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 villas 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 viewpoint of an international cooperation stakeholder

Clément Musil (co-director of the HCMC City Urban Development Management Support Centre), 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 deconcretised cooperation of the city of Toulouse and the Île-de-France Region (Paris metropolitan area), had conducted joint projects with the Hanoian 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, HCMC, and Hoi 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. HCMC was the capital of the Nguyễn dynasty from the early 19th century and Hoi 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.

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Located at 190 Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai Street, this villa is a [dilapidated state is sandwiched between two towers (photo by Clément Musil).]
 graphical location. Urban heritage should not be reduced to an individual construction, but must include its context and other features, such as gardens, fences, 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 emphasize the urban heritage issue is first of all a matter of preservation that excludes destruction.

Today, even though Vietnam has a heritage code, its application is complicated. It is 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 organization such as the Army, conducting an assessment becomes a real challenge. And in the case of the historical building, it is necessary 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 is often more beneficial 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 partially modified. However, 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 few villas located on attractive plots started to disappear. 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 legislation; 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 urban heritage preservation was pushed into the background, and priority was given to the economic development. Not only was heritage damaged, but the way of working was different. The political impacts of this property development became evident in the city. The number of destroyed villas increased sharply and this became a ‘visible’ trigger. This started to be a 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 context. However, the city is in a 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 have been advising about the importance of having this tool. Nevertheless, the city is in a slow process of this transformation. The need to classify the elements of urban heritage is an urgent issue. The PADDI is following this transformation closely. In the words of the Saigonese – way to be Vietnamese has been encapsulated in the city’s life. In the words of the Saigonese – way to be Vietnamese has been encapsulated in the city's life.