

Hanoi Architecture: Some Observations By A Local And A Tourist

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Abstract

Nel presente articolo sono presentate alcune riflessioni degli autori in merito all'architettura di Hanoi (Vietnam).

1. Introduction¹

Vietnamese architect Dinh Quoc Phuong has lived in Hanoi for most of his life, and Australian architect Derham Groves has so far visited Hanoi three times. They love the city but fear for its future in light of what seems to be uncontrolled local development and insensitive foreign development.

As simple as it may sound, they believe that the first step to preserving Hanoi's unique sense of place is to observe the city's built environment. The following article contains some of authors' observations of Hanoi's architecture and everyday life with respect to the past, the present and the future.

2. Appreciating the Past

The retail centre of Hanoi is the historical triangular-shaped district known as the 36 Streets, which is bounded by the Red River to the northeast, the old citadel (now an historical landmark) to the west, and *Hoan Kiem* or Returned Sword Lake to the south. Most people believe this district originally had 36 *pho* or streets (although there are far more streets there now), hence its name. However, Barbara Cohen suggests that the number 36 was more symbolic: three plus six equals nine, an auspicious number in Vietnamese culture.²

Originally, each street in the 36 Streets was home to a different *phuong* or trade guild, which was reflected by the name of the street. For example, in *Hang Bun* or Rice Noodle Street the residents made and sold rice noodles, in *Hang Non* or Hat Street the residents made and sold conical bamboo hats, etc. Some streets continue to specialize in this fashion, but not as strictly as in the past.

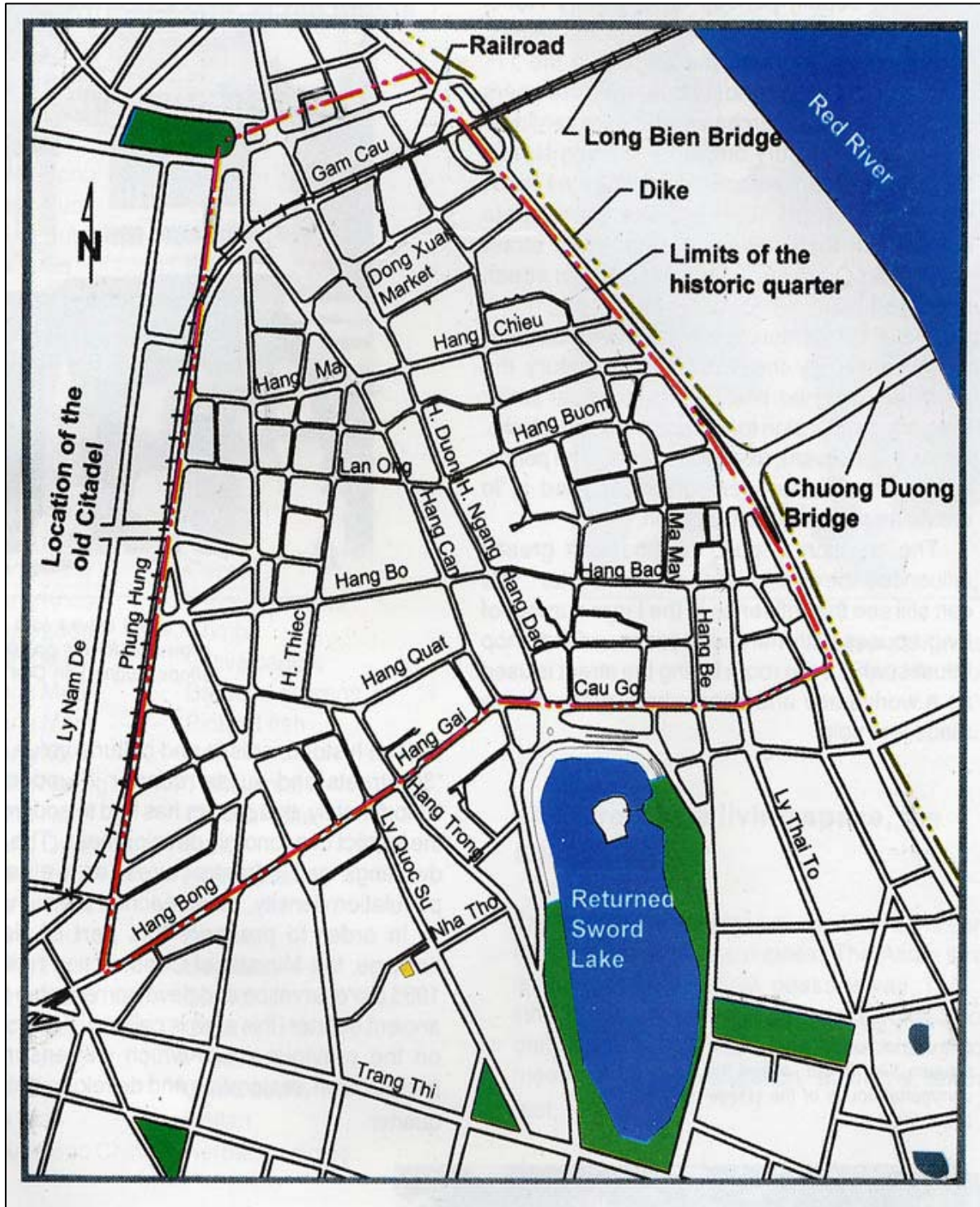
There are two popular theories that explain why the first residents of the 36 Streets settled there. Hoang Dao Thuy suggests that under the Tran dynasty (15th century), many skilled craftsmen left their native villages to work at the Royal Court. When some of them fell out-of-favour with the King, they moved to the 36 Streets and set up shop.³

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¹ The authors in Hanoi obtained research material for this article.

² Cohen 1994.

³ Phe, Nishimura 2000, 20.

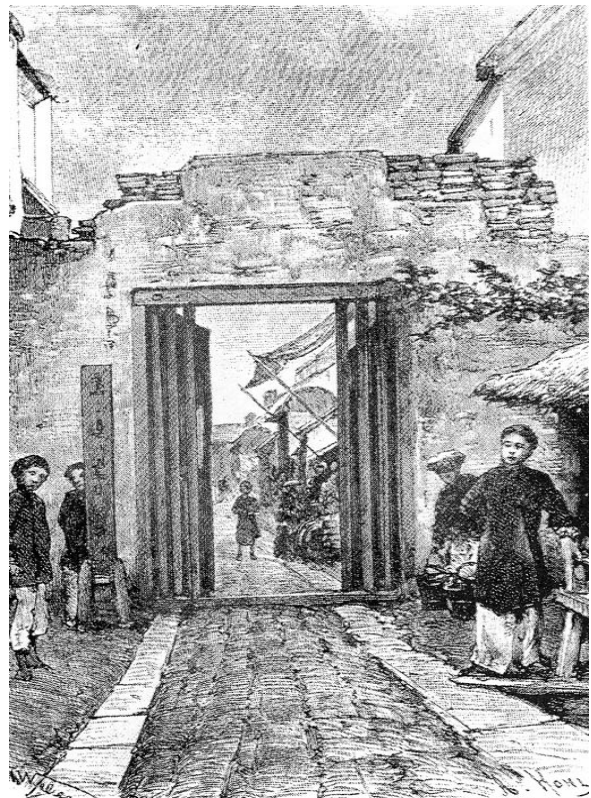


1. Hanoi's 36 Streets.

On the other hand, Nguyen Khac Dam⁴ and Andre Masson⁵ believe the 36 Streets was initially a marketplace. Once a week craftsmen from surrounding villages came to this district to sell their goods. Those from the same village built their stalls next to each other. When they realized that it would be a lot more profitable and convenient to open every day, they gradually replaced their temporary stalls with permanent shophouses. The fact that Hanoi used to be called *Ke Cho* or Big Market seems to support this particular theory.

In either case, the craftsmen and traders who came to Hanoi brought their village culture and customs with them. As a result, some buildings characteristic of traditional Vietnamese village life, such as the *dinh* or communal house, the *chua* or village pagoda, and the *cong lang* or village gate, were introduced in the city from about this time. Usually there was a village gate built at both ends of a street by the members of the appropriate trade guild, who also often built a communal house and a village pagoda for the community.

In our opinion, the best way to sense the authentic character of Hanoi is to take a walk around the 36 Streets. The city's street life nourishes its sense of place. A new day often starts early. People wake up around five a.m. Businesses open at six a.m., but close late. People venture out into the streets to pursue all kinds of activities. They buy sticky rice with pork or Vietnamese-French bread rolls or beef noodles from the food shops and street vendors, then sit nearby on the footpath to eat. A woman in a conical bamboo hat carries two baskets of food on a pole over her shoulder. People sit on small stools at low tables leisurely sipping coffee or tea inside an old-fashioned Vietnamese-style coffee shop. None of the city's growing number of modern Western-style bars and pubs can match this coffee shop's unique ambience. Not far away, a craftsman carves



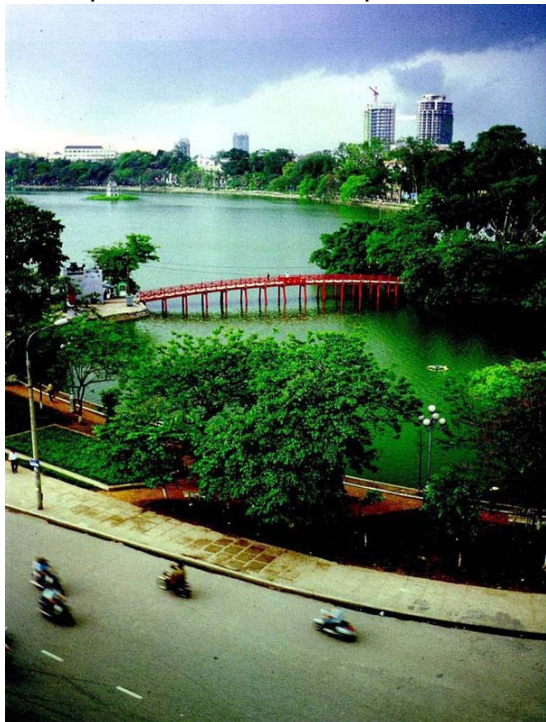
2. A village gate in the 36 Streets.

⁴ Khac Dam, 1998, 118.

⁵ Masson 1983, 108.

a name on a gravestone. His family has practised this trade for generations. An elderly man rests against a display cabinet in front of his old French-style house. A man parks his old Vespa motor scooter on the footpath, blocking people's way. Certainly, all of the hustle and bustle of the 36 Streets reinforces the feeling of a marketplace. Ironically, Hanoi's busiest area is located next to the city's most peaceful spot. The serene landscape of Hoan Kiem Lake, rendered by the curved roofs of ancient pagodas under the greenery of many trees, provides leisure spaces and quiet moments for everyone. Groups of old men sit around playing Chinese chess on the pavements. Students converge on the lakeside lawns after school to chat and snack. The secluded tracks around the lake make perfect rendezvous for young couples to 'make out'. The juxtaposition of the 36 Streets and Hoam Kiem Lake, the hectic beside the tranquil, is a good example of the many stark contrasts to be found in Hanoi's built environment.

The urban form of the 36 Streets was largely created by two-storey shop-houses. Initially, traditional Vietnamese shop-houses consisted of three *gian* or compartments in a row. However, to reduce the cost of a tax imposed on the width of a shop-house started from 19th century, the left and right compartments were eliminated. A typical one-compartment shop-house is approximately three metres wide and up to 60 meters deep, with a shop at the front and living spaces behind. Con-



3. Hoam Kiem Lake

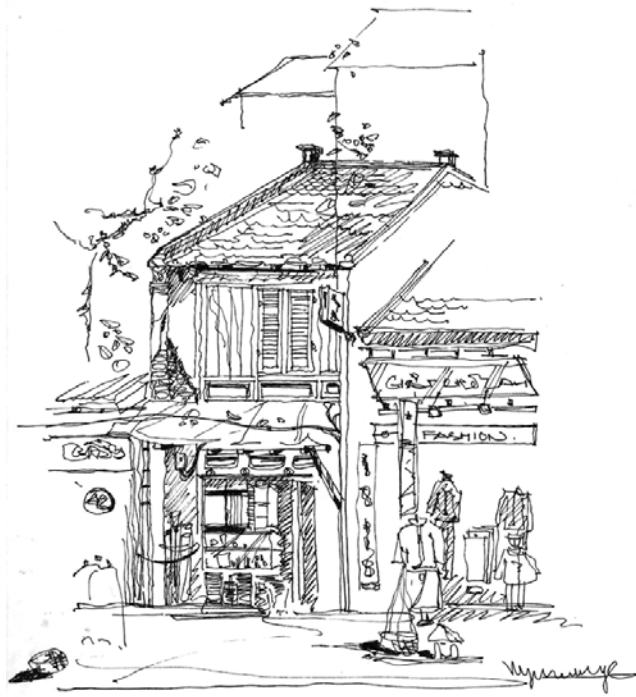
sequently, they became popularly known as 'tube-houses'.

A good example is the late 19th century shop-house at 44 Hang Can Street. It was originally a pen shop, but over the years it has also been a green tea merchant's, an agency for Shell Oil, a convenience store, and currently a grocery shop, illustrating the versatility of this building form. The shop-house is three metres wide and 36 metres long. Occupying the front of the building on the ground floor is a shop measuring three metres wide and seven metres long. During business hours, the front of the shop is open practically from side to side, and after business hours, it is closed with vertical timber planks. Behind the shop are a courtyard with a staircase to the first floor, a storeroom for groceries (originally a living-

room), a bathroom, another courtyard containing a water tank, a kitchen (once a storeroom for green tea) with another staircase leading to an outdoor space on the first floor, an unused room (originally a kitchen), another open air courtyard, and two toilets.

On the first floor (going from front to back) there is an unused room (probably originally a bedroom), a corridor next to a light well overlooking the courtyard below, a living room, a second living room (originally used for ancestor worship), a third living room with a ladder leading to a Buddhist prayer room above, a light well over the bathroom and the water tank, an outdoor space used for clothes drying and growing plants in pots, an unused room (originally a living room), and a void above the open air courtyard on the first floor.

The shop-house is basically sound, but generally run down and in need of repair. The roof is clad with terracotta tiles. Interestingly, in the past, gold and other valuables were hidden between the roof and the ceiling. The sidewalls of the shop-house are made of rendered brickwork. The internal walls and the original fixtures, such as the staircases, are made of timber. As mentioned earlier, shop-houses like this one were largely responsible for creating the architectural character of the 36 Streets that is beloved by locals and tourists alike, but they are becoming increasingly scarce.



4. Shop-house at 44 Hang Can Street.

3. Pressures of the Present

The above description of 44 Hang Can Street indicates that traditional Vietnamese two-storey shop-houses have an abundance of space. In fact, in the recent past it was very common for several families to jointly own and occupy only one old shophouse. For example, between 1954 and 1998 five families lived together in the late 19th century shophouse at 87 Ma May Street, which has now been fully restored

under the Preservation and Renovation of Hanoi Ancient Quarter program. Often these old shophouses remained, albeit in a run down condition, because the joint owners could not agree on a path of action.

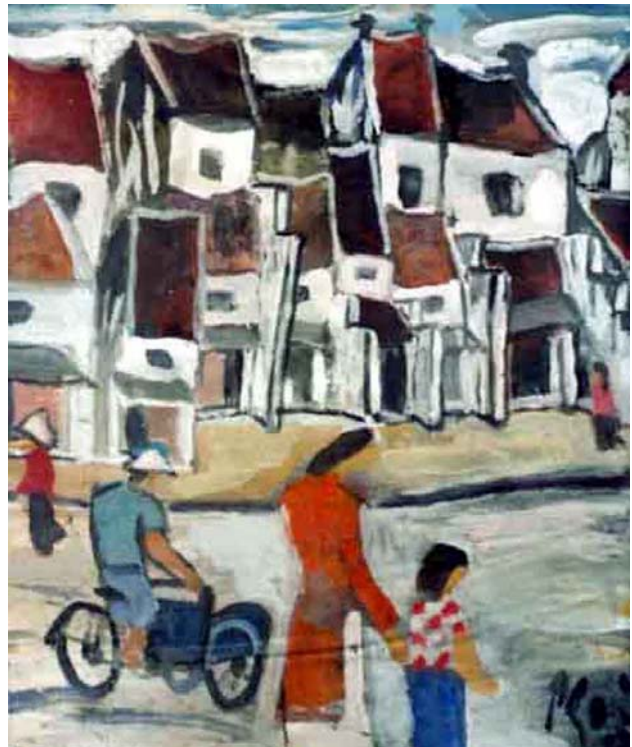
Many individuals who have prospered under *doi moi* (the opening up of Vietnam's economy) can now afford to buy these jointly owned shop-houses. What they tend to do is demolish the old two-storey building and construct a four, five or even six storey shop-house in its place. The dramatic increase in the height of shop-houses is one of the most interesting and significant changes to the built environment in Hanoi (and, indeed, in other cities in Vietnam as well) over the last ten years or so.

Ironically, far fewer people usually live in these new taller shop-houses: generally the size of the building is not about necessity, but about expressing wealth. Perhaps for the same reason, many new shop-houses have an ornately designed prayer room for ancestor worship on the top floor, which is totally different in style to the rest of the shop-house. Consequently, the 36 Streets no longer resembles the famous paintings by Hanoi artist Bui Xuan Phai showing two-storey shop-houses with graceful gables forming beautiful roof-scapes.

A good example of the new tall shop-houses being built in Hanoi is the six-storey shop-house at 140 Nguyen Trai Street, which was built in the late 1990s. At the



5. Shop-house at 87 Ma May Street.

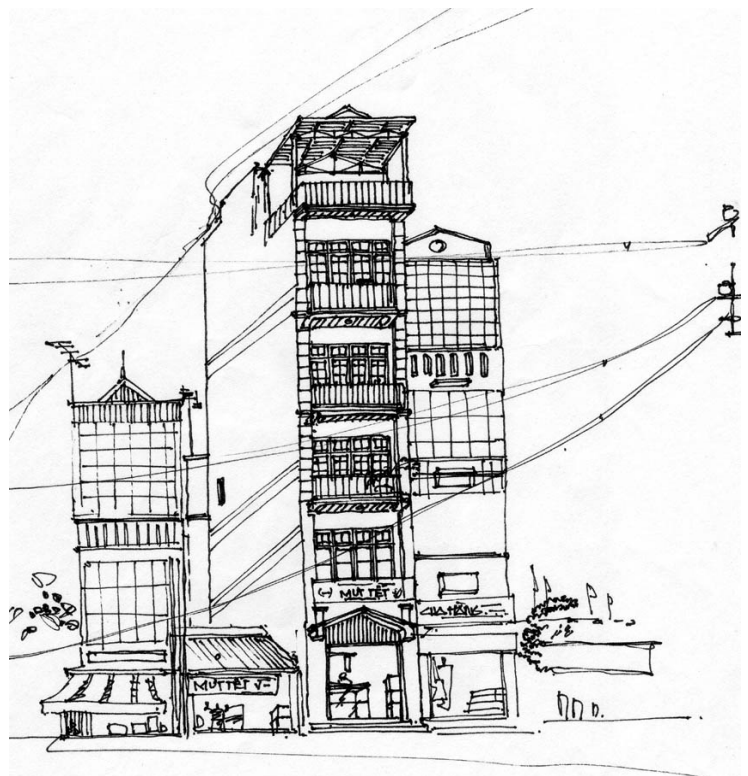


6. Hanoi Ancient Street by Bui Xuan Phai.

front of the building on the ground floor is a three-metre wide shop for selling biscuits and chocolates. The counters, the shelves and the stock stacked on the floor take up most of the floor space. Behind the shop is a staircase that goes up through the entire building, essentially dividing it in half. Behind the staircase is a large storeroom full of stock.

On the first floor (once again going from front to back) there is a balcony, a bedroom half-full of biscuits and chocolates in cardboard boxes, the staircase, the dining room, and the kitchen. On the second floor there is a balcony, a bedroom, a bathroom, the staircase, and another bedroom with an *en suite*. This layout is also repeated on the third and fourth floors. On the fifth floor there is a balcony, a bedroom used by the driver employed by the shop, a toilet, the staircase, and a prayer room for ancestor worship. In case one of the shopkeeper's small children falls down the stairwell, he has strung a homemade spider web-like net from the balusters at several different floors. On the sixth floor there is a roofed outdoor space used for drying clothes and recreational activities like gardening in pots and playing table tennis. There is also a concrete water tank at the rear.

It appears that the owners of these new shop-houses are looking beyond the purity of local-style architecture and the prestige of foreign-style architecture in preference for a combined approach to shop-house design. The most obvious feature of many new shop-houses is the popularity of French-style architecture, particularly of the period when Vietnam was under French control. This is ironic, to say the least, given the enormous sacrifices the Vietnamese made to oust the French. The positive publicity for old French-colonial buildings in the Hanoi media, especially, no doubt plays a significant role in influencing people's perceptions of what is architecturally desirable. There certainly appears to



7. Shop-house at 140 Nguyen Trai Street.

be a strong connection between notions of wealth and this type of architecture. Therefore, many clients ask their architects to design shop-houses with French-style facades. Fortunately, most architects have their own unique interpretations of French-style, so the new shop-houses are varied in appearance. For example, they might be different colours and have different architectural details and decorations, even though they spring from the same ideological source. What is apparent is that the so-called 'French-style' has been sufficiently transformed to create a distinct contemporary local architecture.

Likewise, the 5-storey Soviet-style apartment buildings in Hanoi, designed between 1950 and 1980 by Russian architects or Russian-educated Vietnamese architects, have experienced significant form changes as a direct result of the improved social and economic circumstances of their inhabitants. In particular, extra rooms have been added to the front and back of the buildings. On the ground floor, rooms added in front usually function as shops or workshops, enabling people to work from home, while those added at the back are more frequently used for domestic activities, such as drying clothes, gardening in pots, keeping chickens in cages, and parking motorcycles. On the upper floors, the front and rear balconies are extended and enclosed to create extra rooms. The overall effect is to soften and individualize these otherwise severe-looking buildings, which in turn has a positive impact on the sense of place of the surrounding urban areas. Interestingly, the apartment buildings' new modified form reminds many people of the familiar pattern of rows of shop-houses.



8. French-style shop-houses in Hanoi.



9. A Soviet-style apartment building.

4. Looking Toward the Future

The above discussion about shop-houses in Hanoi raises several important general issues facing architects working in Vietnam today. These include deciding whether to preserve old buildings or to construct new ones in their place, choosing between a western view of architecture or a local traditional one, and designing new buildings that complement their surroundings rather than clash with them. Some of these issues, but on a grander scale, also confronted the 25 architectural firms that entered the competition to design a new Vietnamese Parliament House in Hanoi. It was to consist of two main buildings: a National Assembly House and a Conference Hall. Some Vietnamese firms worked alone, while others collaborated with overseas firms. An international panel of experts assessed the 25 designs before short-listing two Vietnamese-French entries and one Vietnamese-German entry that ultimately won the competition.

In 2003, the 25 new Parliament House designs went on display to the general public in a large exhibition hall in Hanoi. The chief aim was to gauge people's reactions to the designs. Around 1800 people visited the exhibition each day, indicating a high level of interest. Upon entering the hall visitors were handed a form on which to write their views about the schemes. An area with tables and chairs was even specially set-aside for this.

The site for the new Parliament House presented some tricky problems with regard to architectural context. For one thing, the existing 1960s Soviet-style Parliament House occupied a corner of the site, and the competition entrants had to decide for themselves whether to keep or demolish it. The competition guidelines clearly stated that if the old building was to be retained, then it should harmonise with the new one. About half of the entrants kept the old building, but most of them effectively ignored it in their final designs.



10. The 25 designs on display in Hanoi.



11. Existing Parliament House.

While the authors of this article were at the exhibition, the question of whether the existing Parliament House should be kept or not was being hotly debated by several groups of visitors. We were even drawn into one of these discussions by two Vietnamese architects who invited us to comment on one of the short-listed schemes that retained the old building. We explained that what bothered us about this design was the lack of connection between the rectangular form of the old Parliament House and the circular form of the new one. On the other hand, another scheme that had also retained the old Parliament House appeared to work quite well to us. The architects had put a new mirror image of the old building on the opposite side of the site and the rest of the new Parliament House in between these two buildings.

Another complexity that the competition entrants had to cope with was the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum adjacent the new Parliament House site. On one hand, people do early morning exercises nearby the mausoleum. The footpaths are crowded with joggers. Old folks practice *tai chi* and yoga. Younger adults jump rope. Kids play badminton. By the same token, the mausoleum containing the body of the 'father' of modern Vietnam is one of the most revered places in Hanoi. This is another example of the stark contrasts to be found in Hanoi, mentioned earlier.

Looking at the new Parliament House designs, it was clear that many competition entrants found designing a building that was a significant landmark on one hand, yet did not eclipse the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum on the other, very difficult to achieve. The Soviet-style scheme that most people correctly guessed was designed by the Vietnamese Research Institute of Architecture (the names of the designers were not revealed to the general public) may not have been very fashionable, but neither would it have looked out of place opposite the austere mausoleum. Perhaps as to be expected, many entrants resorted to clichés. A number of designs featured a Vietnamese-style curved roof. The Vietnamese flag – a yellow star on a red background – inspired a number of others.

Two of the short-listed schemes featured a circular form. We spoke to Nguyen Duc Vien, a young Vietnamese architect who had worked on one of these schemes, who explained that it graphically symbolized a traditional Vietnamese drum. He also pointed out that his firm's design also featured a square form that symbolised a Vietnamese cake traditionally eaten at important meetings. Furthermore, the circular drum form also represented heaven and the square cake form also represented earth. The interior design of the National Assembly House was based on the Vietnamese flag. It also featured quotations and statues of Ho Chi Minh. According to Vien, the design team carefully considered the views of the building from all directions, especially from the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum.

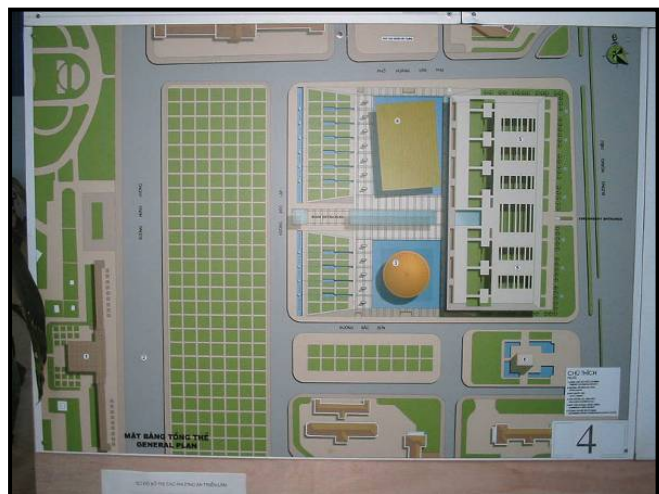
However, the President of the Vietnamese Association of Architects, Professor Nguyen Truc Luyen, who was also one of the judges of the competition, stated that none of the 25 entries completely satisfied the design requirements, and even the winning Vietnamese-German scheme 'was not momentous enough to represent the Vietnamese image of architecture'.

In late 2003, a detailed archaeological survey of the new Parliament House site was undertaken. To everyone's surprise, the archaeologists discovered five layers of earlier settlements dated from 11th century. They include the remains of an ancient imperial citadel. Given the site's unexpected historical significance, the Vietnamese government was under-pressure to find another site for the new Parliament House seven kilometres away. This may have been a blessing in disguise, because it is 10 times bigger than the old site with far fewer contextual problems.

The Vietnamese government invited the German architecture firm, GMP International, which had won the new Parliament House competition, to submit a different scheme for the new site. GMP International ended up designing four alternatives: one represented a conical bamboo hat; two, a lotus flower; three, a wave (which could mean either literally a wave or a trend); and four, the star on the Vietnamese flag. In early 2004, the four schemes were displayed as before. Professor Luyen was surprised by the highly symbolic designs, because he had expected GMP International to take a far more functional approach.⁶ Many other architects also declared they were uncon-



12. The Soviet-style scheme.



13. Vien's firm's short-listed scheme.

⁶ Hoang 2003.

vinced by the designs' simplistic symbolism. However, by and large, the general public liked the new designs. Presumably one of these schemes will go ahead.

5. Conclusion

The authors of this article believe that taking an empirical view of the built environment, as represented by the above 'snapshots' of Hanoi, will lead to a better understanding of what is happening on the ground by architects, builders, planners, and urban designers. In our opinion, this fundamental approach to the built environment should be the beginning of the design and policy-making process.

More specifically, we conclude that Hanoi's unique sense of place remains remarkably resilient, despite the tremendous pressures for change. Take the Vietnamese shop-house for example. While it has become a lot taller, largely as a result of foreign money boosting the Vietnamese economy, the shop-house's basic footprint has remained the same. The important thing is that the grain of the city has not been lost. Another example is the evolution of the Soviet-style apartment block. The ad hoc addition of shops, workshop and rooms has almost transformed this alien building type into a familiar local architectural form. Interestingly, many of the problems facing architects working in Hanoi today are the same for both domestic and monumental scale work, as the development of the 36 Streets and the design of a new Parliament House illustrate. However, the new Parliament House competition highlighted the universal tensions between popular architectural identity and the architectural profession.

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