I. Context

When “Cambodia” gets mentioned, it is often for one of two things - the magnificent Angkor Wat, the pride of our nation and one of the seven wonders of the world, or the Killing Fields, the remnant of the Khmer Rouge regime, representing the most devastating period in the history of the country. Cambodia is known for both its glorious and tumultuous past. This established notion continues to prevail into the present day, leading to instances of cultural conflict and dissonance within the Cambodian population. It represents the modern dichotomy between a painful past filled with glories and traumas of our ancestors as they define the cultural plane, and a pressuring present filled with the efforts of a newer generation of artists and creatives healing and connecting with the cultural plane on their own terms.

Peace does not automatically come because a conflict ends. It is the beginning of the peace that comes, and it is our duty to continue the momentum, creating spaces for seeds of peace to be sowed and for them to grow and spread. When I was younger, I always wondered why my parents instilled in me such fearful notions of my country, to the point of paranoia, like war was going to erupt at any moment and we cannot hope for a brighter future. Growing older, I learned about our tainted history, and why my parents were scared for my safety, my future, and my well-being, given what they experienced growing up during the Khmer Rouge Regime. I felt a strong urge to create a space for them, and others like them, to see the possibility of peace, and prosperity in our country, and to feel inspired to be Cambodians again. I hope to nurture such a space starting with the arts community in modern-day Cambodia. Due to the civil war, a lot of Cambodia’s cultural capital has been wiped out and our cultural narrative has become stagnant. How can we work towards peace sustainably if we cannot continue writing the story of our reconciliation with confidence and have the courage to imagine what our version of a peaceful future looks like?

Sowing the seeds of peace can start with creating a space for our nation’s storytellers, dreamers, artists, and creatives of all generations, to flourish once again and continue the cultural narrative of our country in harmony. I believe that arts and creativity can be powerful tools in connecting people from all backgrounds, especially to heal and rebuild what has been lost and to inspire peaceful efforts to sprout in other spaces too.

II. Summary

Project Artists of a Reconciled Cambodia (ARC) aims to provide a virtual platform and community for Cambodian contemporary artists and creatives to showcase their works as part of a diverse narrative continuing the story of Cambodia, healing and progressing towards a peaceful future. It will also function as a collective hub for these individuals to come together and create projects embodying these notions too. ARC also hopes to provide a space for informative panel discussions, webinars, and forums for both contemporary and traditional creatives to exchange new ideas and continue the intellectual discourse of what a reconciled Cambodia could contribute to its cultural identity and legacy.

This project hopes to provide an easily accessible virtual space that makes connecting easier and empowers Cambodian creatives through technological resources. It will be carried out through a mix of virtual and in-person efforts. I will be based in the U.S., which is where I am currently, and I will be coordinating and collaborating with Phare Ponleu Selpak, Impact Hub Phnom Penh, Wapatoa, and Software for Good, as well as several other individuals both located in the U.S. and Cambodia who will help me fulfill the goals of this project. By remaining in the U.S., I can locate more funds for the project, especially for supporting more Cambodian creatives to participate in this project.

III. Past Efforts

This project is a continuation of my efforts in the summer of 2021 when I received the Professor Roy F. Grow Fellowship funding from Carleton College to work on it. During that time, I was able to hone my technical skillset as well as establish my circle of connections of people and organizations with whom I could work and learn from.
First, I got in contact with an organization called Software for Good and became their software engineering apprentice, gaining useful software development skills and a better understanding of building digital platforms that empower people. I also made connections with technical mentors and supporters whom I can lean on for support and advice. With the knowledge I gained, I managed to create three iterations of the platform’s prototypes.

Next, I established a connection with Impact Hub in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and received membership from Impact Hub Minneapolis. The membership provided me access to a global community of like-minded people and mentors whom I met with weekly for advice on how to maximize the impact of my project. On top of that, I have existing connections in Cambodia, most prominently with a non-profit organization called Phare Ponleu Selpak, which supports young Cambodian artists and creatives, and Wapatoa, a small online publication working to empower Cambodian youth through highlighting our arts and culture.

I am choosing to work with these organizations, namely Impact Hub, Phare, and Wapatoa, for this project because I have worked with them in the past, both in summer 2021 and during my gap year in 2019 before coming to the U.S. and Carleton College. I have established strong connections through my work with them. I was a journalist for Wapatoa and spent 9 months creating articles and visual content in Khmer and English regarding arts and culture in modern-day Cambodia. Moreover, I was lucky enough to be the designated writer from Wapatoa to cover Phare’s Urban Art Festival in 2019, and that’s how I established connections with Osman Khawaja and Laura Fernandez, both prominent members of Phare.

Through them, I made connections with a diverse group of artists, gallerists, and art directors who all contribute vastly to the art community, which was critically damaged during the civil war. I was inspired by their missions and motivated to use my knowledge, skillset, and experiences to support this movement towards creating a more peaceful, vibrant, and reconciled Cambodia.

IV. Plan of Action

1. Creating the Community (Week 1–Week 4)

Goal: Compile an online accessible database of at least a hundred current artists from all over Cambodia.

Plan: I will reach out to my connections from Phare and Wapatoa as well as other organizations and individuals to help me figure out what information I can collect, how I can do it, and how to best present them. My approach includes creating a data submission form, available online and on paper, and providing them to key collaborators in different organizations so that they can help me gain proper consent from these artists to submit their contact information to the database. Once there is a formidable number of artists in the database, I can start reaching out to tell them more about the project and gauge their level of interest and possible involvement. This will help me better understand different exhibition themes and topics that could be engaging for the artists and worthwhile to consider.

This idea emerged from a discussion with the Executive Director of Phare, Osman Khawaja, who talked with me about the lack of connection between pre-existing creative hubs and how it hinders artists from gaining a stronger support system and a bigger presence in society.

2. Creating Exhibition Contents (Week 4–Week 9)

Goal: Form a potential group of artists whom I can collaborate with for the first exhibition and work with them to develop a series of themes and topics relating to several versions of a reconciled Cambodia.

Plan: Together, we will explore how some of these topics can work together to create an engaging narrative for the exhibition. The topics that will not be featured in this first exhibition will be queued for consideration in future exhibitions. Once the exhibition’s overall theme has been decided, the artists and I will discuss what kinds of works they’d like to present, and what kinds of support they would need to
make it happen in a compatible format with the online nature of the exhibition. Then, they will begin working individually and/or collaboratively to create these works.

I will be working together with Laura Fernandez to facilitate discussions and keep track of the artists' experiences and progress. Laura has expressed great interest in helping with this project. She currently lives in Battambang, Cambodia, and has great experience working with artists and organizing and managing art events and festivals.

3. Displaying the Contents (Week 9–Week 12)

Goal: Build a functioning virtual gallery platform to host the exhibition content.

Plan: With the remaining time, I will continue working with Phare and Software for Good to finalize the online content and conduct user-testing sessions in preparation for soft launching it to the public. While the artists are creating exhibition content, I will also be in contact with Phare and Software for Good to start the process of developing and creating a secure online platform to host these exhibition viewings and promote the events to attract more audiences, especially curious artists, and creatives. I will act as a liaison between the two organizations and facilitate a meeting with software developers from Software for Good and art directors from Phare.

V. Expected Outcome & Prospects

Each phase has a respective goal and a plan of action to achieve it. To further monitor progress, I will have a group of 3-5 individuals from the respective organizations and myself who will facilitate check-in sessions with participating artists and parties weekly and at the end of each phase to make sure artists feel supported and to manage expectations between artists and the supporting organizations, Phare, Impact Hub, and/or Software for Good.

I recognize that the project is ambitious, and I also believe it is doable. At the end of the 12 weeks, I expect a functional platform open to the public that can grow without my direct involvement, and that more like-minded people can get involved with and sustain in the future. I have faith that ARC will continue to be a supportive space for passionate Cambodian creatives to work together and reimagine a more peaceful and vibrant Cambodia.