘mainstream’ and help promote the larger multi-cultural identity of Lowell. This last point is significant. Without the Cambodian programs and events, the city’s cosmopolitan identity would be a lot less convincing, and without this cosmopolitan identity, the city would have trouble billing itself as a ‘Destination city.’

### **Beyond Celebration**

In considering the merits of cultural programming, respondents stated that such activities had limited potential in terms of spawning deep structural change. Cultural events, though well-attended and often educational, do not directly help the Cambodians achieve the kind of representation they need at the political and agency levels. Respondents wanted to be better incorporated in the city decision-making processes. The tangible issues that the Cambodian community faces, like economic insecurity, low educational attainment, poor health, and youth delinquency, need to become city-wide issues. Given the size and stability of the Cambodian community, these issues are no longer marginal. Lowell needs to take them on as their own. However, in order for this to happen, more Cambodians must occupy more positions of power. Gaining a voice in the cultural space was a good first step, but the key is not to get pigeon-holed as the city’s purveyors of multi-cultural entertainment.



*Cambodian boats docked for the winter*

© Amy Stitely, 2007

## **Chapter 11: Moving Forward**

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Early in my field work, a mainstream community respondent told me that the Cambodians in Lowell assimilated faster than any other ethnic group in the city's history (personal communication, November 15, 2007). My assessment is that the Cambodians have not assimilated en masse. They rapidly erected their own institutions and selectively penetrated the city's mainstream infrastructure. Both Cambodian cultural norms and local environmental factors determined the order of these actions. Presently, the community is partially incorporated and has made uneven progress in to different civic realms. Lowell's Cambodians have been very successful in producing cultural programming. They have also had some success in gaining positions in the school system and starting neighborhood businesses. They struggle most with political representation.

In order for the Cambodian community to reach a position of greater empowerment, progress must be made in all of four of these realms: cultural, educational, economic, and political. Using cultural programs and the school system as a base, the Cambodians are in the process of building a stronger community. Cultural programs and academic institutions now act as incubators for developing new leaders. As these leaders mature, they then find their way onto Lowell's boards and agencies or they run for political office. This process of evolution suggests that, in time, Lowell's city agencies will become more representative. However, in order to further facilitate this process, I offer the following broad recommendations for action:

### **Build upon Cultural Events**

The Cambodian community's internal drive to preserve tradition, in tandem with the National Park's focus on heritage, led to early and solid successes in the production of festivals and cultural programs. The Angkor Dance Troupe and Southeast Asian Water Festival are nationally known entities with high mainstream visibility. Lesser known programs, like the Cambodian Expressions festival, Light of Cambodian Children folktale project, and the Voice of Cambodian Children radio program have achieved similar success at the local level. Support for all these endeavors can be traced back to

either the National Park or UMass Lowell and their associated resources. In order to build upon this momentum and the resources that are readily available, Cambodian cultural activities should strive toward higher community ends as follows:

- Create a Survivors Component at the National Park

According to Duey Kol, the Park administration is currently working to update Lowell's human story. During this process of narrative revision, administrators should find a permanent space in the Park that explicitly recognizes and celebrates the fact that Lowell has become a safe space for refugees and war survivors to rebuild their lives. This might take the form of an exhibit or a memorial or both that could act a physical space for people to go for healing and reflection. If well executed, refugees and war survivors from all over the region might make pilgrimages to Lowell in the same way that people do for the Vietnam War Memorial or the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.

- Expand the Cambodian Expressions festival

Because the Cambodian Expressions event focuses explicitly on healing the community, it deserves to be better supported. The opera was great success in 2007. There should have been a follow up event of similar caliber in 2008, but for unknown reasons this was not the case. Those who are dedicated to improving community emotional health should join forces with the event producer to produce first-rate programs annually.

- Organize through the Water Festival

With so many Cambodians converging on Lowell for the festival, community organizers should be on hand to register voters and educate residents about the importance of voting. Knowing that the festival has traditionally been more about celebration than confrontation, such an effort would have to be thoughtfully executed so as not to alienate people who come to the festival for entertainment. However, there are ways to combine political action with fun, and the festival is an obvious venue to try to do this.

## **Keep Investing in Youth**

The Cambodian community has been so far very engaged around the issues of education and youth development. Their first political act was joining forces with the Latino population to bring a lawsuit against the Lowell school system to desegregate elementary schools in 1987. Since Rithy Uong became the first Cambodian certified teacher in Lowell in 1990, a handful of other Cambodians have assumed positions as teachers, aides, and administrators in the public and charter school systems. Having academic role models is important for developing the next generation of leaders, but youth also need to have more contact with other kinds of role models.

- Create More Pathways to Leadership for Youth

One of the ways to prepare youth for future leadership is to expose them to city agencies and community based organizations. Leaders of organizations should recruit youth as interns or program assistants in after-school and summer programs. Interaction with advocates and community managers might instill a commitment to future civic engagement.

- Create a Cambodian Youth Cultural Event

Most intergenerational Cambodian programs are designed to expose youth to their elders' culture. Perhaps an inverted model would be equally useful. Youth in after-school programs, summer camp, or school clubs could develop their own cultural program that focuses on their modern experience as a Cambodian-American youth and perform it for their elders. This could be another way to break down the barrier between the generations.

## **Bolster Community Economic Development**

Because entrepreneurship is highly valued in Cambodian culture, Lowell now hosts hundreds of Cambodian-owned enterprises, many of which are clustered together along two Cambodian "main streets" in the Acre and Highlands neighborhoods. The Planning Department should take steps to further brand these Cambodian retail clusters. In addition, the Economic Development Department should assess the sustainability of the region's industries and create a workforce development program in response.



- Give Stronger Physical Identity to the Cambodian Main Street Clusters

One of my respondents said he was working on getting some kind of “Cambodia Town” marker or plaque installed near Pailin Plaza, one of the two major Cambodian retail strips. Appropriate signage or a gateway should be erected here and also in Cupples Square, as was suggested by Mount Auburn Associates (2007). The Planning Department could further strengthen the identities of these areas by helping business owners to make facade and signage improvements that would help brand the cluster. In addition, providing better pedestrian access from the downtown lofts to these Cambodian clusters might encourage more crossing-over into the Acre and Highlands for an ethnic consumer experience.



*Pailin Plaza*

© Amy Stitely, 2007



*Westford Street Cupples Square*

© Amy Stitely, 2007



- Help Immigrant Businesses to Profit from the Hamilton Canal District

Should a new population of loft-dwellers move into the Hamilton Canal Project, the Economic Development Department should work with current immigrant business owners to help them capture a share of the new consumer market. The Economic Development Department could help Cambodian business owners update their marketing and/or expand their operations into the renewal district.

- Invest in a Workforce Development Strategy

The Economic Development Department should work with UMass Lowell, Middlesex Community College, and the Workforce Investment Board to look at growth industries in the region where immigrants can move up the ladder of social mobility. Efforts should be made to train the immigrant workforce to take positions in these industries. This method worked for the Cambodians during the Wang era and should be revisited.

### **Build a Tighter Minority Community**

Community organizing was not a natural act for first generation Cambodians and has thus far not been taken up as a priority by any Cambodian organizations. However, this lack of organization has prevented Cambodians and other ethnic minorities in Lowell from capitalizing on their numbers. As the first generation of Cambodians vacates positions of power, the next generation has the opportunity to build a less fractured movement, one that is not plagued by transnational political alliances or other conflicts from the past.

- Create a Unified Cambodian Movement

The second generation of advocates seems ready to launch a new unified Cambodian community organizing effort. They should consider stepping out from underneath their organizations and creating a comprehensive strategy for change. By coming together, they could set common goals for the community and act strategically within their own organizations to reach these goals.

- Pan-Ethnic Organizing

Even beyond bringing together the Cambodians, there is a demonstrated need for the Lowell's ethnic minorities to work collaboratively to organize for change. The only effort that has come close to a pan-ethnic movement was the minority voter registration project led by the OneLowell agency in 2000. Respondents stated that this effort was ultimately not successful in unifying different groups. It may be time to reflect on this experience, consider the lessons learned, and try again.

## **Change the Political Structure**

Given the frustration that Cambodian community advocates feel due to the lack of political representation, the time may be ripe for political organizing. Rithy Uong's election to the city council in 1999, 2001, and 2003 was not by the votes of the Cambodian population. The chance of another Cambodian being elected to office is slim so long as the Cambodians don't participate in local elections.

- Increase Minority to Voter Turn-Out

Southeast Asian voter registration projects have not been widely supported in the past. The organizing work has repeatedly been taken up by only a few individuals. Everyone who is frustrated by the lack of minority representation should make increasing voter-turnout one of their missions. Collectively, organizations may be capable of affecting a popular election.

- Advocate for Ward Representation

Most respondents said that the Cambodian community is generally apolitical; however, if all of things mentioned above were to be set in motion, perhaps someone, Cambodian or otherwise, might initiate a movement to change the local political structure. If the city council and the school committee were at least partially made up of ward representatives, the composition of both of these entities would change drastically. Minorities in segregated neighborhoods would be able to send a representative to the policy-making level and the city would start to function in a very different manner.

## **Summary of Recommendations**

Though I did not complete an institutional assessment and am, therefore, unable to say with certainty who is empowered to take what actions, I laid out the above recommendations in order of least to greatest difficulty, in terms of implementation. I began by offering suggestions on how to improve existing cultural programs so they can better meet the needs of the Cambodian community. I then suggested that local organizations should mentor more Cambodian youth and advocated for a new Cambodian youth festival. Next, I suggested that the Lowell Planning Department do more for Cambodian neighborhood business owners and also invest in an immigrant workforce development strategy. Lastly, I pushed for better community organizing, stating the need for unification among Cambodian advocates, pan-ethnic organizing, increased capacity for voter registration projects, and the reformation of Lowell's at-large system of representation. Changing the political structure of the city would require the prior implementation of many of the other programs and organizing efforts I suggested beforehand and should be seen as a long-term goal. In the immediate future, there is still some work to be done in the realm of celebration; however, the Cambodian community must soon reach beyond these achievements and organize for deeper political, economic, and social incorporation.

# CAMBODIAN

# MAINSTREAM

pop statistics		1983 Lowell's Cambodian pop. est. at <b>1,000</b>	1987 Lowell's Cambodian pop. est. at <b>10,000</b>	1990 Lowell's Cambodian pop. est. at <b>18,000</b>
political action			1987 Immigrant parents <b>sue School System</b> for segregation	1990 Rithy Uong is <b>first certified Cambodian school teacher</b>
community institutions			1984 <b>Triratanaram Temple</b> opens	1989 <b>Glory Buddhist Temple</b> opens
cultural programs	1970	1980	1986 <b>Angkor Dance Troupe</b> founded	1990
pop statistics	1970 Lowell's pop. <b>94,239</b> 3.4% foreign born <b>less than 1% Asian</b>	1980 Lowell's pop. <b>92,418</b> 4.5% foreign born <b>less than 1% Asian</b>		1990 Lowell's pop. <b>103,439</b> 20.0% foreign born <b>11.1% Asian</b>
policy planning		1983 <b>Governor's Council for Refugees and Immigrants</b> established 1980 <b>U.S. Refugee Act</b>		
city institutions		1976 <b>Wang</b> moves headquarters to Lowell		1992 Wang files for <b>Chapter 11 bankruptcy</b>
cultural institutions		1978 <b>Lowell National Historic Park</b> opens	1982 <b>Brush Art Gallery and Studios</b> founded	1987 <b>New England Quilt Museum</b> opens
cultural programs			1987 <b>National Folk Festival</b> comes to Lowell	1990 first <b>Lowell Folk Festival</b>
cultural institutions			1989 <b>Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center</b> opens	1992 <b>Boott Cotton Mills Museum</b> opens
cultural institutions			1989 <b>Tsongas Center for Industrial History</b> opens	

# TIMELINE

1998 **400 immigrant-owned businesses** in Lowell

2003 Lowell's Cambodian pop. est. at **25,000**

1994 **Asian Task Force for Domestic Violence** launched

1997 Sambath Chey Fennel runs for School Committee

1999 Rithy Uong **elected to City Council**

2001 Vesna Nuon runs for School Committee

2005 **Rithy Uong resigns** 3 Cambodians run for political office

2006 Duey Kol joins the **National Park**

1998 **Light of Cambodian Children** founded

2000 **Metta Health Center** opens

2006-07 **CMAA** relocates to the Acre

1998 **Future Stars Summer Camp** started

1997 first **Southeast Asian Water Festival**

2000

2001 **Angkor Dance Troupe** moves into Mogan Center

2004 first **Cambodian Expressions Festival**

2007 **Where Elephants Weep** opera

2010

1999 Lowell wins **All America City Award**

2001 **COOL** founded  
2001 first **Winterfest**

2005 first **Destination World series**

1997 **American Textile History Museum** opens

2002 **Revolving Museum** relocates in Lowell

2008 **JAM Garage** opens

1998 **Tsongas Arena and LaLacheur Baseball Park** open

2003 **National Streetcar Museum** opens

2000 **Ayer Lofts** open

1994 **Center for Family, Work, and Community** founded at UMass Lowell

1995 **Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School** opens

1999 **Lowell Community Charter Public School** opens

2000 Lowell Police Dept founds **Race Relations Council** founded

1998 **Artist Overlay District**

2000 **JAM Urban Renewal Plan**

2005 **Mills to Martinis** marketing campaign

2003 **No Place for Hate** adopted

2000 Lowell's pop. **105,167**  
28.3% foreign born,  
**17.2% Asian**

## **List of Interviews**

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### **Cambodian Community Respondents**

Cambodian Community Advocate 1 (CCA1), November 14, 2007.

Cambodian Community Advocate 2 (CCA2), February 27, 2008.

Cambodian Community Advocate 3 (CCA3), February 28, 2008.

Sambath Bo, Associate Producer for Lowell Telecommunications Corporation and Event Coordinator for the Southeast Asian Water Festival, January 19, 2008.

Phala Chea, Ed.D., Parent Information Center Coordinator, Lowell Public Schools, January 3, 2008.

Rida Eng, Chief Operating Officer, Lowell Community Charter Public School, February 15, 2008

Sambath Chey Fennel, February 28, 2008.

Samkhann Khoeun, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Advisor, Middlesex Community College Trio Educational Talent Search, January 22, 2008.

Sidney Liang, Producer, Voice of Cambodian Children Radio Program and Director, Southeast Asian Resources for Culture and Health Program at Lowell Community Health Center, February 22, 2008.

Lianne Linlavong, Accounting Manager, Community Teamwork, Inc (CTI), January 21, 2008.

Doeun “Duey” Kol, Special Events Assistant, Lowell National Historical Park, February 28, 2008.

Vesna Nuon, Sex Offender Registry Board Member, Commonwealth of Massachusetts Office of Public Safety, January 21, 2008.

Vongsaranak “Vong” Ros, Executive Director, Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association (CMAA), November 7, 2007 and February 27, 2008.

Sayon Soeun, Executive Director, Light of Cambodian Children (LCC), January 17, 2008.

Sothy Sopheap, Board Member, Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association (CMAA), January 22, 2008.

Sophy Suon, Economic Development Assistant, City of Lowell Division of Planning and Development (DPD) and Board President, Angkor Dance Troupe, January 23, 2008.

Chanrithy “Rithy” Uong, Guidance Counselor, Lowell High School, November 16, 2008 and January 8, 2008.

### **Mainstream and Academic Respondents**

Community Respondent 1 (CR1), November 13, 2007.

Community Respondent 2 (CR2), November 15, 2007.

Community Respondent 3 (CR3), November 25, 2007.

Community Respondent 4 (CR4), November 27, 2007.

Mehmed Ali, Director of Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center for the Lowell National Park, January 8, 2008.

Adam Baacke, Assistant City Manager and Director, City of Lowell Division of Planning and Development, February 2, 2008.

Robert Farrant, Professor of Regional Economic and Social Development, University of Massachusetts Lowell Department of History, January 22, 2008.

Dennis Frenchman, Leventhal Professor of Urban Design and Planning at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, February 20, 2008.

Jeffrey Gerson, Associate Professor, University of Massachusetts Lowell Department of Political Science, January 10, 2008.

LZ Nunn, Executive Director, Cultural Organization of Lowell, February 28, 2008.

Christoph Stroebel, Assistant Professor, University of Massachusetts Lowell Department of History, January 10, 2008.

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