

Good Design: Mekong Design Selection
~Travel to Cambodia~

STUDIO BYCOLOR

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It was around November of last year when I discovered that Japan Institute of Design Promotion (JDP) was reaching out to Japanese designers for the “Mekong Design Selection” project. Even though Cambodia is a part of the same continent of Asia as Japan, I felt that we need to better understand the differences between the history, language, politics, customs, lifestyle, and culture in order to produce a new brand product together.

STUDIO BYCOLOR is a design firm that produces many products that accentuate on colors, materials, and craftsmanship. I would like to be able to fulfill this role for this project and focus on Cambodia’s traditional crafts and materials with Cambodian Sedge Mats Business Association (CSMBA).

The sedge used to produce mats are very similar to the rush used to make *tatami* (straw mats) in Japan. Every year, close to 300,000 tons of sedges are harvested by December. Once they are dyed and dried, the sedges are woven in different patterns with a variety of vibrant colors.

My design proposal was accepted by the end of last year, and was officially announced the following month in January 2015. The basics of my proposal is to keep the same production line unchanged, but add an extra material to be woven with the sedge. In preparation for my trip, I was advised by both JDP and AJC to bring a sample of the new material. I bought a variety of kinds and brought them with me on the trip.

Before the trip, I was anxiously looking forward to meeting with the staff members of CSMBA. I took extra precautions to how I wanted to meet with the goal of concluding a contract to continue on with the project.

On the first day of meeting, I was able to briefly explain my design proposal. I felt that it went smoothly. By the next day, a visit to the workshop was arranged so that we can discuss further details about the project while they created samples of my proposal. The biggest obstacle so far in this project was finding a local manufacturer of the new added material that is similar to the samples that I brought from Japan. We went to the local market by car to several shops, but weren’t able to find similar materials.

Phnom Penh is situated on the banks of the Mekong River. Located on the opposite side of the

river is where the famous Kandal province where sedges are harvested. The CSMBA has a workshop in the province which is an hour drive from the main shop and office. On the second day, we all met at the shop at 8 AM and headed to the workshop, arriving a little after 9 AM.

The workshop contains 3 power looms and a sewing area. Most of the workers are women and some of them have their children play nearby as they work. The infrastructure is still developing in the Kandal province. I was told that the electricity cannot power the looms all at the same time. A couple of meters away, there is another workshop which contains looms that have been traditionally used to weave sedge mats by two people. One person adds the weft yarn and another person weaves using the non-electric loom. Together, they can weave only a couple of centimeters a day.

We tested both the power loom and the handloom but there was a slight problem for the power loom to weave the new material weft yarn properly. In the end, it was decided that production will be done by handloom and the warp yarn will be cotton or hemp. Since Cambodian sedges are grown in various thicknesses, we decided that the new product should use the thicker sedges, because of the cushion properties that the thickness provides.

In walking distance, there was a workshop where the sedges are being dyed. In order for darker colors like black and deep blue to get properly dyed, the workers repeat the dye processing several times. Facing the Mekong River, the dyed sedges are hung dried in an orderly fashion. During the monsoon season, they are left to dry in an area where it is roofed. The sister of the owner was passionately explaining the process of production, techniques and materials used and made 4 samples during my first visit.

The day before, the Cambodia team all gathered to have dinner with Mr. Kurata, President of KURATA PEPPER. He has been living in Cambodia for the past 20 years, building his company. He gave us advice on how he was able to grow his business in Cambodia. He said that we as Japanese must know the heart of Cambodians and recommended us to visit Angkor Wat. We rescheduled to all go to Siem Reap, where we were able to expand our knowledge of Cambodia's history and culture.

On the following day, I met again with CSMBA when the sample product was made. The biggest challenge still remains to be finding the right new material. We all agreed to continue our search even after my return to Japan.

Before the last day of the trip, the main objective of concluding a contract between Cambodian Sedge Mats Business Association was not materialized. Even though both parties agreed with the collaboration project, CSMBA could not commit to a contract with the owner away from a business trip, which was understandable.

On the last day of our trip, the Cambodia team all met up at the Ministry of Commerce headquarters to have a debriefing meeting. I am very grateful for this opportunity to be a part of this project with the help and support from all organizers, advisors, and my fellow designers. It is rare for designers to share and have discussions but I was thankful to be able to learn from my fellow designers and advisors. I look forward to reaching the goal of this collaboration project.

For the original report in Japanese with pictures, please view this link:

http://www.asean.or.jp/ja/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Cambodia-Report_STUDIO-BYCOLOR_Ms.-Akiyama1.pdf