

Colonial Architecture in Indochina: An Overview of Studies and Future Challenges

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Abstract: This paper aims to fill existing research gaps by providing a systematic analysis of colonial architecture in former Indochina. By addressing key issues and proposing avenues for future research, it seeks to enrich scholarly discourse on the subject and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of colonial architectural heritage.

Keywords: Indochina, Colonial architecture, Greek-Roman, French, culture, environment, climate.

1. Introduction

This paper examines the contributions of research works related to the topic of colonial architecture in the former Indochina. It delves into the valuable insights provided by studies conducted in various fields of colonial architecture, shedding light on the amalgamation of Eastern and Western architectural styles in the region. Through meticulous analysis of historical developments, researchers have unraveled the intricate fusion of cultures that shaped the architectural landscape of French colonial Indochina. Moreover, the paper discusses the appreciation of indigenous cultures by the French, highlighting the utilization of architecture as a means to assert colonial identity and ideals. By exploring the historical context and cultural significance embedded in architectural endeavors, researchers have gained a comprehensive understanding of the colonial architectural heritage in Indochina.

Furthermore, the paper addresses lingering issues within existing research works. It emphasizes the necessity of exploring the true origins of colonial architecture and the need for a comprehensive framework for evaluating colonial architectural structures. Despite the significant strides made in understanding the architectural landscape of French colonial Indochina, there remains a gap in establishing a unified system for assessing the historical, legal, and theoretical aspects of architectural works in the region. The paper also identifies the lack of clarity regarding the influence of Western classical architecture on colonial architectural developments, calling for further investigation into the evolution of architectural forms and their adaptation to local contexts.

2. Typical Research Works Related to Colonial Architecture in Indochina Include

The content of research works related to the topic of Indochina reflects the complexity and diversity of Colonial architecture in Indochina. Research works are cumulative and inherit from each other, becoming part of the research foundation on issues related to the formation and development of Colonial architecture in Indochina. Many scientific viewpoints have been developed on a broad scale, related to architectural space and urban space, indigenous and Western traditional factors, adaptation methods, and integration with the local environment.

First, the works constructed by France in Indochina, though not novel, have always been an attractive topic not only for researchers but also for those interested in Colonial architecture. Many renowned foreign authors have devoted their lives to studying colonial subjects in Indochina.

For instance, Nicola Cooper's research "Urban planning and architecture in colonial Indochina," published in 2000, not only identifies public constructions built in Indochina from the early days to the 1930s but also investigates the reasons why the French authorities carried out specific urban construction projects in different periods. It explores how these public constructions during those times were related to the governance policies in

Indochina. The purpose of this article is to help readers adopt a different attitude towards colonial policies and broaden their understanding of urban planning methods and French architectural designs in Indochina. The research also discusses two imposition and integration phases of Colonial architecture in Indochina, as well as how the French preserved the indigenous national identity.

Similarly, in Gwendolyn Wright's book "The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism" in 1991, the analysis focuses on the relationship between culture and politics, specifically efforts in architectural and urban design in Indochina and French colonies worldwide, from decorative details to city regulations, as part of a complex political agenda. The fact that culture and politics often influence each other in continuously evolving ways is evident. However, only a few historians and architects acknowledge this relationship. Hence, Gwendolyn Wright's research concentrates on addressing two questions: whether political purposes generate specific urban policies and design style priorities that promote political goals and whether the development of architectural styles and urbanism can be considered products of the political context at the time. Because the author studies the mutual influence of politics and culture, the development process of Indochinese architecture is meticulously presented by the author through historical milestones to clarify the transformation of architecture and urbanism in Indochina under the influence of politics. Other authors have also researched the historical development process through political periods in Indochina, such as Amaury Lorin's "Le Tremplin colonial: Paul Doumer, gouverneur général de l'Indochine (1897-1902)" published in 2005 [6], or Amber J. Njoh's "French Urbanism in Foreign Lands" published in 2016 [5], or Paul Doumer's "l'Indochine française," reissued in 2017... [3].

In Vietnam alone, since 2000, there have been numerous meticulous works from authors such as Lê Minh Sơn, Đoàn Khắc Tinh, Lê Thanh Sơn, Ngô Huy Quỳnh, Lê Văn Ninh, Nguyễn Đình Toàn, Trần Quốc Bảo... and in-depth research theses on Indochinese architecture in Vietnam by scholars like Trương Nhật Quỳnh, Đỗ Quốc Hiệp, Võ Đình Trần Trân,... For example, the thesis "Adaptation to natural conditions, indigenous culture in French architecture in Ho Chi Minh City" by Phan Hữu Khiêm successfully defended in 2005, or the thesis "East-West harmony in Indochinese architecture in Vietnam" by Trương Nhật Quỳnh in 2012.

Articles by authors such as "The architectural heritage of France in Saigon" by Nguyễn Hữu Thái, "French architectural heritage in District 1 - Ho Chi Minh City: Values, status quo, and management orientation" by Trần Anh Tuấn. Noteworthy books include "Urban Saigon - Archaeology and heritage conservation" by Nguyễn Thị Hậu [1], "Early urban infrastructure in Saigon" by Trần Hữu Quang [4]... These studies all address architectural styles in Saigon during the colonial period.

In Laos, works such as "Laos, The Country - The People" by Hoài Nguyên, or the dissertation "The process of invasion and governance policies of France in Laos" by Nghiêm Thị Hải Yến clearly outline each stage of development in Laos's history, from being invaded by Siamese troops to French occupation. They all elucidate why French investment in Laos cannot be compared to that in Vietnam. These reasons tend to lean more towards political factors. Abroad, there is the study "The challenge for Lao historiography" by Martin Stuart-Fox, which examines the political aspect's contribution to national development projects, referencing the institutional and social forms of Lao political culture from the French colonial period. The article also raises questions about the political responsibility of Lao and foreign historians in contributing to national history building.

Similarly, a notable work discusses the formation and development of Laos during the French colonial period, titled "Land of the lotus-eaters: Vientiane under the French" by Logan and William. The research presents the French invasion stages in Laos, the stabilization policies, and Laos's relationship with the other two Indochinese countries during the colonial period. While focusing heavily on the relationship between politics and culture, this research provides readers with a deeper understanding of French influence in Laos's developmental history.

Originating from the shared notion of respecting indigenous cultures by the French, the aspect of adaptation to local culture and environment in French-built structures has also been discussed in various studies. In Vietnam specifically, many excellent studies have addressed this field, such as the dissertation "Natural and cultural factors in French colonial architecture in Vietnam" by Nguyễn Đình Toàn in 1998, or Lê Thanh Sơn's dissertation in 2000 on "Symbiosis of traditional and modern cultures in Vietnamese architecture (from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century)." Nguyễn Đình Toàn analyzed the factors influencing the adaptation process of Western

architecture in Vietnam, such as climate and land conditions. His dissertation covers a wide range of knowledge from technical aspects, urban planning to architecture, laying the scientific groundwork for analyzing the adaptation of Indochinese architecture in Vietnam. However, the cultural aspect has not been sufficiently researched to provide evidence for the spiritual adaptation process of Western architecture in the colonies, specifically in Vietnam. Meanwhile, for Lê Thanh Sơn, one of the specific objectives he aimed to achieve in his dissertation was to explore the "characteristics of cultural symbiosis in Vietnamese architecture through different periods from the late 19th century to the early 20th century." With the concept of "symbiosis" permeating throughout the dissertation, the author dedicated an entire chapter to discuss cultural exchanges in Vietnamese architecture, notably analyzing the cultural exchange between the West and Vietnam, or in other words, the cultural adaptation of Western architecture to the indigenous architecture. Thus, the results of the two doctoral dissertations by Nguyễn Đình Toàn and Lê Thanh Sơn have somewhat revealed the transformation and adaptation process to natural climate and indigenous culture, serving as a direction for further research. A series of dissertations have been based on these theses and delved deeper into the adaptation to culture and climate in French-built structures in Indochina, specifically in Vietnam, such as Trương Nhật Quỳnh's thesis on "East-West harmony in Indochinese architecture in Vietnam" and Nguyễn Thị Minh Hải's thesis on "Architectural forms of government offices in some northern provinces - The period from 1990 to 2010," both successfully defended in 2012. Or Phan Hữu Khiêm's thesis on "Adaptation to natural conditions, indigenous culture in French architecture in Ho Chi Minh City" defended in 2017... Overall, most studies based on the "symbiotic" architectural concept by these authors predominantly focus on the combination and interaction of two cultures between Western and Vietnamese architecture. However, if this "symbiotic" concept is used as a basis to further expand research on the Western cultural influence in the remaining two Indochinese countries, Laos and Cambodia, it will provide a more comprehensive overview of this intriguing "symbiotic" concept.

A notable study on this issue is presented clearly in the book "Architectures du Vietnam colonial. Repenser le métissage" (translated: Architectures of colonial Vietnam. Rethinking hybridity) by Caroline Herbelin, published in 2018, which introduces a new definition of adaptation to natural and cultural conditions in the colonial architecture of the West, she refers to this as "hybridity" [8]. Also in the same year, she published an article with the same theme "Architecture et métissages dans le Vietnam colonial" (translated: Architecture and hybridity in colonial Vietnam) discussing the combination of two different cultures, East and West, in natural tropical climates [9]. In her view, "hybridity" is like an intertwining of society and technology, which allows for a more accurate approach to cultural exchanges between the East and the West, or in other words, this intertwining is interaction. A general overview of this particular approach by Caroline is explained as follows: the French borrowed technical solutions from the indigenous people, but they were not widely known because these solutions were undervalued. Evidence of this is that in colonial speeches, they did not mention technical solutions when discussing the construction process in the colony. Therefore, the combination of technology and society is not always considered equally important. Thus, examining this relationship in a new approach can highlight the transformation of Western architecture in the colony over time. And through the examples Caroline chose to analyze, readers can see that over time, depending on the economic, political, and cultural contexts, the French recognized the benefits brought by technical solutions, based on indigenous factors and vice versa. At the same time, considering the influencing factors in the colonial context, the author emphasizes the cultural intersection in the characteristics of indigenous cultural values. Caroline's perspective has also opened up a new and innovative research direction in the colonial topic in Indochina.

In the other two colonies, Laos and Cambodia, there are also authors researching the cultural intersection between Western architecture and indigenous architecture such as Marc Askew, William S. Logan, and Colin Long in the work "Vientiane: transformations of a Lao Landscape" [14]; Logan and William in "Land of the lotus-eaters: Vientiane under the French" [13]; or Marco R. Deyasi in the article "Indochina, 'Greater France' and the 1931 Colonial Exhibition in Paris: Angkor Wat in Blue, White and Red" [2].

All these studies on the integration of architecture between two cultures in the above aspects will be the most important reference materials, serving as the foundation for developing research directions in future studies.

3. The Contributions of Research Works Related to the Topic of Colonial Architecture in Indochina

Research topics in each field of colonial architecture in Indochina are always valuable and valuable reference sources. Not only for humanity in general, but also for experts who want to expand and delve deeper into related research aspects.

For studies on structures built by France in Indochina, the combination of Eastern and Western architectural styles has been a recurring theme over decades, always explored and discovered by researchers. Through these themes, it can be seen that with the skillfulness of experts from the empire, architecture in Indochina truly became a source of pride for the French. To understand the combination of two seemingly disparate cultures, researchers analyzing this integration had to grasp each stage of parallel historical development between the metropolis and the colonial countries of Indochina. Because events in each historical stage influenced the development of architecture in this area. Thanks to historical data mentioned in previous studies, scientists can later understand the historical process, providing an objective view of colonial architecture in Indochina corresponding to each stage of historical development.

Furthermore, the appreciation of indigenous culture by the French is recognized through various perspectives of domestic and international authors, helping objectively acknowledge that the construction of architecture in Indochina was used by the French empire as a means to assert its imperial identity and colonial ideals. This is evident in visual impact plans on cities such as: building statues, palaces, government headquarters during the 1920s-1930s in Indochina. From their ideals of respecting indigenous culture, the French tried to combine the two cultures, elevating colonial architecture to new heights. It's not just a combination of East-West decorative elements visible from the outside, but also a combination of Western architecture and the East to adapt to the tropical climate of Indochina. It can be said that this is the most noble form of civilization of the French because it satisfies two high concerns during the French rule in Indochina: one is absolute respect for the indigenous, trying to provide a comfortable, hygienic living environment for the native people; second is reaping success after great architectural achievements by combining two different cultures.

In summary, although some studies still have subjective elements when discussing colonial architecture in Indochina, possibly due to some factors related to politics, or due to insufficient broad perspectives to be able to generalize the issues more objectively; however, it cannot be denied that these studies have depicted the panorama of colonial architecture in Indochina, making it easier and deeper to approach new research directions on the same topic.

4. The Remaining Issues in Research Works

The research endeavors concerning the architecture of Indochina are commendable successes, always serving as invaluable reference sources for future generations. However, several issues persist within these research works.

Firstly, the most significant existing issue in these studies lies in the thorough examination of the true origins of Colonial Architecture. Let us consider the developmental stages of Western Architecture (Figure 1.07). The initial point of departure for Western Architecture is the three major architectural civilizations of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia. Then, with the emergence of Hellenistic architecture, which was located in the Hellenic mainland, Crete, the Aegean Sea, Anatolia, Italy, Sicily, France, Spain, and even Egypt; with the aforementioned territories, the ancient Hellenic civilization absorbed all the cultures of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia [2]. Whenever ancient Hellenic architecture is mentioned, one recalls the three orders: Doric, Ionic, Corinthian—representing the pure beauty of humanity. In the Roman architectural era, it wholly assimilated the architectural beauty of Hellenistic architecture, adding the Tuscan order, although less proportionate and aesthetically pleasing, it presented more structures and variations [2].

Here it can be understood why human architecture standards are based on Greek-Roman architecture. Evidence of this is that subsequent architectural eras have either been influenced by or inherited the forms of Greek-Roman architecture. For instance, in the Byzantine architectural era, originally belonging to the Hellenistic empire, after being conquered by the Romans, Byzantine architecture inherited the achievements of Rome (but essentially still Greek) and was slightly influenced by Persia. Then, in the Romanesque architecture, besides inheriting the

achievements of Hellenistic architecture, it also inherited the Byzantine culture transmitted through ports like Venice, Ravenna, Marseille... [2]. By the Gothic architectural period, it broke away entirely from Greek-Roman architecture and developed a robust architectural style with new construction methods. Until the Renaissance period developed vigorously in Europe, especially in Italy and France, the nostalgic trend returned to the beauty of Greco-Roman architecture, bringing about many prominent architectural works and achievements. After numerous changes and developments of various architectural styles, architects still believe that the pure beauty of Greek-Roman architecture remains irreplaceable. The Renaissance architecture continued to inherit the achievements of Greek-Roman architecture and developed it into a trend for a long time from the 15th to the 19th centuries.

Moving to the Modern architecture period, there was a struggle between classical revival and new technical styles. Among them, France was one of the strongest countries in developing classical revival architectural styles such as Neoclassicism, Romanticism, and Neoclassical decoration still drawing inspiration from Greek-Roman architecture. Then, the nostalgic trend reached saturation point in the late Modern architecture period, yielding to the new trend of technical architecture. Alongside the development of new technical architecture, there were two new architectural styles: Art Deco and Art Nouveau. This was also the time when European countries began colonizing Southeast Asian and African colonies [15], [12], [81].

Thus, the development process of Western Architecture, with mutual inheritance and influence from the core origin, namely Hellenistic-Roman architecture. In particular, the architecture in France—the country with the greatest impact on the architecture of Indochina, through many historical ups and downs, can be seen as a major architectural style and a collection of architectural styles from ancient times such as Hellenistic, Roman, Gothic, Renaissance, classical French, Baroque, Rococo, Art Deco, Art Nouveau, Neoclassical, Romantic, eclectic, etc. All these styles (except Gothic) are greatly influenced by ancient Greek-Roman architecture. In other words, architectural expressions of these styles have many variants originating from ancient Greek-Roman architecture [7], [10], [12]. Until the period when France colonized colonies in Asia and Africa, which fell into the Modern architecture period I and II. Amidst myriad variations in Western architectural styles at that time, France was still struggling to find a suitable style for its colonies. Architects pondered what was considered beautiful, and they returned to the origins of Greek-Roman architecture [7] [11]. After a long period of adaptation of colonial buildings to the local climate, architects created suitable architectural styles for each region. For example, the architecture of Indochina is a combination of two different cultures. Therefore, it is not surprising to assert that Indochinese architecture is a subset of Colonial Architecture, which in turn is a subset of French architecture, and the architectural styles in France are ultimately subsets of Greek-Roman architecture. Therefore, the discussions in the aforementioned studies regarding Indochina stop at how France influenced Colonial Architecture in Indochina, overlooking the true origin, which is from Greek-Roman architecture.

In summary, to establish a Colonial Architecture framework requires a transformation process from Classical architecture: Greek-Roman. Understanding Colonial Architecture entails comprehending its origins from Western Architecture and the factors influencing that transformation. This direction of research requires further exploration.

Secondly, research on the architecture of Indochina or Colonial Architecture has been addressed by many scholars worldwide in conference papers or in-depth studies. However, there is no documentation providing all three historical, legal, and theoretical foundations to offer a specific perspective on the criteria for evaluating structures within the theoretical framework of Indochinese and Colonial Architecture, such as the following studies:

Regarding urban design in French colonies worldwide and specifically in Indochina, Ambe J. Njoh's study in the book "French Urbanism in Foreign Lands" published in 2015 [5] argues that the task given to French urban designers in colonial territories is to experiment and create a completely new environment for the motherland, and this is one of the priorities. This urgency not only relies on efforts to accelerate construction activities in Indochina but also pays attention to the impact of replacing indigenous spatial rules. The author analyzes implications to clarify this issue and presents a logical way to make rigorous arguments between the introduction of a new culture and the transformation of an old space in the indigenous land. Due to the pervasive idea throughout the study,

Ambe's bases mainly focus on concepts of urban design and architecture that have existed for a long time in Europe but are applied to colonial territories. Additionally, to justify the promotion of construction in Indochina, a rather subjective and veiled pretext for France's invasion is presented by the author, citing the French goal of bringing light to backward areas, improving the living standards of the local population, or "enlightenment". Therefore, if Amber's book were supplemented with a more objective theoretical and historical foundation, it would better satisfy readers regarding the results he presents.

Or in the book "The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism" by Gwendolyn Wright in 1991 [11]. The scientific bases provided by the author mainly focus on legal and theoretical foundations. This is a good reference for future studies.

In the study "Urban planning and architecture in colonial Indochina" by Nicola Cooper [16]. The author's bases for her arguments rely on historical events and theoretical arguments. However, evidence of legality for the construction of structures in Indochina remains unclear.

Studies like "Le Tremplin colonial: Paul Doumer, gouverneur général de l'Indochine (1897-1902)" by Amaury Lorin [6], or the book " l'Indochine française " by Paul Doumer [3]... are also valuable documents, but they have hardly satisfied the scientific foundation when studying the issue of Colonial Architecture in Indochina.

5. The Research Issues Raised in Future Studies

With the remaining issues from the general research situation, FUTURE STUDIES need to address the following:

- Architectural styles, quantities, characteristics, and locations of French colonial-era buildings in the three Indochinese countries: Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia need to be systematically compiled and classified.
- Based on the linkage with the historical development process of Classical Western architecture in France, studies need to clarify the characteristics and differences of colonial-era administrative architecture in major cities influenced by the French in the three Indochinese countries.
- Studies need to establish an evaluation system for the transformation of Western Architecture in buildings in Indochina, based on architectural values expressed in external forms, combined with characteristic factors adapting to the local climate. This system is established according to specific criteria analyzed and objectively demonstrated through scientific methods and foundations.
- Studies need to clarify the laws appearing in the process of transforming the forms of Western Architecture in some buildings in Indochina. Concurrently, research should demonstrate the mutual influences of French Colonial Architecture and the traditional architecture of the three Indochinese countries based on comparative and chronological comparisons of architectural expressions in the colonial period.

6. Conclusion

Examining French colonial architecture in Indochina reveals a nuanced interplay between Western design paradigms and indigenous cultural contexts. Despite extensive scholarship, lingering inquiries persist, notably concerning the genesis of architectural typologies and the absence of a comprehensive evaluative rubric. These unresolved issues necessitate deeper delving into historical narratives and socio-cultural dynamics, alongside the employment of interdisciplinary research methodologies. Such endeavors promise a richer understanding of colonial architectural legacies and their enduring impact on contemporary architectural discourse.

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