

# The framing and representation of cultural heritage

Colonial narratives of urban development, centered on cities like Saigon, Hanoi and Phnom Penh, and those of restoration and conservation, centered especially on Angkor as well as Luang Prabang and Vientiane, framed issues of heritage by underlining the “civilising mission” in bringing progress and protecting local cultures. Yet imperial rivalry and the exploitation of colonial possessions also provided a major impetus for the classification of monuments and historical sites.

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POSTCOLONIAL CONSTRUCTIONS of national identities and histories, and economic development and globalization, have significantly changed heritage issues. In tracing the evolution of perspectives regarding heritage, this article treats a range of architectural types, such as religious, monumental, residential and commercial types, and underlines the need to understand and protect intangible heritage and urban historical heritage in a broad sense.

## Early phase of colonisation

During the early phase of French colonisation of Cochinchina (a small portion of southern Vietnam) and Cambodia from the 1860s onwards, several perspectives emerged, which were later to be articulated as heritage issues.

First, perceptions of local culture were framed by narratives of colonial conquest and urban development. Saigon, seen as an unimpressive town, was to be a European city, and much of the local architecture rapidly disappeared from the area. The French news magazine *L'illustration* reported in 1864 that European architecture was taking over in Saigon, and that most of the pagodas had disappeared.<sup>1</sup> Thus, concerns about the disappearance of local architecture, seen as fragile, were expressed within the narrative of development.

Cholon, the Chinese commercial city and a busy port next to Saigon, was to remain a “native” city; indeed throughout the colonial period Cholon was a dynamic economic centre. The French saw Chinese architecture as superior to the “Annamese” (Vietnamese) equivalent, seen to be subordinate to and influenced by the former. *L'illustration* praised Chinese temples in Cholon as worthy of a city that used to count 100,000 inhabitants. At the same time another framework, a hierarchy among European, Chinese and Annamese cultures, was established in respect of artistic qualities and directions of cultural influence.

The appreciation of local culture was largely the purview of the Ecole Française de l'Extrême Orient (EFEO), which was established in 1898 in Hanoi, for study, classification and potential conservation. Local culture was all too often sidelined in the process of colonisation. When the French established the protectorate of Tonkin (northern Vietnam) in the 1880s, although they were aware of Hanoi's long history, the Imperial Citadel, re-constructed in the early 19th century, was virtually destroyed, and the Bao Thien pagoda, one of the most significant ancient Buddhist sacred structures, was demolished to make way for the St. Joseph Cathedral.<sup>2</sup>

Both in Saigon and Hanoi – which became the capital of the Indochina Union – imperial prestige and authority were to be manifested through landmark buildings in the beaux-arts style. The European sector of Hanoi, laid out along wide boulevards below the ancient city, would be filled with French villas and gardens for colonial administration, residences, commerce and leisure. The Municipal Theatre of Saigon (figure 1) was rivaled by “the Theatre” of Hanoi emulating the Opéra Garnier of Paris, and grand hotels were built. Indeed, European-style buildings were not exclusively built by and for Europeans. The Vietnamese middle class which eventually rose, and the wealthy Chinese in Cholon, possessed degrees of agency in creating the urban environment; many French-style buildings in Saigon-Cholon were built by the Chinese.<sup>3</sup>

The European district in Phnom Penh also showcased “modern” – neo-classical – architecture. By 1890, Phnom Penh was divided into three districts: below the European district was a Chinese one – the commercial centre and the only densely populated area – below which lay a Cambodian district around the Royal Palace. A Vietnamese district was added to the west.<sup>4</sup> The presence of the royal court provided crucial symbolic and ritual significance, and Buddhist temples and monasteries were important urban sites. In Phnom Penh narratives of development and colonial prestige were thus juxtaposed to those of the renewal of Khmer court and religious architecture. However, little effort was made to protect local architecture; in particular, wooden architecture which was virtually ignored by colonial scholarship.<sup>5</sup>

While accessing local culture was far from a prime motive for the establishment of French Indochina, accessing Angkor, known in Europe from the 1860s, was a crucial exception. Admired as marvels rivalling Egyptian monuments, and viewed as the “ruins” of a bygone civilization and race,<sup>6</sup> narratives about Angkor's monuments were interwoven into the politics of imperial rivalry and the civilising mission, although Angkor did not come under French control until 1907.<sup>7</sup> The monuments of Angkor in Cambodia and of Champa in present-day central Vietnam influenced EFEO to preserve certain monuments in Hanoi and elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Although Vietnam always had pride of place within French Indochina, Angkor was the centre of cultural prestige and tourism. The first lists of historical monuments of Indochina, produced in 1901, established a hierarchy of heritage among the different areas of French Indochina.<sup>9</sup> Only four temples in Vientiane and monuments and objects in five Lao villages were included, as Laos was not regarded by the French as an ancient kingdom worthy of being preserved.<sup>10</sup>

Above:  
Mansion of the  
Résident Supérieur  
(Presidential Palace),  
Vientiane. Author's  
photograph.

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## The advent of “Indochinese culture” and the “Indochinese style”

After the turn of the century, urban development continued to be the primary framework for cultural heritage in Saigon-Cholon and Hanoi. While colonial administrators, following precedents set by Vietnamese kings, protected certain sites such as the Temple of Literature in Hanoi, the differences between the French sense of historical monuments and Vietnamese conceptions also led to the loss of certain types of heritage.<sup>11</sup> The French viewed Saigon and Hanoi as pleasant, “modern” cities in which “the Far East is mixed with the Provence”.<sup>12</sup> Colonial-era urban planners showed little sensitivity for the need to conserve local architecture. The French architect Ernest Hébrard, who became the first director of the Central Service of Architecture and Urban Planning in 1923 and who was commissioned to design plans for Hanoi, Saigon-Cholon, Haiphong, Phnom Penh and Dalat, juxtaposed the “old cities” of Indochina with “new” cities, seen as a terrain for modern development.<sup>13</sup> However, he was also the architect at the forefront of developing the “Indochinese style” which integrated Asian elements: Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Khmer, Vietnamese, Siamese and so forth.<sup>14</sup> For inspiration he looked first towards Chinese models, starting with the Imperial Palace of the Forbidden City in Beijing.<sup>15</sup> His buildings, the Indochinese University (1927) and the Louis Finot Museum (1932), are in mixed styles.

The “Indochinese style” was not one cohesive style but an eclectic mix, paralleling the vague and speculative definitions of the designation *Indo-chine* itself, which arose in the early 19th century because this region was seen as having been heavily influenced by Indian or Chinese cultures. An earlier example of what could be considered a “hybrid” style was the Indochina pavilion at the Franco-British Exposition in London held in 1908. Designed by L. Siffert, it combined Siamese, Vietnamese, Khmer and European traits.<sup>16</sup> Georges Groslier's Albert Sarraut Museum (National Museum) in Phnom Penh (1920) incorporated Angkorian and European elements.<sup>17</sup>

The invention of the “Indochinese style” was part of the emergence of an “Indochinese” identity which by the 1930s had become more concrete, not only from the colonial perspective but also from that of many Vietnamese, who staffed much of the colonial administrations in Cambodia and Laos.<sup>18</sup> The sense of heritage as exploitable properties also motivated the promotion of *Indo-chine* within French Indochina and abroad as possessing numerous cultural attractions such as the ancient imperial capital Hue, as well as natural heritage such as Halong Bay. Angkor was from early on integrated into plans for developing tourism and was designated as “Angkor Park” from the 1920s.<sup>19</sup> Colonial-era designations of tourist routes such as the “grand circuit” and “small circuit” are still used today.

Postcolonial framing of urban historical heritage In the postcolonial era diverse narratives of national and regional heritage led both to the evolution of the meanings of cultural heritage, which includes archeological sites, ancient monuments, colonial-era architecture, post-colonial architecture, and to the inclusion of elements that were left out of the frameworks of the colonial period.

## Phnom Penh

The golden age of Phnom Penh's urban development began in 1953 with independence. Until 1970, city planners and architects embraced the modern movement adapted to the Khmer context, designing universities, ministries, a sports complex, and gardens. Since the 1980s the city has undergone rapid changes, and since the 1990s the pressures of economic expansion and speculative real-estate development, and the absence of regulation regarding constructions or demolitions, particularly threaten architectural heritage. The meaning of urban heritage has been transformed and includes not only archaeological sites and older monuments but also wooden architecture as well as modern architecture built in the 1950s and 60s.<sup>20</sup> Wooden architecture, a major trait of Cambodian culture since ancient times that once filled Angkor, has been disappearing, although much that was built in the late 19th and 20th centuries is still visible.<sup>21</sup>

Phnom Penh's shophouses, built mainly by the Chinese from the 1870s onwards, testify to the city's diverse legacy. By the early 20th century half of Phnom Penh's population was Chinese.<sup>22</sup> The Cambodian law of 1996 on the protection of cultural heritage includes urban historical heritage. However, application of the law is difficult, given the challenge of regulation and the obscure diffusion of responsibilities into various government authorities.<sup>23</sup> In 2005 the Heritage Mission was created by the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts and the French Embassy, in order to classify and protect non-Angkorian architectural sites. Colonial architecture and modern architecture are particularly threatened because of the large lots they are situated on.



# In French Indochina and contemporary Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos

## Hanoi

In postcolonial Hanoi conflicting national historical narratives and identities have complicated heritage issues. The Ancient Quarter—the economic centre—has maintained its formal and social configurations through the colonial period despite extensive changes in social and commercial relations.<sup>24</sup> Since economic liberalization began in Vietnam in 1986, in spite of plans for preserving the historic ambiance of the Ancient Quarter marked by the proximity of living and working, and the coexistence of handicraft, wholesale and retail, it has been in an increasingly critical position. Many of this quarter's tube houses—divided into bays for commerce, storage, courtyard, living quarters and kitchen—have disappeared.<sup>25</sup> Overpopulated, the inhabitable space per person is sometimes less than 2.2 m<sup>2</sup>.<sup>26</sup> Throughout the 1990s, many of the streets retained their specific trades, such as metal work or Buddhist paraphernalia. However, economic revitalization and the flow of global tourism has led to the wholesale conversion of living space into commercial space.<sup>27</sup>

The “French Quarter” of Hanoi is also threatened by the pressures of economic change, real estate development and population growth, due to its central location. Villas sit on large lots which make them particularly vulnerable to development. From the 1960s up to the 1980s, French colonial architectural legacy was often overlooked and criticized. Nguyen Quang Nhac and Nguyen Nang Dac in *Vietnamese Architecture* (1971), published by the Vietnam Council on Foreign Relations of the South Vietnamese government, called the style of colonial public buildings “pseudo-classical”, underlining its conservative and imitative qualities, and praised the later fusion style. The authors also noted that the Vietnamese had to learn to appreciate their own heritage, suggesting that a sense of pride in Vietnamese heritage eroded under the colonial regime.<sup>28</sup>

The passage of time has made it easier to attempt to conserve colonial-era buildings, many of which fell into decrepit states. Recent joint efforts by scholars, architects, local and international administrators as well as residents to preserve French villas have seen some success. Đào Ngọc Nghiêm, former director of the Service of Urban Planning of Hanoi, notes that the more real estate value rises, the more questions linked to the utilisation of the villas become complex, while the buildings continue to deteriorate. In 2008 about 80% of the 970 villas of Hanoi belonging to the state were occupied partly illegally and had undergone modifications. About 50% of the villas were occupied by 5 to 10 households, and in some cases up to 50 households lived in a single villa.<sup>29</sup> In 2009, after 536 villas belonging to the state were sold, city authorities decided to preserve 46 villas as a cultural feature of the city, after the municipal People's Council highlighted the need to maintain the city's distinctive cultural features.<sup>30</sup>

## Luang Prabang

Laos has also undergone a series of changes regarding cultural heritage since gaining independence in 1954. The designation of Luang Prabang—the former capital of the kingdom of Lang Xang—as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1995 had significant political resonance. The interpretation of Luang Prabang's cultural significance by UNESCO and the Lao government allowed the latter to construct and promote a simplified narrative about a unified Lao national identity, belying ethnic complexity and fragmentation.<sup>31</sup> The UNESCO designation led to economic development through tourism, on which the government heavily relies.<sup>32</sup> This has led to the commodification of the physical environment, paradoxically eroding the everyday life and experience of local residents, as the city has undergone a transformation into an environment built mainly for tourism.<sup>33</sup> In addition, although Luang Prabang's heritage includes a “fusion of traditional architecture and Lao urban structures” with colonial-era structures,<sup>34</sup> the re-telling of Lao national history privileges Lao religious architecture. Non-monumental colonial-era buildings (fig. 2)—many in mixed styles—outside the protected area are potentially vulnerable to re-development.

## Vientiane

Vientiane, the administrative capital of French Laos, in 1902 consisted of about a hundred Laotian huts, some Chinese shops and a few pagodas in ruins.<sup>35</sup> A beaux-arts mansion (figure 3) of the Résident Supérieur claimed a major part of the local budget. The population only reached 10,000 in the late 1930s.<sup>36</sup> Although colonial Laos was only a fragment of the former Lao kingdom, the French claimed to “restore” the ancient city of Vientiane, destroyed by the Siamese in 1827, of which the “ruins attest a great past”.<sup>37</sup> Laos was marginal in the listing of monuments in Indochina; in 1930 only 13 structures in Vientiane were included. But the colonial government claimed that great progress was made in the conservation and restoration of archeological sites and structures.<sup>38</sup> The colonial civil service was increasingly staffed by the Vietnamese, and trading and shops run by Vietnamese and Chinese, so that by the late 1930s Laotians were in the minority.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, the “Indochinese” identity being promoted was often perceived to be a threat to Laotians.



**Top:**  
Municipal Theater,  
Saigon, designed by  
Eugène Ferret, 1897.  
Author's photograph.

**Below:**  
A house in Luang  
Prabang. Author's  
photograph.

Today critical issues in Vientiane concern the heritage of both the pre-modern period and the colonial period. In contrast to Luang Prabang which is seen as the site of Lao heritage, the government views Vientiane as a site for modernization.<sup>40</sup> A tranquil, small city which fascinates visitors with its laidback riverside atmosphere and an improbable concentration of national and cosmopolitan institutions as well as pagodas, monuments and colonial buildings, Vientiane is now undergoing dramatic urban development. The government's decree issued in 1997 on the preservation of cultural, historical and natural heritage, reflecting the desire to use heritage to encourage patriotism and nationalism, was ironically violated by the government itself when some of the last remnants of the foundations of the city wall dating back to the 14th century, as well as several colonial buildings, were destroyed.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

French colonisers' view of Hanoi, Saigon and Phnom Penh as modern cities ironically led to the opinion that local culture was in need of “protection”. However, efforts at such protection were often half-hearted, since apart from Angkorian and Cham monuments local culture received uneven attention, in spite of EFEO's work. The narrative of “discovery”, restoration and conservation distanced modern, dynamic European culture from Asian culture—Khmer culture in particular was seen as being in “ruins”—and provided the motivation for turning French Indochina into a tourist destination.

Elements of heritage neglected under the colonial regime, such as wooden architecture, shop houses, tube houses and the great number of minor religious structures and dwellings, have only recently been highlighted. The erosion of everyday rituals, overall ambiance and lived experiences in Luang Prabang and in the Ancient Quarter of Hanoi point to a critical need for protecting intangible heritage and broader urban historical heritage. As French Indochina ultimately remained a modern construct with limited success in forging an identity, notions of “Indochinese culture” today resonate with exoticism and nostalgia, but also pragmatically refer to “fusion” styles. Whether in beaux-arts, fusion or more modern styles, colonial architecture, in addition to ancient heritage, is threatened by global dynamics and the powerful allure of the new “modern”—contemporary postmodern architecture providing clean, comfortable and stylish built environments.

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## Notes

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- 6 “The Ruined temples of Cambodia,” *The Illustrated London News*, 1 February 1868, p. 118.
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- 9 Mangin, *Le Patrimoine indo-chinois*, p. 163.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 163; Martin Stuart-Fox, “The French in Laos, 1887-1945,” *Modern Asian Studies* (1995), pp. 111-139: 111.
- 11 Mangin. *Le Patrimoine indo-chinois*, pp. 23, 15.
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