

Drafting and implementing urban heritage preservation policies

After decades of war and destruction, followed by the reunification of the country in 1976, the new Socialist Republic of Vietnam gave right of way to social and economic reconstruction and development. Architectural and urban heritage preservation did not appear as a priority *de facto*. However, in 1984 a first decree related to the preservation of historical and cultural relics was issued. This first step was followed during the 1990s by a broad inventory, led by the Ministry of Culture, to identify Vietnam's heritage throughout the country. Eventually, the first law regarding cultural heritage was adopted in 2001 to protect monuments, notably in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). Through these key stages, the increasing interest for architectural and urban heritage matched the new urban dynamics that took place, namely the metropolisation process and the development of tourism. On the one hand, metropolisation implies the increase of private investments that contribute to reshaping the urban landscape. On the other hand, the development of the tourism industry pushed the authorities to think of ways to value places of interest, in order to attract visitors. These trends constitute a first step towards urban heritage thinking.

Clément Musil



TODAY, THE OUTCOMES of the heritage preservation policies are, however, contrasted between Hanoi and HCMC. Though both cities have urban heritage assets to value, especially traditional, religious and colonial heritage, the capital city Hanoi has received much more attention from the Government. The trailing situation in HCMC allows for the exploration of what urban heritage in Vietnam is today, and how to consider and preserve it. To address these issues, this paper gives three different stakeholders concerned by urban heritage policies in HCMC the opportunity to deliver their viewpoint.

The viewpoint of an international cooperation stakeholder
Fanny Quertamp (Co-director of PADDI-HCM City Urban Development Management Support Centre),¹ interviewed by Clément Musil.

In 2010, UNESCO inscribed Hanoi's Imperial Citadel on its World Heritage list. Prior to that, numerous international organisations, namely Japanese and French bilateral cooperations, and especially the French decentralised cooperation of the city of Toulouse and the Île-de-France Region (Paris metropolitan area), had conducted joint projects with the Hanoi authorities to identify and preserve remarkable architecture and specific neighbourhoods. In HCMC, however, no international institutional organisations besides your own (PADDI) are engaged in the urban heritage field. How do you explain the singular position of your institute?

Originally, the cooperation between the Lyon metropolitan area, Rhône-Alpes Region (France) and HCMC, of which PADDI is today an operational instrument, started in the early 1990s and was initiated by urban heritage issues. At that time, the Lyon metropolitan area was providing technical support to the city to launch its first heritage inventory. Further to a request from HCMC's technical departments, and since 2010, PADDI provides specific expertise concerning inventory methods as well as the drawing up of urban heritage preservation policies and tools.

There are great differences between Hanoi, Huế, and Hội An on one hand, and HCMC on the other, regarding their historical and architectural heritage. There are also differences concerning the measures adopted by the central and the local governments to preserve urban heritage. Hanoi is the capital of the country with a broad history; the city celebrated its millennium in 2010. Huế was the imperial capital of the Nguyễn dynasty from the early 19th century and Hội An is a harbour that foreign sailors have visited since the 17th century. The urban fabric of these cities has been shaped by their administrative and political functions and also by external influences that they absorbed.

HCMC, which was renamed after the reunification and was initially composed of two urban cores, namely Saigon

and Cholon, started to see urban settlement in the late 18th century. This is why HCMC is today considered to be a young city that welcomed several waves of migration, notably during the Indochina and Vietnam wars (refugees) and nowadays (workers), and is seen as a melting pot with a plural identity. Unlike Hanoi, HCMC cannot claim to have a consistent urban heritage area as the *phố cổ* (old quarter). The old quarter of Hanoi receives particular attention from the Government for being part of the urban heritage that is considered purely Vietnamese without any foreign influence and thus contributes to shaping a national identity. By contrast, HCMC is seen more as a city dedicated to the country's economic development. Its metropolitan area is today the main economic engine of the country as well as the gateway for Foreign Direct Investments. Moreover, its architectural and urban heritage is fragmented and spread out across the urban territory, and the city does not have a vast heritage area or any major iconic cultural buildings.

During the 1990s, HCMC compiled its inventory list as other cities did. Monuments, historical and architectural sites were identified, including buildings inherited from the colonial period. In other cities, however, such inventories led to the adoption of concrete measures (e.g., in 1996, Hanoi approved a preservation plan for the Hoàn Kiếm Lake area and in 1998 the Old Quarter Management Office was created), while in HCMC listed buildings were approved only occasionally (e.g., pagodas and monumental public buildings). Until today, the main target of the authorities is to develop HCMC as an economic hub. However, internally, within the municipal departments, urban heritage becomes an insistent question of debate: how to combine urban and architectural preservation while the economy is booming? Today, those departments do not have any clear and detailed regulation at their disposal to preserve urban heritage, whereas it is disappearing increasingly. This preoccupation was recently put to the forefront of public debate because of the demolition of iconic buildings like the Eden Quarter and several villas inherited from the colonial period, with currently more villas severely threatened by demolition.

Often it is stressed that there is a gap between western and eastern consideration regarding urban heritage. In this field in particular, do your local partners share the same values as you?

Actually, our concern is mostly to support our partners in the implementation of their tasks. Today, on their part, there is a real shift from a cultural and monumental approach to heritage, to a more urban approach. This is particularly a consequence of the involvement of different institutional partners. This shift is promising with regard to the preservation of buildings as well as authentic neighbourhoods. Among our partners, the Department of Culture, for instance, has a 'monumental' approach to urban heritage. It isolates the

Located at 190 Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai Street, this villa in a dilapidated state is sandwiched between two towers (photo by Clément Musil).

building's historic and aesthetic value without considering its surroundings and the dialogue that a building has with its urban environment. In 2009, however, the city approved a decision to produce a revised inventory of existing villas built before 1975, putting the Department of Urban Planning and Architecture in charge. This Department pushes to refine the concept of heritage, going beyond the building and its monumentality, and focusing on the relationship with the urban environment. Today, it is precisely in this aspect that PADDI assists the Department, notably to support the development of a methodology of the inventory work.

Currently, it is a major challenge to overcome the 'monumental' heritage approach. The value of a monument is not only linked to its history and its authenticity, but also to its contribution to the urban identity. In addition, there is a real preoccupation concerning a wide acceptance about heritage such as urban landscapes, or urban infrastructure such as canals and river banks. Adopting a broader sense of urban heritage is also in line with the definitions set by UNESCO in 2011 regarding historic urban landscape.

Although there is real effort and willingness to give meaning to the urban heritage as a whole, local authorities lack the tools to assess, define, classify and regulate urban heritage. PADDI is today supporting the authorities in developing new inventory tools, which will enable them to adopt new and more comprehensive regulations to preserve architectural and urban heritage in HCMC.

The viewpoint of a local expert

Nguyễn Trọng Hòa (High-ranking official from Ho Chi Minh City, former director of the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning and former director of the HIDS-Ho Chi Minh City Institute for Development Studies), interviewed by Clément Musil and translated by Đỗ Phương Thúy.

In the context of Ho Chi Minh City's rapid urbanisation, what does the notion of urban heritage mean for the municipality?

Whereas Ho Chi Minh City and other cities in Vietnam are developing rapidly, the notion of urban heritage is still under discussion and remains controversial. Currently, among the local and central authorities there is no consensus regarding this notion and there is clearly a lack of definition. For instance, some issues remain concerning the pool of villas built in HCMC before 1975, such as how to even determine the year of construction, because some villas have been modified and divided many times by the occupants, mostly after the reunification of the country.

As HCMC is driven by fast economic growth, the will persists to make room for modernity, which means replacing old buildings with modern ones. As preserving historic and architectural heritage is today a wish of the municipality, it is essential to extend the notion of heritage from a single building to its geo-

A 'trial and error' approach for Ho Chi Minh City

graphical location. Urban heritage should not be reduced to an individual construction, but must include its context and other features, such as gardens, fences, trees, as well as landscapes, including the surrounding canals and river banks, and even the whole neighbourhood with its 'immaterial' heritage. But above all, it is necessary to emphasise that the urban heritage issue is first of all a matter of preservation that excludes demolition.

Today, even though Vietnam has a heritage code, its application is complicated. It is especially difficult to enforce the law for private buildings. Classifying a public building, despite it being a time-consuming process, remains feasible because the city's technical departments can access the plot and the archives (when they exist), and implement surveys. When the land belongs to a private owner or an organisation such as the Army, conducting an assessment becomes a real challenge. And in the case of private residential edifices, it is difficult to convince the owners and to involve them in the preservation process. From a private owner or developer perspective, because land values in the inner city are so high, it brings more benefits to demolish a villa and build a high-rise, rather than to preserve it.

Until now, what has been done by the municipality regarding preservation policies? And why does urban heritage today appear as a critical issue for the city authorities?

Until the early 1990s urban heritage was untouched. For instance, only a few villas were demolished, and most of them were only partially modified. Since 1990, with the economic take-off, the municipality needed land to attract foreign investors and to produce new buildings such as office towers or luxurious hotels to generate profit. That is when the first villas located on attractive plots started to disappear. As this economic pressure increased, the first awareness from the authorities occurred. In 1998, with the celebration of the 300th anniversary of the city, several architectural inventories were conducted. However, the detailed inventory concerning urban and architectural heritage has never been formally approved and turned into regulation; also part of this work has been lost.

From the early 2000s, the economic pressure was so strong that the urban and architectural heritage started to be seriously affected. Informally, the issue of heritage preservation was pushed into the background, and priority was given to the economic development. Not only was heritage damaged, but the work of researchers was 'badmouthed'. The physical impacts of this property development became evident in the city. The number of destroyed villas increased sharply and this became too 'visible'. That triggered the kick-start of a second period of urban heritage conservation efforts.

Since 2009 a new inventory has been in progress. Its purpose is not directly to classify but to identify in detail the urban heritage content. However, the city lacks methodology. This is why PADDI is today supporting the municipality in this task. The purpose of this inventory is not only preservation, but also to provide a tool to the city departments to regulate and manage urban heritage assets on the city scale. Unfortunately, progress is slow. Local experts and foreign colleagues undergo miscommunications. Not everything old will be preserved; it is likely that only exceptional buildings will be preserved as they are. Other villas, less remarkable, will be conserved due to their landscape assets, but their functions will change, as will their interiors. While the city departments try to design better regulations, villas continue to be demolished and the assets of the ancient *Perle de L'Extrême Orient* slowly disappear. Today if a building is not classified, nothing prevents its owner from demolishing it.

The viewpoint of a foreign historian

"From the Heart. How the memories inhabited by Saigon's cityscape are being erased", by Philippe Peycam (Director of the International Institute for Asian Studies).

"If you fire at the Past with the violence of the guns, it will fire back at you with canons." It was with these words, borrowed by "an author from Daghestan", that the famous southern historian Sơn Nam (1926-2008) concluded his contribution to a book celebrating Ho Chi Minh City's multifaceted heritages.² Sơn Nam, like other contemporary intellectuals from the South, knew the importance of heritage as material incarnations of popular collective memories, whether these memories invoked painful or happy moments. 'Collective memories as connections to a local place' is perhaps the most democratic definition of the always ambivalent notion of heritage. Southern Vietnamese intellectuals like Sơn Nam strove to keep localised genealogies alive, drawing influence from *Đĩa chỉ*, the traditional Vietnamese literary genre of local monographs, giving life to people and stories of the past, of a hamlet, a 'country', a region, and by extension, a city, however miscellaneous and interwoven that local past might be. It is the southern Saigon spirit and its mix of contradictory emotions and imaginations – including political ones – that these authors and their readers sought to preserve and transmit to the millions of Saigonese, old and newcomers.

This visceral attachment to the land (and water ways), and its multiple layers of histories, echoes the presence of the early Khmers (Saigon was once called Prey Nokor), the early Vietnamese (*người kinh*) and Chinese (*người hoa*) settlers, the marks and scars left by later groups including the French, the Americans, the new Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants, but also followers of the Buddhist, Cao Dai, Catholic, Evangelist, Hoa-Hao and Muslim faiths, the Chams, the Indians, the Hindus, the post-1975 Vietnamese returnees, the new northern Vietnamese migrants, etc.

Somehow, this need to nurture a distinctive Southern – Saigonese – way to be Vietnamese has been encapsulated in the words and acts of two revered former southern communist revolutionary figures from the first and second liberation wars: Trần Văn Giàu (1911-2010), an early anticolonial activist and historian, and Trần Bạch Đằng (1926-2007), the leader of the Saigon resistance against the Republic of Vietnam and its American backers. For as long as these two figures of modern Vietnam were alive they continued to hold high the flame of a distinct southern Vietnamese cultural integrity and a desire to locate Saigon in its historical continuity. When I was a doctoral student in Saigon in the 1990s, I learned how these two major local figures, however complicated their past political actions had been, stood as protectors of free-minded southern intellectuals like Sơn Nam, and how they continuously supported micro initiatives aimed at uncovering and rehabilitating bits and pieces of the Saigon historical human puzzle. They stood firm, though they often found themselves powerless to oppose mindless urban projects put forward by the bureaucrats who controlled the city.

Already in the 1990s, blatantly destructive projects were put forward. For instance, the neoclassical French-built Peugeot building behind the Cathedral, from where Vietnam's Independence was proclaimed on 2 September 1945 (by Giàu), was demolished by a coalition of interests involving the South Korean Chaebol Posco; and a Singapore-Malaysian investor hoping to build a modern high-rise building in the historical heart of the city (today the Sheraton Hotel) undermined the foundations of the adjacent 1930s Indian-built central Mosque. The ends of Giàu and Đằng's public lives were increasingly devoted to expressing public outcry against nonsensical projects that one after the other wiped out parts of old Saigon. Regrettably, they were already too frail to pick a fight when the banks of the Chợ Lớn (Chinatown) Canal were bereft of their original – sometimes three-stories high – Chinese shop houses, the highest in Southeast Asia.

More was to come and the two men were no longer present when a new wave of unprecedented attacks on the historical fabric of the city was recently unleashed, such as the shady Vincom real estate company project that pulled down the Eden cinema complex and its surrounding block on Đồng Khởi Street, a block that housed more than 200 families, rich and poor, including the legendary Givral café. Surely, there should have been ways to keep elements of this central memory-rich landscape of the city. The speculative interests of Vincom, allied with the murky practices of the city's leaders, sought another path. A few months later, the 213 Đồng Khởi Street building, the first concrete-built Art Deco high-rise in the Indochinese peninsula, still in good condition, was also wiped out along with a public park where so many of the city's couples once spent their afternoons on a public bench in the shade of almost fifty-metre high trees. These landmarks

of Saigon's public popular culture have been demolished and replaced by half-empty shopping malls where exclusive luxury stores have replaced what were essentially public spaces – spaces where everyone was entitled to live and share the city. This list can easily be extended as no local memory-charged urban spaces have been spared.

Today, the old naval construction complex of Ba Son, the most important site of anticolonial industrial struggle in the collective memory of the country, owned by the Vietnamese army, will soon be replaced by yet again another exclusive, mega-project with a huge footprint that will have no connection with the rest of Saigon's urban landscape. In the words of urban sociologist Saskia Sassen, these mega-projects not only "raise the density of the city, they actually de-urbanise it." What we now see is a systematic process of corporatisation of the metropolis's urban landscape, which will "inevitably kill much urban tissue: little streets and squares, density of street-level shops and modest offices, and so on."³

Despite punctual efforts carried out by members of the municipality's technical departments to classify elements of urban heritage, the questions that remain for everyone who love(d?) this city are: why such a blindness on the part of the leaders? Can this be explained by a disconcerting lack of historical and cultural education? Or is it just basic, mediocre greed and collusion with big national and international corporate interests at the expense of all other concerns? Or else, is there some naïve idea of 'progress' in their mind to think that Đồng Khởi Street should become the Orchard Road of Saigon – with, like so many leaders of Asia, a blind admiration for the top-down corporatised Singaporean state model?

In the Vietnamese context, one thing is certain: this state of mind does not just betray a surrender of responsibility to the forces of global corporate interests vis-à-vis the people the Party represents, it also serves a political purpose. It connects with a past when Saigon dared to be more than a simple economic emporium for the country, when the city held the potential to represent an alternative way 'to be and feel Vietnamese'. It leads indeed to the effective annihilation of the spirit of a rebellious city and its people; a city where people no longer are allowed to have roots and attachments. A city divided between those who have and those who don't, of transient dwellers, of salary-men/women and consumers, of refugees in their own city; a corporate de-urbanisation in the service of a cultural erasure of Vietnam's South. Is this what awaits Vietnam as a whole, forty years after winning her unification at the price of millions of lives?

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References

- 1 Founded in 2006, PADDI is an innovative decentralised cooperation project between the Lyon metropolitan area and the Rhône-Alpes Region (France), and Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam). Under the Ho Chi Minh City municipality supervision, its goal is to assist the city's technical agencies in various fields of urban management.
- 2 NXB TPHCM. 1998. *Saigon 1698-1998, architectures and urbanism*.
- 3 Sassen, S. 2015. 'Who owns our cities – and why this urban takeover should concern us all', *The Guardian*, 24/11/2015.

Nam Mansion located at 110-112 Võ Văn Tần Street is one of the largest colonial residences in the city (Courtesy of PADDI).

