



STUDIUM

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Thi Thuy DUNG NGUYEN*, Tran Văn DUNG

PROMOTING THE VALUE OF COLONIAL ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE IN HUE THROUGH TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Promovarea valorii patrimoniului arhitectural colonial în orașul Hue prin dezvoltarea turismului

Abstract: În perioada colonială franceză, orașul Hue a trecut printr-o planificare și dezvoltare urbană sistematică și științifică. Un număr semnificativ de structuri arhitecturale coloniale au fost construite în această perioadă, într-o diversitate remarcabilă de stiluri și arte decorative. Aceste clădiri constituie acum un valoros repertoriu de patrimoniu arhitectural al orașului. După mai bine de 100 de ani, majoritatea acestor lucrări arhitecturale sunt încă în uz și au devenit patrimonii culturale valoroase, cu o estetică de înaltă calitate, contribuind la crearea unui peisaj urban al orașului Hue ca oraș de patrimoniu, atât istoric cât și modern, reflectând schimbul cultural dintre Franța și Vietnam. toate acestea sunt și puncte forte, baze și resurse ale orașului Hue pentru a-și dezvolta economia și societatea, în special în promovarea turismului cultural.

Keywords: Vietnam, French colonialism, colonialist architecture, cultural heritage, urban planning, urban development, heritage tourism

During the French colonial period, Hue underwent systematic and scientific urban planning and development. A significant number of colonial architectural structures were constructed during this time, characterized by a remarkable diversity of styles and decorative arts. These buildings now constitute a valuable repository of architectural heritage in the city. After more than 100 years, most of these architectural works are still in use and have become valuable cultural heritages, with high aesthetics, contributing to creating an urban landscape of Hue as a heritage city that is both ancient and modern, reflecting the cultural exchange between France and Vietnam in history. That is also one of the potentials, strengths, foundations, and endogenous resources for Hue to develop its economy and society, especially in promoting cultural tourism.

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From the values of colonial architectural heritage in Hue...

The Western Quarter (Vietnamese: *Khu phố Tây*) was established on the southern bank of the poetic Perfume River, facing the ancient Imperial Citadel of Hue. According to a provision in the treaty signed with the Nguyen Dynasty in 1874, the French were allowed to send a diplomatic mission to reside permanently in Hue. A few years later, they began constructing residential buildings for long-term settlement. From this initial foothold, the French increasingly pressured the imperial court to grant them additional land for the construction of affiliated administrative agencies, gradually consolidating the local colonial government apparatus.

Driven by their practical needs, the French planned and built many colonial architectural works in Hue that held significant architectural, cultural, and artistic value, particularly along routes such as Jules Ferry (now Le Loi Street), Chaigneau (Ly Thuong Kiet), Khai Dinh (Nguyen Hue), and Route Mandarine (Hung Vuong).

Some representative colonial buildings that still exist today include: the hospital (now Hue Central Hospital), Le Grand Hotel de Hue (now Saigon Morin Hotel), the Public Works Office (now the Center for Culture, Information, and Sports of Thuan Hoa District), the train station, Quoc Hoc High School, Dong Khanh High School (now Hai Ba Trung High School), the Redemptorist Church, Pellerin School (now Hue Music Academy), the war memorial, the Annamite House of Representatives (now Hue University), and Thien Huu School (now the University of Sciences), etc.

Initially, these buildings—bearing strong influences of Western architectural and artistic styles—were constructed to serve the French colonial administrative system, symbolizing their power and dominance over the colonized population. Later, however, Western-style houses¹ and villas began to appear, designed in ways that adapted to the local climate and traditions of Hue, demonstrating a gradual architectural hybridization between colonial and indigenous elements.

Compared to the capital Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the colonial architectural heritage in Hue is not less diverse in terms of the diversity of architectural styles, only differing in the level of sophistication and decorative art. Initially, colonial architectural works in Hue can be divided into 3 typical types, as follows:

¹ See Nguyễn, Q. M., „The architectural value of French-style houses in the French Quarter of Hanoi”, in *Journal of Construction Science and Technology*, University of Civil Engineering, 2015

- Official residences/government buildings: These are administrative headquarters and cultural and public works with large campus areas, large construction scale, highly aesthetic architectural designs, serving French mandarins and civil servants and their families.

- Villas: These are residential buildings with relatively vast surroundings and beautiful architectural designs, meant for French mandarins and civil servants and their families. Some French-style villas built later were the residences of Vietnamese civil servants working in the French government, with smaller scale and simpler architectural designs.

- Townhouses: There are houses combined with businesses, meant mainly for the urban bourgeoisie, built in long rows along some main streets of the city, such as Bao Vinh, Gia Hoi - Cho Dinh, Dong Ba, etc.

In French architectural planning, the environment is a combination of buildings interspersed with green park systems. Colonial architectural works with interspersed green trees are scattered on main streets such as Le Loi, Nguyen Hue, Tran Hung Dao... Besides the function of improving the environment for the buildings themselves, space and natural landscape also have a great influence on the shaping of colonial architecture. Nguyen Dinh Toan (architect PhD) highly praised the value of Hue's colonial architecture, stating:

“French architects skillfully used transitional spaces—such as gardens, lawns, and green areas along the Perfume River—to distance, conceal, and isolate the French architectural zone from the imperial palace complexes. The new urban blocks were designed to meet the needs of modern and civilized living. French architectural works in Hue made excellent use of the natural landscape, incorporating elements of Eastern architectural style and applying traditional Hue proportions and design details to achieve architectural harmony with the local climate.”²

It can be said that colonial architecture is a unique and valuable urban heritage that contributes to creating a new nuance of Hue's urban heritage landscape, making the ancient capital of Hue have a harmonious transition from traditional architecture to modern architecture, and is also an important testament to the history of urban development of Hue city.

² Nguyễn, Đ. T., „Colonial architecture in Hue” in *Proceedings of the Expert Conference on Assessing the Urban Architecture Fund of Hue*, Vietnam Association of Architects, Hue People's Committee, Thua Thien Hue Department of Construction, 2003, p. 111

Nowadays, Hue's urban landscape is being planned and gradually expanded to the West and Southwest, turning the area with many colonial architectural works into the city's commercial center. However, while new urban areas are being developed and bringing a modern image to the city, the southern bank of the Perfume River — home to many colonial-era buildings — has become a place that preserves the memory of a distinct historical and cultural period of Hue. These colonial architectural structures, existing within a contemporary society, create a balance and harmony with the present. They have become an indispensable part of people's living space, enabling residents to engage with and experience the values that colonial heritage brings to the heritage city of Hue. From public buildings such as train stations, hospitals, schools, and churches, to residential villas that have been standing for over a century, these structures contribute to the city's identity.

Colonial architecture in Hue represents a vibrant cultural heritage and a form of artistic expression reflecting the East–West cultural exchange in terms of urban planning, architectural structures, stylistic features, building materials, and especially construction techniques during a significant historical phase of Hue's urban development. Researchers Phan Thuan An and Nguyen Quoc Thong, in their article “French Architecture on the Banks of the Perfume River”, noted:

“In addition to the use of durable building materials and imported construction techniques — such as glass windows, shutters, panels, concrete breeze blocks, and decorative mouldings at the base of buildings — one can also clearly observe traditional Vietnamese architectural features in roof decorations and ornamental parapets. Occasionally, this blending of styles is also reflected in column designs: the base and shaft are done in Western architectural styles, while the capitals bear traditional Vietnamese elements.”³

This East–West fusion can be illustrated by the villa of Minister Ton That Quang (commonly known as *Lầu Ông Thượng* in Vietnamese), located at 103 Bui Thi Xuan Street, Phuong Duc Ward, Thuan Hoa District, Hue City. The compound includes a gate, a decorative screen wall (Vietnamese: *bình phong*), a small pond, a miniature rock garden (Vietnamese: *hòn non bộ*), and a main house with annexes. The main building was constructed in

³ Phan, T. A.; Nguyễn, Q. T., „French architecture along the Perfume River” in *Hue Ancient and Modern Journal*, vol. 21, 1997, pp. 71-72

the colonial architectural style, harmonizing with its surrounding landscape. Therefore, the preservation and promotion of colonial architecture in Hue⁴ is not only the safeguarding of part of Hue's cultural and artistic heritage but also an acknowledgment of the historical development of East–West cultural interaction.

... to solutions for promoting cultural heritage value linked to tourism development

Exploiting and promoting the value of colonial architectural heritage in Hue to serve sustainable tourism development is one of the best solutions for preserving heritage, bringing the heritage back to life and integrating it into the contemporary society, avoiding the risk of deterioration, and contributing to creating a source of income for heritage preservation and development. Each colonial architectural work opens up many interesting and attractive aspects about landscape architecture, culture, and historical stories. Therefore, the system of colonial architectural heritage needs to be invested in by local authorities and organizations or individuals who own and manage these sites, focusing on restoration, conservation, and developing appropriate products to turn them into unique cultural and historical heritage tourism destinations that attract visitors for sightseeing and experiences. As a result, we must understand that colonial architectural heritage is a gift from the past to the Hue heritage urban economy today. There are many cities in the world that have exploited tourism development from the heritage system. That is an extremely large economic benefit. Incorporating colonial architectural heritage into the tourism development strategy will contribute to promoting the distinct features of Hue's heritage and create income for those managing and preserving colonial architecture, thereby encouraging the better conservation and promotion of this architectural heritage. At the same time, the city of Hue will have new and unique tourism products.

However, to exploit potential and promote strengths for tourism development without losing the cultural, historical, and artistic values inherent in colonial architectural heritage, in addition to the proactive involvement of authorities, functional agencies need the cooperation and support of the managers who preserve this heritage. Any tourism development project will be affected and difficult to implement if the execution process is not carefully planned and does not receive enthusiastic

⁴ See Trần, Q. B., „The architectural form of the French Quarter in Hanoi and preservation methods”, article from 2015, retrieved <https://36hn.wordpress.com> (Summer of 2025)

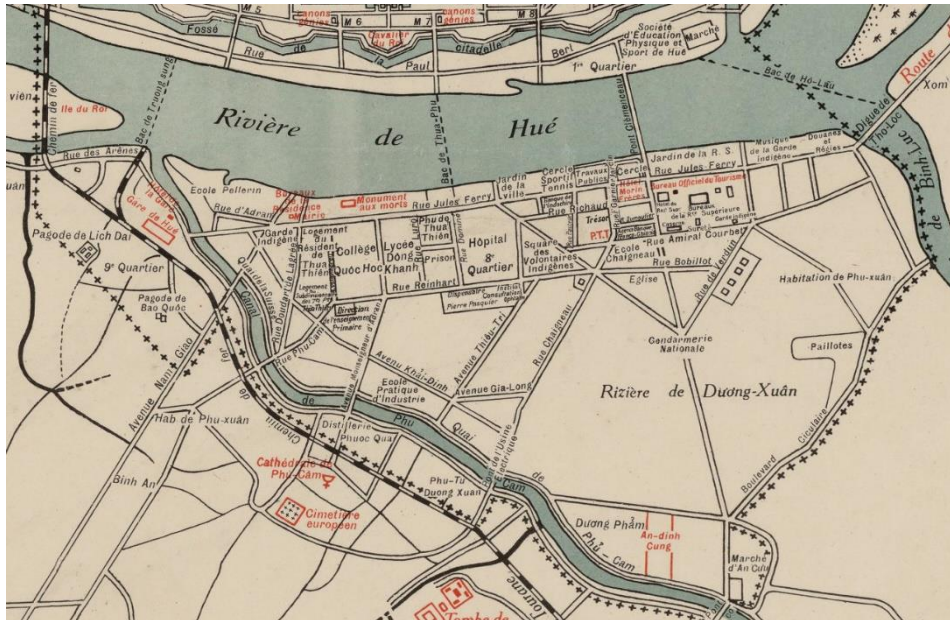
support from the community. Therefore, local authorities need to have policies and programs to disseminate detailed and timely information about the colonial architectural heritage tourism development projects to the public, in order to enhance understanding, support, and contribute ideas for sustainable tourism development projects.

In the near future, local authorities should strengthen cooperation with tourism businesses to design heritage tourism routes connecting colonial architectural heritage with tours to visit sites and monuments in the UNESCO-listed Imperial City of Hue, thereby introducing visitors to explore this heritage system and enriching the tourism offerings of the city of Hue.

It can be said that the colonial architectural system is a vibrant cultural heritage, playing a significant role in creating the outstanding and unique values of the heritage city of Hue, alongside the UNESCO-listed Imperial City of Hue, and is closely tied to the formation and development of the city's landscape and urban architecture within the historical and cultural flow. Most colonial buildings in Hue are not only valuable in terms of architecture but also in terms of culture, history, and art. Therefore, they require attention for conservation and development in conjunction with sustainable tourism, to avoid the risk of distortion or gradual destruction in the future.

Annexes

The location of colonial architecture in Hue, on a map from 1930



Source: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/>

Panoramic View of the Villa of Minister Ton That Quang



Source: Author

Aerial view of the French Quarter on the southern bank of the Perfume River



Source: Archival photo

Decorative art at the villa of Minister Ton That Quang



Source: Author

*Headquarters of the Culture, Information, and Sports Center of Thuan Hoa
District*



Source: Author