

HKA * PARTNERS
Brown Coffee x
VMV Living Heritage House

BROWN COFFEE X VMV LIVING HERITAGE HOUSE

Set in the heart of Phnom Penh, the Brown x Vann Molyvann Living Heritage House is a quiet yet bold attempt to rewrite the dialogue between history and contemporary life. The project transforms the former residence of Cambodia's most celebrated architect, Vann Molyvann, into a layered cultural destination—a space where coffee, conversation, and memory intersect.



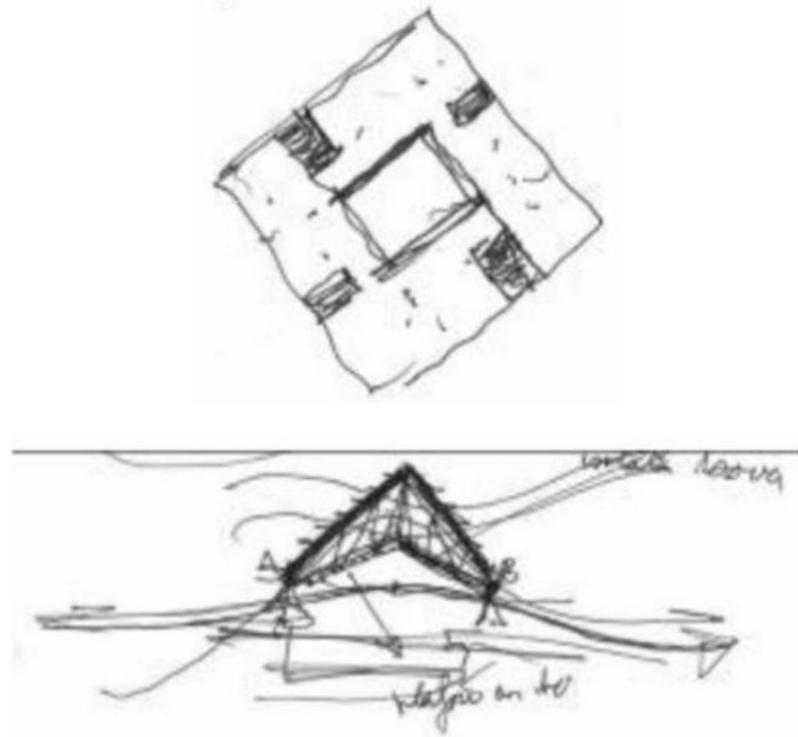


Photo: Vann's Family

A FORENSIC READING OF THE PAST

The brief was never about turning the house into a café, nor freezing it in time. Instead, the design team focused on a more living approach—a sensitive retrofit that respects the original spirit while allowing new rhythms to enter. The result is a house reawakened: grounded in memory, yet open to the public, open to now.

Before design began, the team undertook a careful research process—treating the house as both an artifact and a narrative. Supported by documents and insights from Vann's family and the Vann Molyvann Project team, the architects studied Molyvann's original drawings and photos, while also examining his broader architectural body of work—from monumental civic buildings like the National Sports Complex to academic landmarks like the Institute of Foreign Languages.





Photo: Vann's Family 1970



Photo: Aug 2024



Photo: Apr 2025





BEFORE: 2009



AFTER: 2025

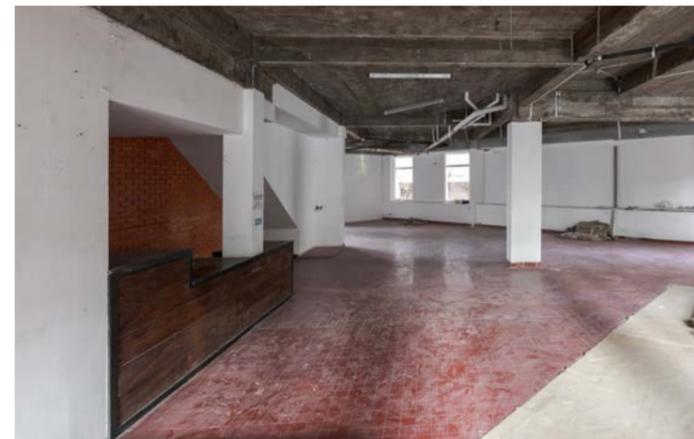
BEFORE AND AFTER: TRACING THE JOURNEY OF RESTORATION

Archival photographs from the 1960s, 2009, 2014, and recent years were compared to the current condition of the house to guide the design. These materials offered insight into not only the building's exterior form, but also its interior spatial qualities—how natural light moved through rooms, how materials aged over time, and how everyday life was choreographed inside

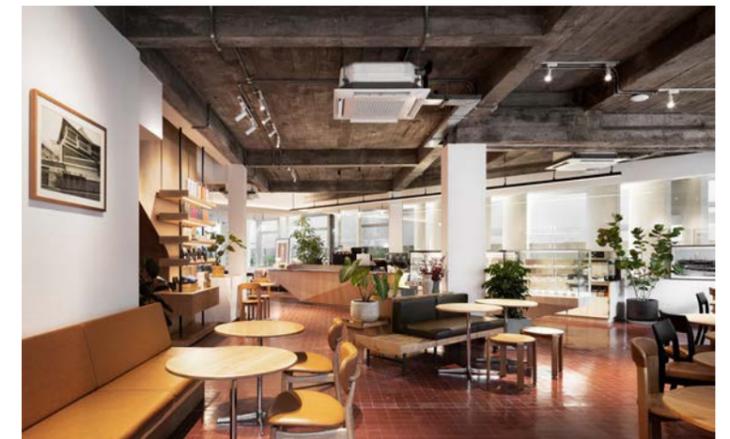
Photo: Vann's Family



BEFORE: Aug 2024



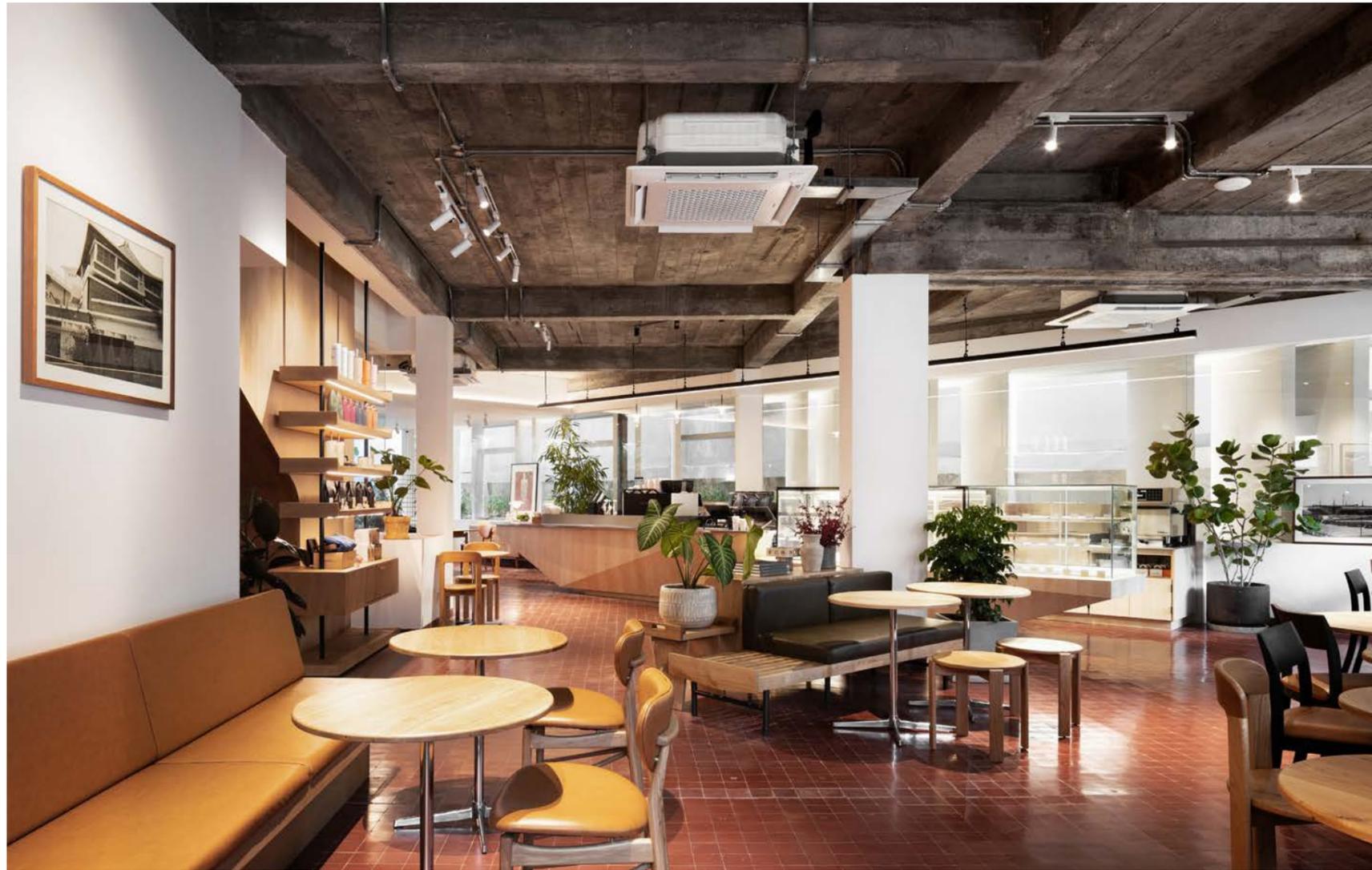
BEFORE: Apr 2025





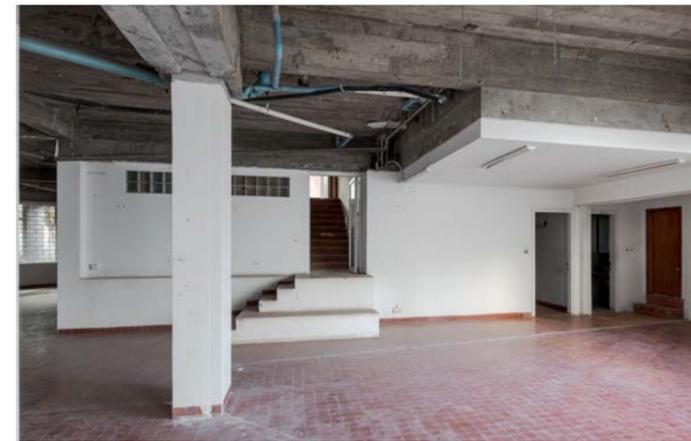
BROWN COFFEE

107 EX.179



Restoration focused primarily on addressing only structural repairs that posed long-term risks to the building, while carefully repainting steel railings and wooden handrails in their original tones, restoring the wooden ceilings, and replacing only damaged terracotta tiles to retain the authentic material character. The natural material façades were also carefully cleaned and treated to bring them back to shape—not to make them look new, but to preserve their integrity and visual coherence. All intrusive vegetation, including rooting plants that could compromise the structure in the future, was removed with sensitivity to prevent long-term damage. The original water drainage system—an integral part of Molyvann’s passive design—was also reinstated.

One of the most symbolic restoration moments was the brise-soleil. Altered by a former tenant during a commercial conversion, it was restored to its original form and proportion, returning the façade to its rightful architectural language.



ECHOES OF THE PAST

Many original features had been lost or modified, including steel-framed windows with ornamental grille screens, timber doors, and bathroom fittings. Through detailed photo analysis and spatial comparisons, these elements were either salvaged, restored, or replicated to closely match the originals.

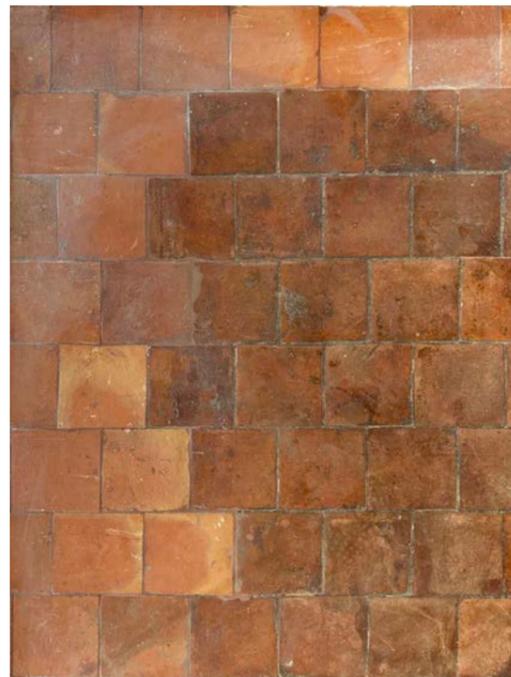
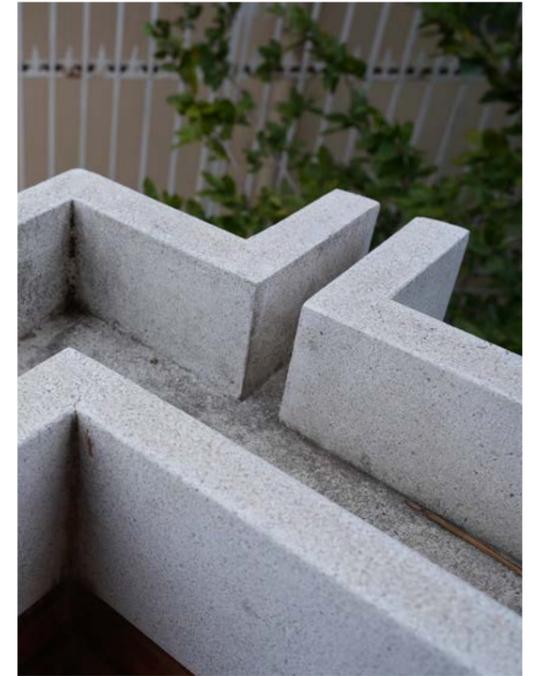
Through this meticulous process, the team maintained a singular focus: to preserve the house in the state closest to how Molyvann lived in it—not as a static monument, but as a quietly breathing presence.



BEFORE: 2024



AFTER: 2025



**TRACING MEMORY:
COLOR, TEXTURE, AND TIME.**



CRAFTING A JOURNEY THROUGH SPACE

The experience of the house begins with contrast: from one of Phnom Penh's bustling boulevards, visitors arrive at a softened edge. The brise-soleil gently screens the ground floor café from the street's noise and heat, offering both visual protection and a sense of anticipation. Entry is made through the original narrow wooden door—once the entrance to Vann Molyvann's architectural workshop—before gradually opening up to a frameless panoramic glass view of the garden.

This quiet reveal is carefully choreographed. The café volume gently hugs the brise-soleil, which becomes more than just a shading device; it serves as an effortless architectural backdrop that shapes the entire space. The backyard itself becomes a serene refuge from the city—an intimate outdoor space where visitors can sit and observe the building in stillness, allowing its architectural presence to unfold at their own pace.







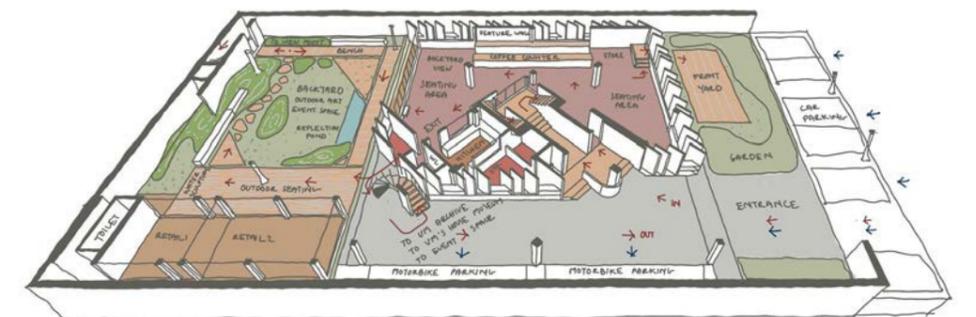
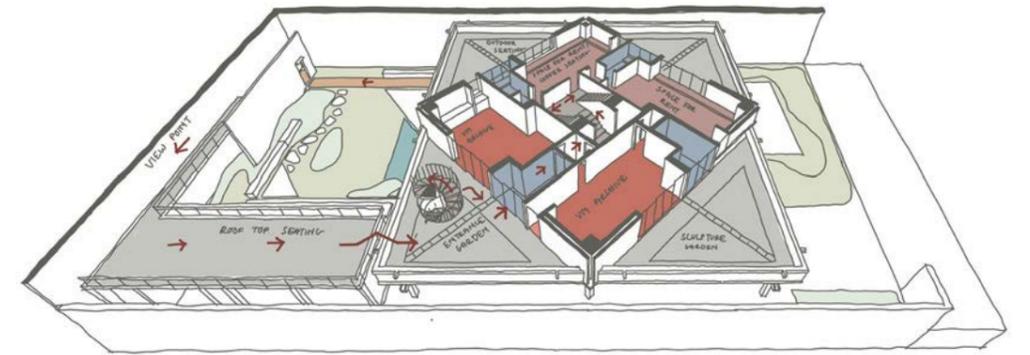
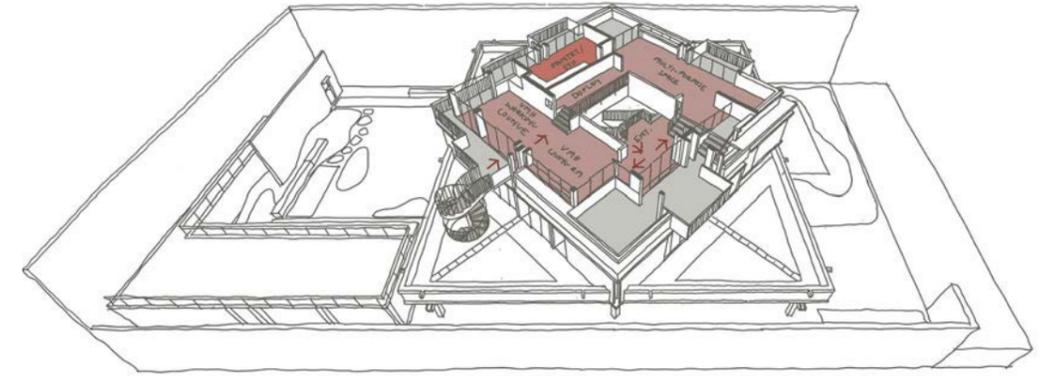
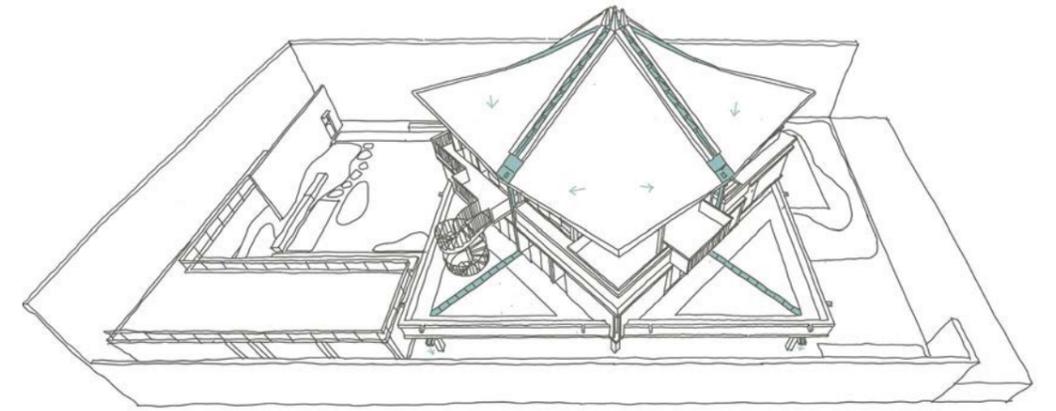






The design of the café honors Molyvann's spatial language through fractured geometries, open corners, and layered thresholds. Every line and surface pays homage to his restrained yet expressive sensibility. Materials and furnishings evoke the textures of the original home, elevated by refined contemporary interventions. Central to the spatial organization is the staircase, which Sir Vann Molyvann purposely designed to separate circulation flows: visitors to his atelier, private family movement, high-ranking official guests, and back-of-house activities. Over time, modifications had obscured this clarity, rendering the staircase dark, confusing, and devoid of its architectural value.

The restoration approach sought to return the staircase to its original sculptural form, transforming it into a visible and dynamic centerpiece within the café space. By revealing its clean lines and distinct circulation paths, the staircase now stands as a testament to Vann Molyvann's thoughtful design, enriching the spatial experience while maintaining functional clarity.





The former back-of-house area—once a functional service zone—has been thoughtfully reimagined to support the building's renewed public life. Its original layout was adapted to house a souvenir and art-and-design store showcasing works by young Cambodian artists, injecting new creative energy into the space while honoring its modest past at the architecture book reading corner. This retail and reading corner now act as a soft spatial link between the courtyard-view seating area and the former carport, which has been transformed into a welcoming entrance foyer and informal seating zone. These subtle but meaningful adjustments enhance the visitor journey and reinterpret the service spaces without compromising the architectural integrity of the original design.





A LIVING ARCHIVE, A SUSTAINABLE LEGACY

Though the café provides daily activation and funding, it is only one component of a much larger ambition. The primary goal was to create a sustainable model for preserving Cambodian modernist architecture—not as static heritage, but as an active contributor to the community.

Two first-floor bedrooms now serve as a Vann Molyvann archive and permanent exhibition, showcasing digitized materials donated by his family. To complement these resources, three architectural maquettes were commissioned by the Vann Molyvann Project to enrich the public's understanding of his legacy. One model depicts the house itself, helping visitors visualize its original form and comprehend its spatial logic during the visit. Another presents the Preah Suramarith National Theatre—a poetic cultural landmark tragically lost to fire and demolition—included here to memorialize one of Molyvann's most iconic yet vanished works. The third model features the RUPP Library, whose unique shape, inspired by the palm leaf hat worn by Cambodian farmers, has become symbolic of vernacular modernism. This very form inspired the landscape bench and the gently curved coffee counter in the café. In Khmer, the word for palm is 'Tnaot,' which also means 'brown,' weaving a quiet connection between the building's heritage and the identity of Brown Coffee. Here, architecture students, historians, and visitors can study his legacy in the very space where he once lived.

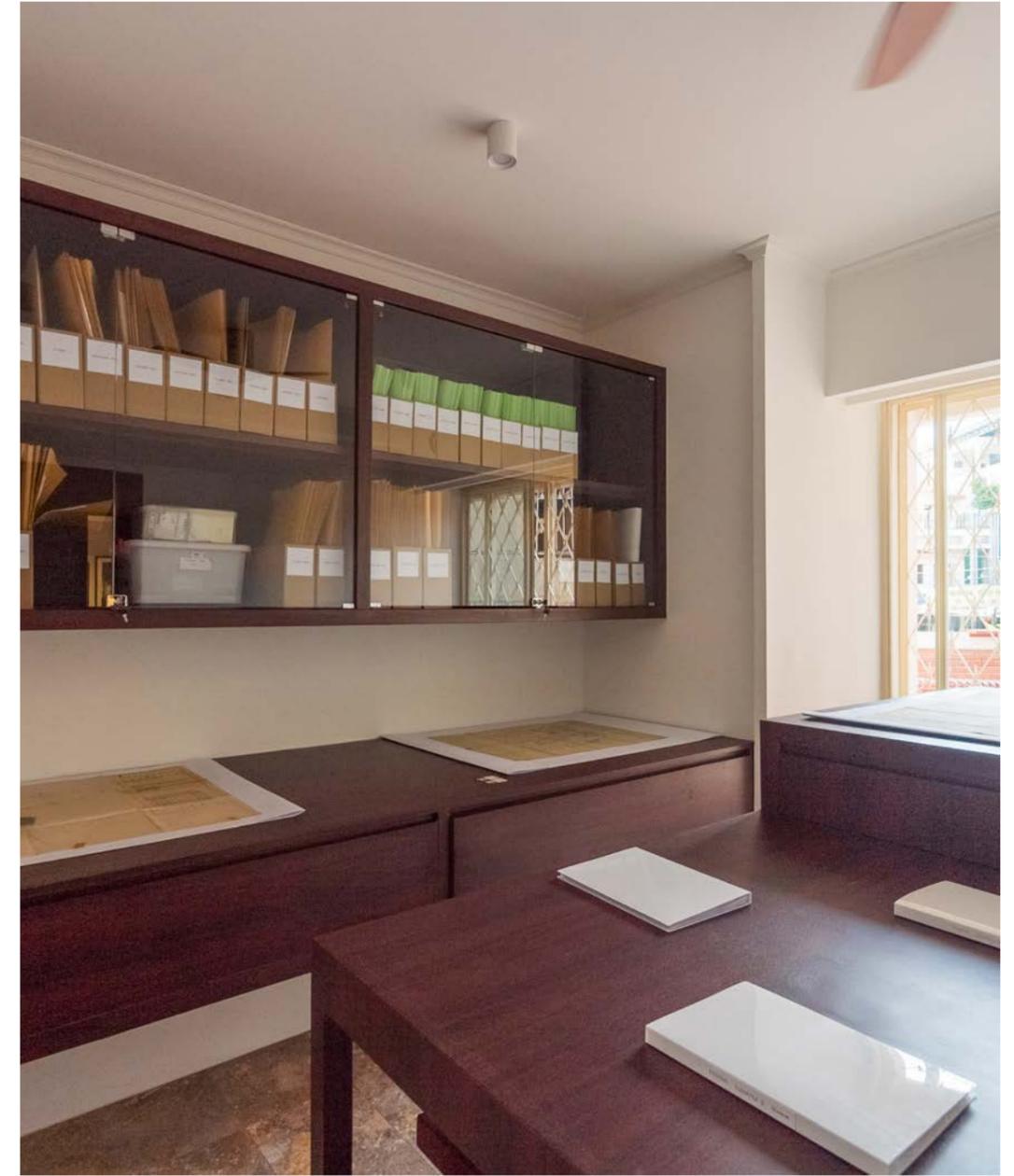




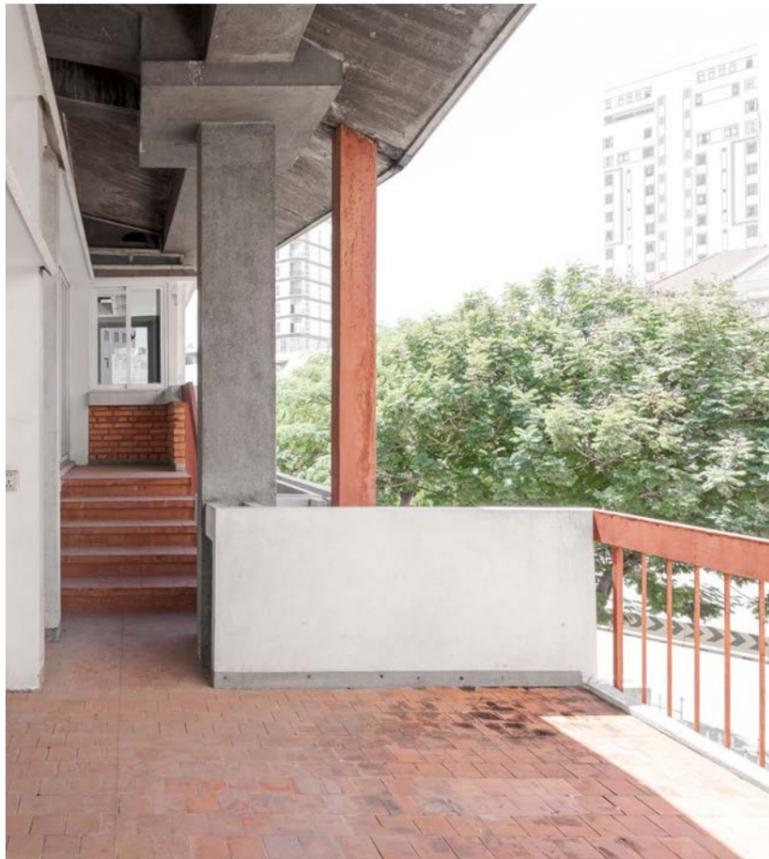
As a meaningful gesture, one of the original toilets connected to a bedroom was reconstructed using archival reference. The aim was not just to present architectural history through drawings, text, and photos, but to allow visitors to physically experience the spirit of the house—to step into its lived-in rhythms and feel its tactility.

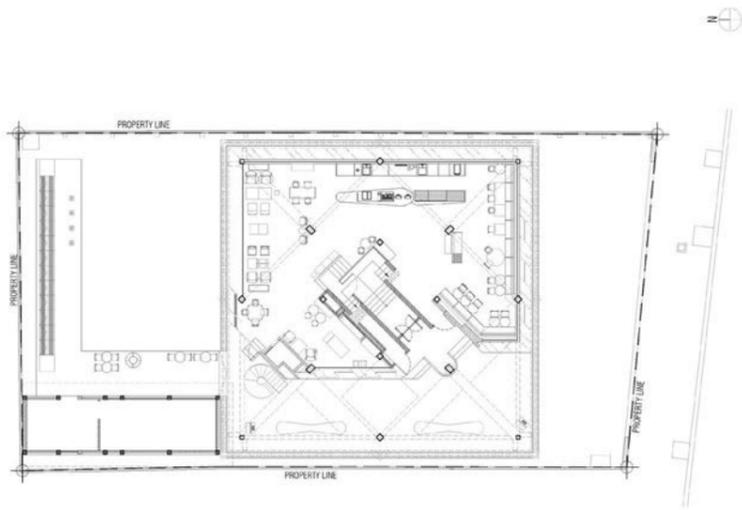
To further support long-term research and documentation, original architectural and personal documents lent by the Vann Molyvann family were scanned and archived digitally. High-quality printed reproductions of these materials are securely stored in a private research room within the house, not accessible to the general public. This archive provides scholars and students with an opportunity for deeper study into Molyvann's architectural thinking and legacy.

The top-floor atelier, preserved beneath its monumental, exposed timber ceiling, is now a flexible space for exhibitions, events, and gatherings. Other bedrooms have been transformed into heritage meeting rooms, while a small creative store supports young Cambodian designers through retail collaboration. Each of these new functions was considered not as an imposition, but as a continuation of the house's creative energy.

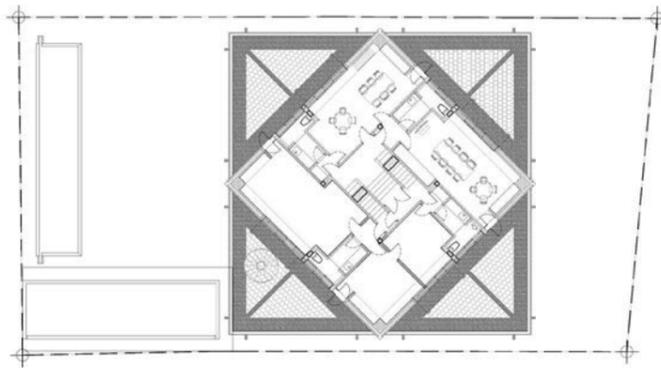




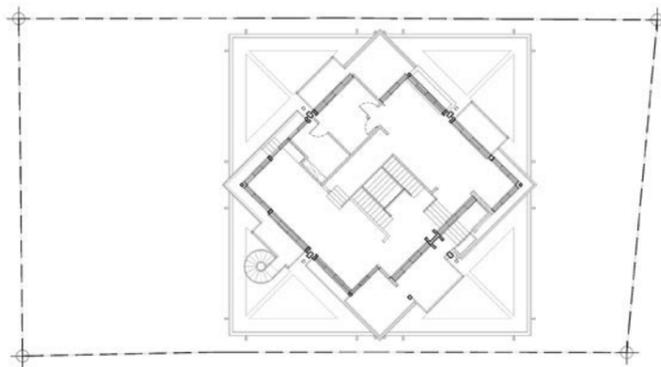




1. VM HOUSE
GROUND FLOOR PLAN

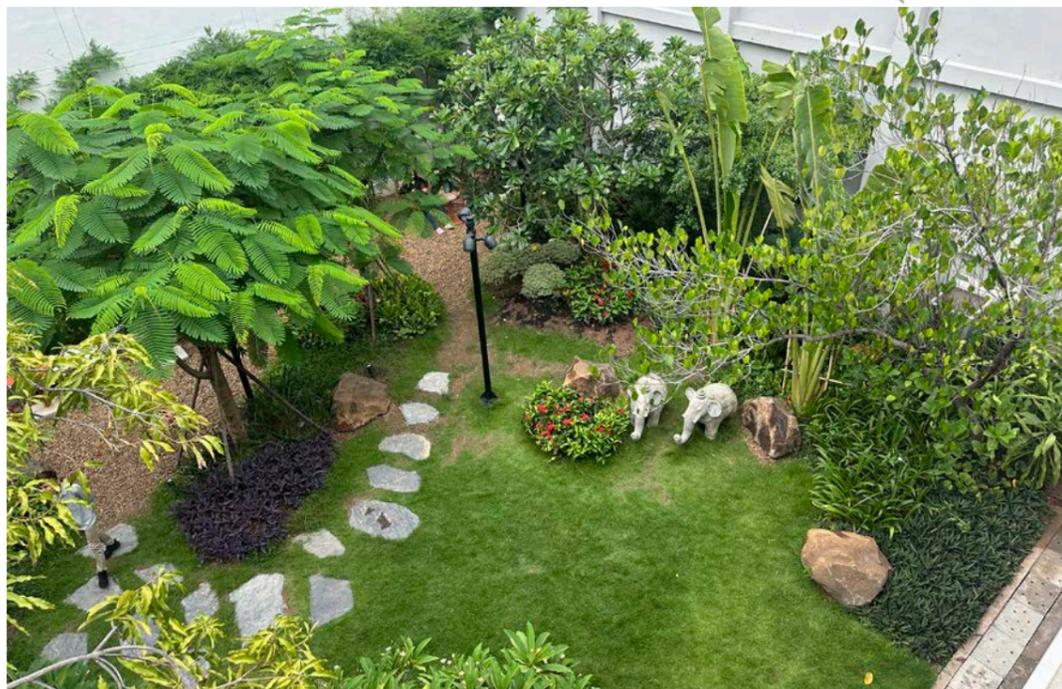
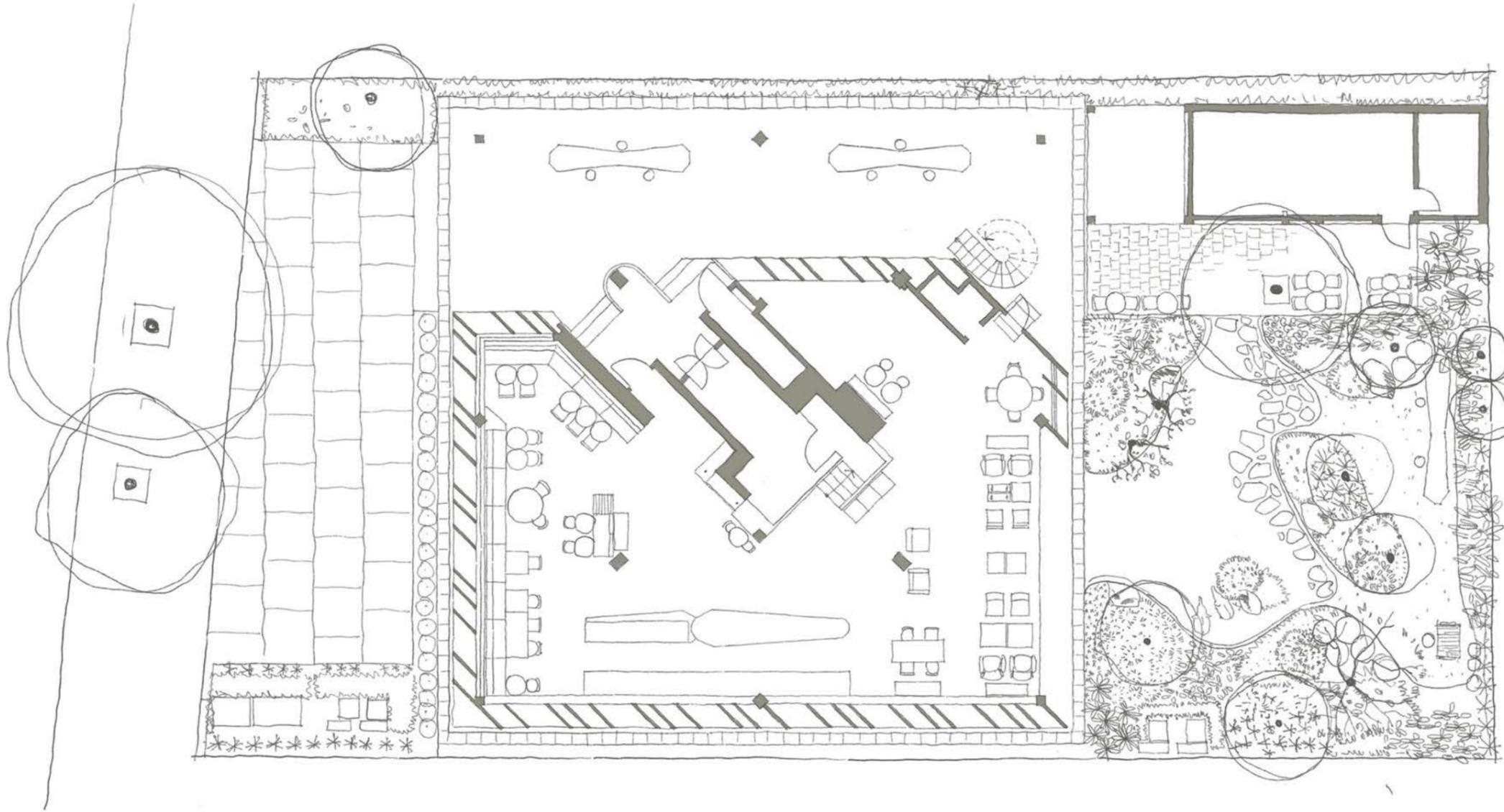


1. VM HOUSE
1ST & 2ND FLOOR PLAN



1. VM HOUSE
3RD & 4TH FLOOR PLAN





LANDSCAPE ROOTED IN MEMORY AND MEANING

The courtyard garden serves as the house's green heart. It was conceived not only as an open space, but as a cultural layer unto itself—a hybrid of Khmer and Japanese sensibilities. The Japanese influence reflects a personal detail: Molyvann's preference for tatami mats, one of which once lay in his master bedroom.

The plant selection draws inspiration from the tropical character of the French Embassy garden in Phnom Penh—a nostalgic, textured palette filled with native species popular in the 1960s. Many of the plants were chosen based on archival photographs of the house during Molyvann's time, reconnecting the present landscape with the emotional memory of its past. The result is a sensory space where architecture and planting feel inseparable—a lush, living extension of the house's soul.





**A BOTANICAL DIALOGUE
BETWEEN MEMORY
AND PLACE.**







ARCHITECTURE AS EVERYDAY LEGACY

In a city where development often overshadows preservation, the Brown x Vann Molyvann Living Heritage House offers a different vision: an architecture of continuity. By integrating cultural programming and careful spatial restoration, the house becomes a place of everyday interaction—where design is not only remembered, but re-experienced.

It also helps place Phnom Penh on the cultural map. By offering a meaningful, intimate heritage experience rooted in one of the country's most important modernist homes, the project positions the city as a destination of architectural and creative relevance—not just for scholars, but for travelers, locals, and the next generation of Cambodian thinkers.

This house is now more than a house. It is a sculpture, a seed, a shared memory. A living heritage for a new generation—and a quiet invitation to see Phnom Penh differently.



THE BROWN X VMV LIVING HERITAGE HOUSE

Architects: HKA & Partners

Site area: 924 sqm

Total GFA: 560 sqm

Number of storey: 4 Floors

Year: 2025

Lead architects & Design team: Hok Kang, Putchai Sam, Satya Seang

Client: Brown Coffee

Contractor: Metric Konstruct Co.,LTD

Photographers: Robert Kleiner, Gentry Hub, Litara (Jun) Ung, Putchai Sam

Location: Phnom Penh, Cambodia