



SLEUK RITH INSTITUTE
A Permanent Documentation
Center of Cambodia

REMARKS

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THE FOUNDER OF THE SLEUK RITH INSTITUTE
FOR THE LONDON UNVEILING
OF THE SLEUK RITH INSTITUTE DESIGN

Tuesday 7th October
The Zaha Hadid Gallery
London

Good evening friends, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen. On behalf of the Sleuk Rith Institute, and as its founder, I want to express our appreciation for your attendance at this important event to unveil the inspiring design for the new Institute by Iraqi Dame Zaha Hadid and her architects.

The name of our Institute reflects our core objectives as well as our Cambodian heritage. Sleuk rith are dried leaves that Cambodian religious leaders and scholars have used for centuries to document history, disseminate knowledge, and preserve culture during periods of harsh rule and grave peril. The term “sleuk rith” literally means “the power of the leaves,” capturing their beauty as vehicles of knowledge and their strength in advancing social memory and human dignity.

The Sleuk Rith Institute (SRI), which encompasses a museum, a research center, and a school, will embody the past, present, and future. Continuing the work of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, the Institute will look to our time-tested initiatives and programs to improve our

understanding of Khmer Rouge history and Cambodian society. In addition, with an eye to the future, we will also champion new ideas and approaches that challenge our understanding of justice and advance our efforts in the global struggle against genocide and mass atrocity. One approach that is particularly relevant this evening relates to the field of memorial architecture.

Memorial architecture is by no means a new field. One can find memorials throughout the world, both modern and ancient, which give society an opportunity to remember, reflect, and learn about history. In the context of genocide and mass atrocity, memorial architecture has tended to reflect the evil and misfortune of the historical period it represents. In this sense, the architecture's legacy is dark, somber, and oriented to the past.

Visitors often leave such memorials with a deeper understanding of the unspeakable depths of human suffering and evil, as well as a heightened recognition for the need to do more. Without a doubt, these feelings and attitudes are critical to our struggle against genocide and mass atrocity. Mankind can never expect to reach the higher order of righteousness unless individual human beings are aware of mankind's propensity for the lower order of true evil.

However our intellectual endeavor is not confined to the past, and our struggle, for all practical purposes in Cambodia and the world, is waged in the present and future. Memorial architecture gives us the power to not only interact with time and space but also our imagination. With an eye to the past, memorial architecture can educate and memorialize, but with an eye to the present and future, memorial architecture can also inspire and innovate. Partnered with the world-renowned Zaha Hadid Architects, the Sleuk Rith Institute is proud to champion both fields of vision in its own institute design.

Words and ideas form and reform states, and subtle nuances in language and art make all the difference in the grand scheme of reconstructing a post-conflict nation. Cambodia, since 1979 (the year in which the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime fell), has come to be defined as the 'killing fields', and the land of genocide, war, and the Khmer Rouge. Cambodia will never escape its history, but it



does not need to be enslaved by it either. Post-conflict societies have to move on. Through art, music, and the vast spectrum of cultural expression, post-conflict societies must shift their definition of individual self, community, and national identity from the dominant paradigm of victims and perpetrators, to human beings that dream and work for a better tomorrow.

Our world is not a static reality, but a reality in the process of continual transformation. Post-conflict societies must not bury their past, but, in the opposite extreme, they also must not continue to relive it over and over. While horror, atrocity, oppression, and evil must be interred so future generations of the 21st century know and understand the depths of human depravity, kindness, hope, forgiveness, and courage must also define our worldview. Indeed, a post-conflict society must find a common high ground between extremes if it is to ever forge a way forward. Beset on all sides by mankind's potential extremes, it is easy for post-conflict societies to oscillate like a pendulum between punishment and forgiveness, beauty and horror, and the higher and lower forms of human existence. Breaking the historic cycle of violence requires not only love, hope, and forgiveness, but also a balanced account of the past. Likewise while our past becomes our guide we must be diligent in preventing her from becoming our master.

Memorial architecture gives us a medium by which we can contemplate our condition and potential. In this sense, art can give us the common high ground by which we can connect our past with our present and future, and our dreams with reality.

The Sleuk Rith Institute sees this common ground to be an indispensable objective of a post-conflict society's transformation, and it welcomes your support in this grand endeavour.

Thank you.

