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Inside a Cambodian building, a feeling

Kerri MacDonald

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It's not that Carlotta Zarattini can't explain why she wanted so badly to photograph a dilapidated marvel of 1960s architecture in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, known as the White Building. It's just that she has trouble putting it into words. It's more of a feeling.

The first time she saw the building was in August of 2005. It had been raining and it was getting dark. Carrying a Leica that had belonged to her grandmother, Ms. Zarattini, who was then only tinkering with the notion of becoming a photographer, went inside the building with a friend, a video journalist. They met with residents, and learned that the building was in danger of being torn down.

As a student of Italian literature and history in Bologna, Ms. Zarattini, 25, did her thesis on Cambodia. She focused on the reign of the Khmer Rouge regime, during which 1.7 million people were killed or died from torture, disease, overwork and starvation. She wanted to examine the psychology behind human actions.

She didn't focus on the White Building in her studies. But she didn't forget about it, either.

"I think that was the moment that I realized that I wanted to be a photographer," she said a couple of weeks ago in New York, "that I wanted to be able to tell this story."

The White Building was developed as housing for civil servants in the Ministry of Culture. More than 400 apartments were divided into six blocks, each with three or four floors, all connected with open staircases. During the rule of the Khmer Rouge, from 1975 to 1979, the people and businesses who had been housed there were forced to leave.

The people who returned, often in small groups, needed a place to stay in a city that had been abandoned for years, its streets and buildings emptied; its history quietly erased.

Ms. Zarattini, who graduated from the International Center of Photography in 2010 and plans to move back to Italy from New York this summer, recently spent five weeks photographing in and around the building. She plans to return in November.

Many of the people she has met so far had never before spoken about the Khmer Rouge rule — or if they had, no more than a few times. An entire generation of children didn't learn about it in school. Ms. Zarattini thought of her grandparents, who lived through the Second World War. "It's something that you talk about," she said. "In Cambodia, this

didn't happen. After the war, people got back to the cities and it's like they act as if nothing happened."

She was interested in their anger, in how difficult it is for them to talk about what they lived through. She sees the White Building as a metaphor for Cambodia. "They still have it in their eyes," she said. "They are stuck in that building and they cannot get out. It's more like a state of mind."

While Ms. Zarattini is interested in the people, she isn't interested in them *photographically*. What draws her eye is the building itself. It is a state of mind; a poem.

"There's a love story between me and this building," she said. "Let's understand why, after five years, I'm still interested in this place; why this place is so stuck in my mind."