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.

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

After the turn of the 20th 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 concepts of certain types of heritage.1 The French viewed Saigon and Hanoi as pleasant, “modern” cities in which “the Far East is mixed with the Provence.”2 Colonial-era planners expressed 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 oversaw national monuments plans for Hanoi, Saigon-Cholon, Hàiphong, Phnom Penh and Dalat, juxtaposed the “old cities” of Indochina with “new” cities, as seen in a trenchant statement.3

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.4 For inspiration he looked first towards Chinese models, starting with the Imperial Palace of the Forbidden City in Beijing. “His buildings, the Indochina University (1927) and the Louis Finot Museum (1932), are in mixed styles.”

The “Indochinese style” was not one cohesive style but an eclectic mix, paraling the vague and speculative designations of these hybrid cities, 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 Indocina pavilion at the Franco-British Exposition in London held in 1908. Designed by architects Siffert, it combined Siamese, Vietnamese, Khmer and European traits.5 Georges Grodier’s Albert Sarraut Museum (National Museum) in Phnom Penh (1920) incorporated Angkorvian and European elements.6

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.7 The sense of heritage as exploitable properties also motivated the promotion of Indochine itself within French Indochina and among third world architects as attractive attractions such as the ancient imperial capital Hanoi, 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.8 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 have been developed. The law of the means of cultural heritage, which includes archeological sites, ancient monuments, colonial-era architecture, post-colonial architecture, and archaeological remains 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 archeological sites and older monuments but also wooden architecture as well as modern architecture built in the 1950s and 60s.9 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.

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.10 The Cambodian law of 1996 on the protection of cultural heritage includes urban historical heritage. However, application of the law resulted in the liquidation of regulations and the obscure diffusion of responsibilities into various government authorities.11 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-Angkorvian architectural sites. Colonial architecture and modern architecture are particularly threatened because of the large lots they are situated on.

POSTCOLONIAL CONSTRUCTIONS of national identities and histories and heritage management, and restoration and preservation, 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 Cochin-China (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 colonial communications and 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.
In French Indochina and contemporary Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos

Hanoi

In postcolonial Hanoi conflicting national historical narratives and identities exist. The “French Quarter” – the economic centre – has maintained its formal and social configurations through the colonial period despite extensive changes in social and commercial relations.34 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.35 Overpopulated, the inhabitable space per person is sometimes less than 2.2 m².36 Throughout the 1990s, many of the streets regained 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.37

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 Vietnam government, called the style of colonial public buildings “pseudo-classical”, undermining its conserva- tive 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.38

The passage of time has made it easy to attempt to conserve colonial-era buildings, many of which fell into decrepit states. Recent joint efforts by scholars, architects, local and interna- tional administrators as well as residents to preserve French villas have seen some success. Dào Ngọc Nghĩm, 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 Hanoi belonging to the state were occupied partly illegally and had undergone modifications. About 50% of the villas were

Laos

Vientiane, the administrative capital of French Laos, in 1902 had undergone a series of changes regarding cultural and heritage since gaining independence in 1954. The designation of Laos as a Sino-oriental nation and the impact of local culture received uneven attention, as the government itself was still divided after the foundations of the city which disappeared in the late 19th century due to modern 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 isolated by the government itself when the last remnants of heritage were destroyed in 2008.

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 pro- tection were often half-hearted, since apart from Angkor and Cham monuments local culture received uneven attention, in spite of EDOE’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 ambience and lived experiences in Luang Prabang and the Ancient Quarter of Hanoi point to a critical need for protecting intangible heritage and broader urban history, 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 an enigma of 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

3. Thanks to Gerard Saumier for this information.

19. Ibid., p. 83.
31. Ibid., pp. 102-03.