

BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND ARCHITECTURAL CULTURE IN VIETNAM

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Abstract

The Vietnamese nation, an aggregate of 60 nationalities, looks back to four millennia. Traditional architecture — without architects — emphasises bonds with nature. Vietnamese buildings — living houses and village halls — are accumulations of attendant arts and applied arts. In this country on the way to industrialization, concern is raised by atmospheric pollution and other environmental harms encountered in developed countries. Mass housing — needed to help housing shortage — is expected to avoid monotony and other errors observed in residential estates abroad, and to keep human scale.

Introduction

Actually, one may wonder why it is that at a time where sciences, technics, civilization are booming, and so does the living standard, environment does not keep pace with this development, or even exhibits a decline from several aspects.

No doubt, development of the human society is unthinkable without the scientific-technical revolution that much endowed mankind materially and mentally. One day's production in developed countries exceeds that having required formerly months or even years.

Besides of undoubtedly positive results of modern civilization, it has also drawbacks for the social life, that have to be scrutinized to avoid them in the future.

Abrupt economical-social transformations concomitant to the scientific-technical revolution, mainly in developed industrial countries, have altered the built and the natural environment, the fabric of settlements, material and intellectual frames of the individual, the family, community, society. Demographic problems, urbanization harms, intolerable, aggravating pollution of the environment, annihilation of spiritual and emotional values cause agony of mankind.

Deepgoing economical and social changes have much affected and blurred features of traditional national cultures, and upswing of the technical civilization jeopardizes centuries-old cultural and moral values of peoples.

Different regions and countries of the world exhibit immense differences in economical and social development. At present, nuclear age and automation age are going on in several developed industrial countries (Japan, USA, FRG, etc.), where most branches of production are featured by reliance on computers, robots and automatic production lines. Nevertheless, several countries are still on a level of social-economical development arisen centuries ago.

There are enormous differences also from demographic aspects, mainly between developed and developing countries. In certain countries, population may grow as much as 3 or 4% a year, others exhibit zero growth or even decrease. This latter may be the case in medium developed socialist countries. (According to statistical data, the population of Hungary decreased by 55.000 persons in 1984.) Both overpopulation and depopulation are injurious to the economical-social development of the country, to the adequate human-social ways of living.

Industrialized production, overdifferentiation of social labour division, rupture of physical-spiritual relations between social strata, generalization of prefabricated, "ready-made" material and mental goods, of mass media, penetration of electronics into everyday life, etc., although ease material-physical life but increasingly imperil human thinking ability, mental values, emotional life, induce man to part with nature, jeopardize biological, ecological balance.

Early in the 20th century, and mainly after World War II, "modernism" has come to the foreground, reflecting regularities and essentials of industrialized, mechanized societies, comprising factors both proficient and adverse to the development of human life and society.

Modernism has had different impacts on countries and societies of the world. It has altered the aspect of industrial societies and the built and natural environment, in particular, architecture.

Industrially produced building materials (metals, plastics, glass, reinforced concrete, etc.), mechanized building technologies, new design and constructional regulations, procedures, modern architecture relying on a changed mentality coped to a degree with mass housing needs of society. At the same time, however, the artificial environment created by modern architecture increasingly separates man from natural environment, jeopardizing biological, ecological conditions of man as a natural being.

As mentioned, modern society is featured by extreme differentiation of social labour division, manifest also in architecture. Activities are decomposed to sections, entraining differentiation of mentalities, eruditions, modes of viewing of social strata of different activities, of physical workers and intelligentsia. From the study of requirements for, and demands on, human environment it is obvious that actually, mentality, erudition, concept of "landscape designers" and other specialists deviate from several aspects from

those of the environment-bound population, and so do other activities and arts.

Disunion between physical and mental in society involves a risk to grade and niveau of the environment.

All these urge to prevent and bypass these risks and harms concomitant, in developed countries, to the predominance of technical sciences, and in developing countries, to the actual economical-social transformation and development, by way of scientific considerations.

This short study is intended to outline some basic trends of the economical, social, cultural development of Vietnam, in particular, as concerns architectural culture, and environmental engineering, in view of the outlined experiences and recognitions.

Geographical and climatic conditions affecting architecture in Vietnam

Vietnam is sited in Asia, east part of the Peninsula of Indochina, over an area of 329.600 sq.km, a giant "S" about 1730 km long from the Chinese border to the Gulf of Siam. 75 per cent of the territory of Vietnam are mountainous, and only 25 per cent are flatland. Its climate is typically tropical, hazy, rainy and hot. The mean temperature is 21.4 to 26.5 °C. The highest summer temperature is 35 to 40 °C. Even the lowest winter temperature is seldom below 0 °C. Vietnam has variegated geographical features, fauna and flora, is rich in natural resources including some fifty exploitable materials. Its immense forests are inexhaustible sources of natural building materials. Multiple beauties of nature are spiritual sources of architecture. Notwithstanding natural benefits, natural plights (floods, droughts, storms, typhoons, etc.) cause serious damages every year, especially in architecture.

Historical, ethnographical, cultural peculiarities of Vietnam

Recent archaeological finds prove Vietnam to have been inhabited by groups of primitive men some hundred thousand years ago. Vietnam has developed about 4000 years ago by the union of different ethnic groups and tribes.

During the over 4000 years of building and defending the homeland, the Vietnamese nation has developed peculiar, high-niveau culture and traditions. The ancestral Vietnamese "Dong Son" culture has developed some 2500 to 3000 years ago, during the Bronze Age. Bronze tools, art objects,

etc., made in this age, witness highly developed material and spiritual culture.

The bronze drum (Fig. 1) from the first millennium B. C. is typical of the ancestral Vietnamese culture.

Vietnam is a multinational country, with over 60 different nationalities. It has over 60 million inhabitants.

The history of Vietnam is a succession of fights to natural plights and to foreign intruders. The traditional national culture, consciousness and solidarity are overwhelming in the development of Vietnamese culture and society.

The actual economical-social situation in Vietnam

The glorious victory won by the Vietnamese people over the American imperialism is known to have introduced a new era of Vietnamese history — that of building and developing an integer, independent, free, sovereign and unified Vietnam. The historical victory of 1975 is an outstanding example of



Fig. 1. Bronze drum from the 1st millennium B.C., symbol of ancestral Vietnamese culture

the high national consciousness of the Vietnamese nation, of the love to nature and to the homeland, of the national solidarity and humanist ideology, and is a proof that the Vietnamese people is able to evict enemies and to preserve high-niveau cultural traditions developed in course of its four millennia of history.

The American aggression war caused immensurable material and spiritual damages, loss of men to the Vietnamese nation, economy and society. Coping with immense, complex economical and social problems is an extraordinary challenge to Vietnamese social strata and individuals. Architects and other professionals are first of all expected to spend high-level scientific abilities, skill, self-denial, humaneness, social justness and humanist ideology in order to create an environmental culture such as to forward economical, social, development, niveau of environment, to help evolution of mental values of man, and to create better, more humane ways of living for all strata and members of society.

Conservation of national traditions

In solving the problems above, architects and other professionals have to keep in mind the imperative of conserving and developing peculiar cultural traditions, values of the architectural culture, alongside with the assimilation of other countries' positive cultural achievements beneficial for the homeland.

Economical-social development of peoples, nations, countries has to rely on the complex interaction between peculiar national traditions, and up-to-date technologies and scientific achievements. In any case, human factors, features and mental-emotional needs of human life have to be reckoned with, namely omission of these factors has been the worst mistake of modernism, hence also of modern architecture.

Every people has peculiar traditions, cultures, customs developed during its history. The variety of national traditions and cultures adds up to the variegatedness of human culture, suiting to distinguish peoples and nations. As a matter of fact, national traditions have their positive and negative elements, that have to be reevaluated by scientific methods for their action on economical-social development and on the environment culture, and of them the positive ones have to be preserved and furthered.

The twoness of national traditions and culture is composed partly from requirements, peculiarities arisen from natural (geographic, climatic, relief, vegetational, etc.) features, and partly, of self-contained, primeval popular, national, religious customs, features, traditions. National culture and tradition have both material and mental sides, differentiated accordingly. Material culture (i. e. civilization) involves — among others — man-made objects, en-

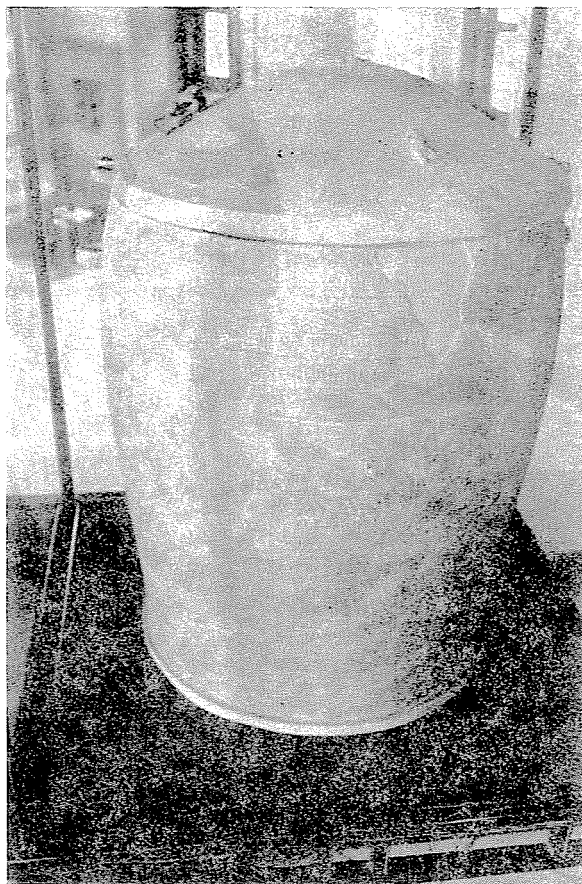


Fig. 2. Bronze vessel from the 1st millennium B.C.

vironment. Means of production, commodities, ornaments, food, clothing, buildings, roads, vehicles, settlements, etc. pertain to civilization. Personal, social conditions, production, building methods, entertainments, arts, man-to-nature relation add up to spiritual culture and tradition. Civilization and spiritual culture are indivisible, namely civilization underlies spiritual culture, and in turn, spiritual culture is resource and motor of civilization — the two being in interaction.

In evaluating national traditions and culture, positive, valuable factors have to be pointed out, as essential, permanent fundamentals of national development, suiting to forward, boost social-economical development of the nation. On the other hand, inherited customs, traditions failing to forward, or even counteracting the development of nations or countries have to be

discontinued. This would not mean — in conformity with international experience — to cancel them from among the national peculiarities, namely they belong to the historically developed traditions, integer parts of the national culture, and offset recent negative features.

Environment culture involving architectural culture is an integer, essential domain of national culture, so the culture of architecture cannot be analyzed, evaluated independent of the comprehensive, complex examination and evaluation of national culture.

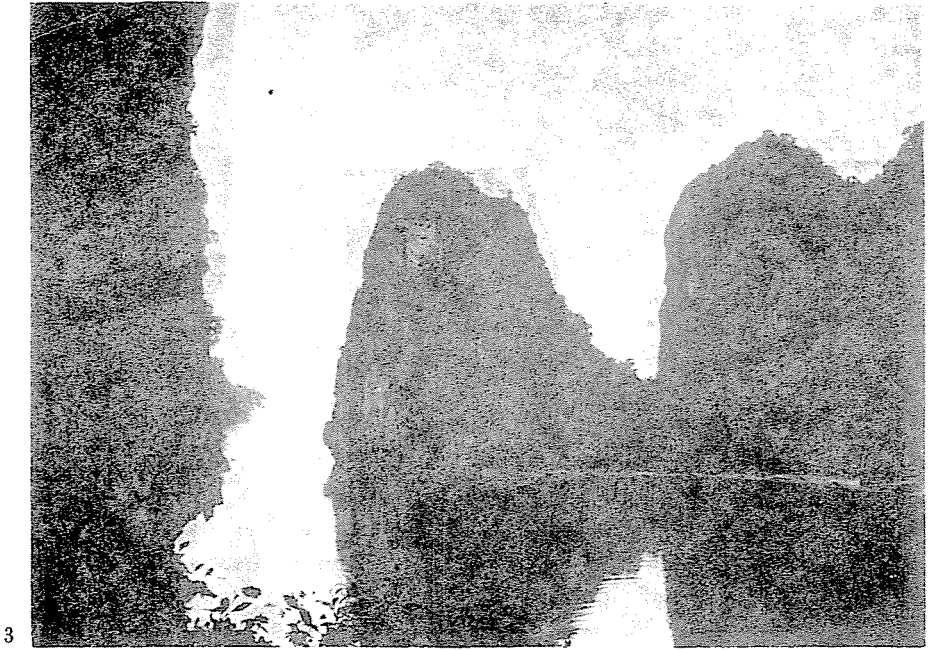
Peculiarities of the national culture in Vietnam

Starting from the above, let us have a closer look at Vietnam's culture. The wide range of geographic, climatic and other natural features, as well as the multinationality helped the Vietnamese to create a rich, versatile and peculiar culture across history. Vietnamese nationalities have cultures of their own, integer, inseparable parts of the national culture of Vietnam. In course of this history of four millennia, cohabitation produced Vietnamese peculiarities, common features in each, at the same time letting them to maintain their own cultures and traditions.

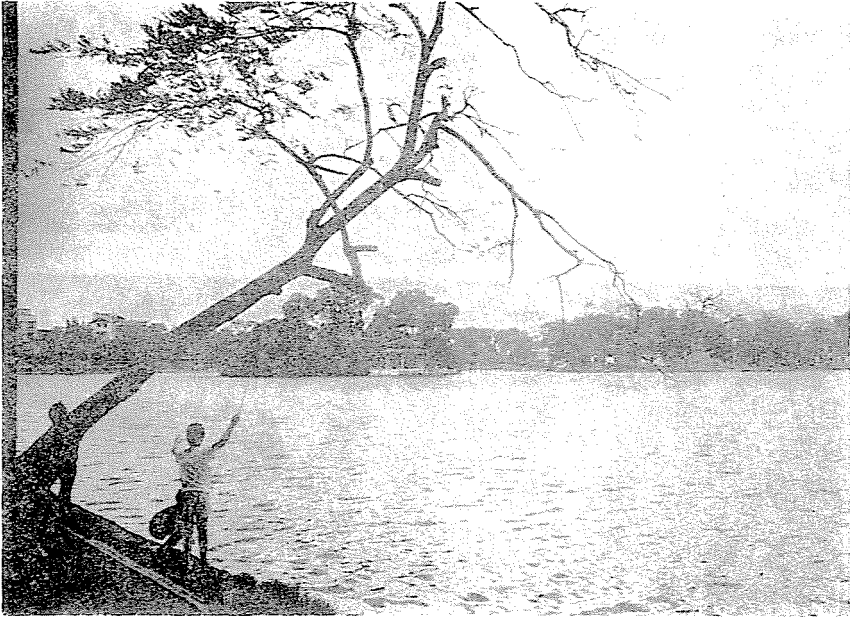
One of the most conspicuous, most essential features of Vietnamese national culture is the close, organic man-to-nature relation, underlying its social-economical development. Since prehistoric ages to now, Vietnamese have lived in correlation with nature, clearly reflected by their approach to nature. Vietnamese don't consider themselves rulers of nature, neither to be small in front of nature's forces. They strive to accommodate themselves to natural features rather than to change environmental peculiarities. The inherent, intimate man-to-nature relation may be simply called as love to, and interest in, nature, approach to nature. For the Vietnamese every item of nature, from the smallest (leaves, flowers, ants, bees, etc.) to the greatest (rivers, mountains, forests, moon, sun, etc.), just as natural phenomena (wind, rain, moonlight, sunshine, storm, flood, drought, etc.) have, like man, their own spiritual world. Vietnamese desire to speak a common language with nature to understand spirit, features of the natural world.

Physical and mental relations to nature of peoples of the world depend on natural features and national traditions. These relations are determinant for their peculiar moral-ideological orders. In the Vietnamese society, personal-familial-social relations are featured by humanist ideology, due exactly to the close relation, harmonic coexistence and deep affection of man to man and man to nature.

Man comes from nature, resides in nature and returns to nature. So man is a natural being assuming social marks in life to become a social being.



Figs 3—4. Ha Long (Landing Dragon) Bay in North Vietnam



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Figs 5—6. Hoan Kiem (Recovered Sword) Lake in Hanoi



Fig. 7. Street in Hanoi

In addition to natural features, also social peculiarities were decisive for the development of national culture in Vietnam, in particular, rural ways of living and peculiarities of peasants. Agriculture, first of all, cultivation of rice, has been about determinant for productive and social conditions, the type of national culture, settlement fabric and aspect.

Vietnamese settlement fabric

The fabric of Vietnamese settlements is best understood from rural fabrics, rural systems. Nature has been determinant for the development of villages. Man ever had to adapt himself to natural environment, and to fight nature's unkindness.

Ancestral Vietnamese settlements have arisen at the delta region of the Red River (Song Hong), alongside with agriculture and water-bound rice cultivation. A most grandiose and primeval environment engineering work has been the dam system along the Red River, still functioning. The first town in Vietnam — Co Loa Vietnam — built in the 3rd century B.C., had been capital of the country named Au Lac by that time. This town clearly reflected economical, social, political conditions in Vietnam at that time. The first town was a confined entity, of three zones. An internal fortification surrounded the ruler's palace. It was surrounded by the zone of residences and offices of man-



Fig. 8. Mot Cot (One-Footed) Pagoda

darins and merchants. The outer zone was that of the defence military, also with fortifications, surrounded, in turn, by rivers, lakes, swamps, important factors in Vietnamese warfare and communication.

Vietnam has a humane rural system, featured by organic integrity, rather than by self-containedness, of constituent villages, physical-mental and ideological relation. This is peculiar of the social life in Vietnam, and explains how could the Vietnamese nation evict every enemy and defend cultural traditions developed in course of millennia.

Alongside with social development, within the economical system, agriculture got paralleled by an increasing number of productive branches, such as handicraft with its multiple, variegated domains of production. It had rapid development of transports (land, river transport and maritime navigation) and of commerce, as concomitant. These factors have contributed to the development of the town network, integrating the settlement network in Vietnam.

As to the architectural aspect of the settlement network, Vietnamese towns and villages integrate natural environment as if arisen therefrom. In these human settlements, natural items keep their natural features. Lakes, forests, hills, mountains, rivers integrate the settlement fabric. Even the biggest urban or rural constructions fit the landscape rather than to prevail over the environment.

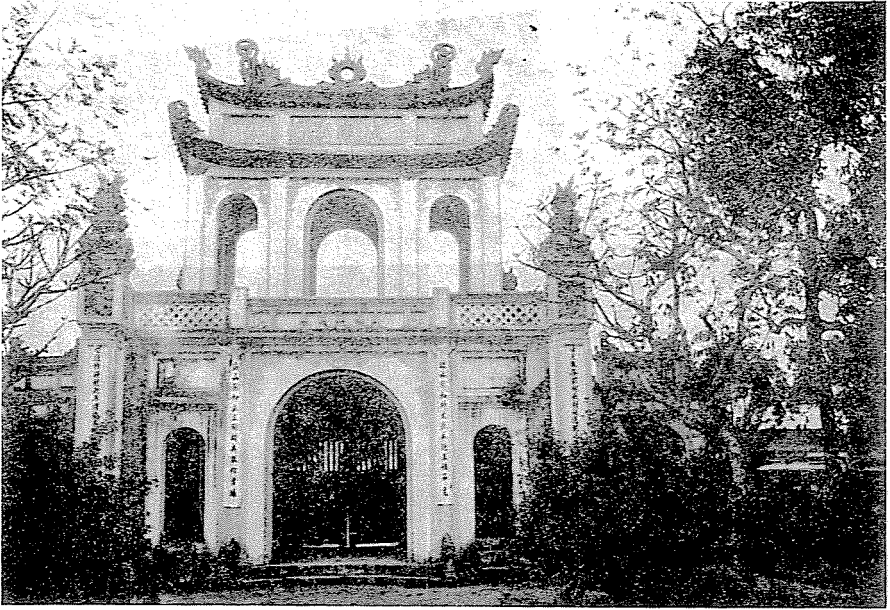


Fig. 9. Gate of Van Mieu (University of Literature) 11th century, Hanoi

Human scale and character of Vietnamese culture and architecture

Physically and spiritually “human scale” has been prevailing in Vietnamese built environment and architecture from prehistoric ages to now. Human scale is due to dimensioning buildings and building complexes to suit everyday activities, needs of man; on the other hand, building design, space order, building materials, ornamentation visually fit atmosphere and features of the environment. Consciously integrating vegetation, sights and natural features with built environment forwards its harmony and human scale. Traditional Vietnamese architecture is exempt from monumental, pompous constructions like mediaeval cathedrals or baroque residences in Europe.

Attendant arts and relation to Vietnamese architecture

Just as architecture, other arts (painting, sculpture, wood carving, literature, music, etc.) look back to a long past. Spiritually and emotionally, Vietnamese arts draw from everyday life, man’s approach to society and nature, affection to, and interest in, fellow beings, and observation of nature, creating thereby strict relations between common people and arts. Arts are shared and enjoyed by working people and peasants too, rather than by professional artists alone.



Fig. 10. One court of the Museum of Literature

Traditional Vietnamese architecture gathers literature, poetry, sculpture, wood carving, music and other popular arts. It is integrated by applied arts, integer, in turn, to everyday life. Building furniture and equipment are partly commodities, objects, and partly, bearers of emotional, mental purports; expressing peculiarities of the way of living, reflecting one's emotional realm, mentality, approach to arts. Vietnamese arts — architecture and applied arts — exhibit phenomena, motifs recalling spirit and features of Nature, stressing organic unity between man, architecture, attendant arts and applied arts.

Vietnamese rural society and architecture

Physical and spiritual life, personal and social conditions of Vietnamese are clearly reflected by architecture, in particular, by the villagescape. Village is a place where personal, familial, communal, social, professional relations prevail. The built-up of a village fits agriculture, irrigational cultivation of rice. Also labour division, social, productional conditions concomitant to economical-social development are decisive for built-up and features of villages.

Names of Vietnamese villages — Lime Village, Silk Village, Picture Village, etc. — express the prevailing, specialized production, that, nevertheless, does not mean absence of the main business — agriculture. An essential



Fig. 11. Tortoise-decorated stone plates with inscriptions referring to eternity of knowledge and skill, University of Literature

product is rice, staple food of Vietnamese. Villages are scattered between, and contiguous to, rice fields. Irrigational rice cultivation depends on continuous water supply, making irrigation channels indispensable. Rural residential areas are surrounded with fields.

The highway leads into the village across the rural gate, that is different in each village. In the consciousness of Vietnamese, mainly of peasants, the rural gate has an important function as symbol of coziness and intimacy.

The village comprises several lesser or greater groups of houses, organized by the street network. Peculiarly, houses do not follow the street line but different numbers of houses are freely grouped to organic, harmonic complexes, separated by farm yards, fields, footpaths, ponds, swamps.

Yard and garden

Individual plots accommodate a complex of two or three houses (living house, outhouse, kitchen) surrounding the paved courtyard in front of the living house. Yard is important for peasants, as a place for working, drying the crops, doing household, for leisure-time entertainment, recreation, for receiving guests, relations, for feasting, etc. The yard is joined by the garden. There is a wide range of rural gardens in Vietnam, such as pot gardens, pleas-



Fig. 12. Inner hall of a building of the Museum of Literature

ure gardens, mixed gardens, with the common characteristic that each may be considered as a small-scale nature, delivering material and spiritual food to man and relating him with nature. Flowers and ornamental plants are grown in gardens. Beyond of being fond of natural beauties, Vietnamese have an understanding of nature. Different kinds of trees, plants, flowers are planted in groups letting prevail their features: size, colour, fragrance, in a manner to provide visual, olfactory and gustatory pleasures around the year. Vegetation is the apparel of built environment, a connection between building and nature. After a day's heavy bodily work, Vietnamese workers find recreation in a quiet familiar atmosphere, by friendly entertainment and amidst nature. Song and flight of birds in the garden enliven natural and built environment. In addition to vegetation, architecture involves gracefulness of beasts, birds and beetles.



Fig. 13. Buddha statues of the Pagoda

Vietnamese living houses dependent on nature

Climatic conditions permit Vietnamese to do most of their living functions outdoors in all four seasons. Buildings, living houses are airy, freely accessible to air currents. Between closed spaces and the environment there is usually an intermediary space as a transition between them. This — partly or fully — overroofed, open-sided porch is essential not only in rural architecture but in the Vietnamese architecture in general.

Living houses are simply constructed and shaped from local building materials. Traditional building materials are mostly genuine materials such as timber, bamboo, a reed type related to bamboo, straw, palm leaves, etc. But also stone, ceramics, brick look back to millennia of application. In flatlands, rural houses are mostly single-storeyed, while highland architecture features

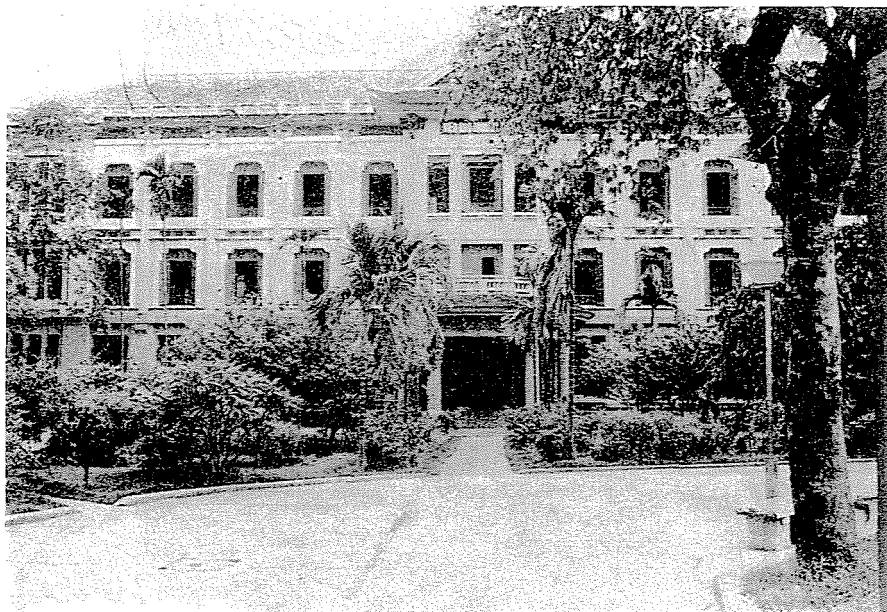


Fig. 14. Museum of Fine Arts, Hanoi

timbered buildings on stilts as a caution against excessive precipitation and groundwater.

Inner spaces of houses are seldom divided to rooms that are mostly but marked off. Main part of a living house is the central, multifunctional living area comprising the greatest part of the floor area, and separated by the porch from the environment. Members of a Vietnamese family do most of their daily chores in the central space, they rest there after work, take meals, do housework, receive visitors, etc. There are also the altars of gods and the dead. Minor rooms in the house are directly connected to the central space.

Family life, family relations

In Vietnam, strict family bonds are traditional. Marital bonds, bonds between parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, and others of the kind are humane in character. Typically, three (or even four) generations live together. Strict bonds between grandparents, parents and children provide for unity of Vietnamese families.

Cohabitation of less close relations is not uncommon, either, relying on mutual sympathies and interests. Bygone feudal ideologies created some

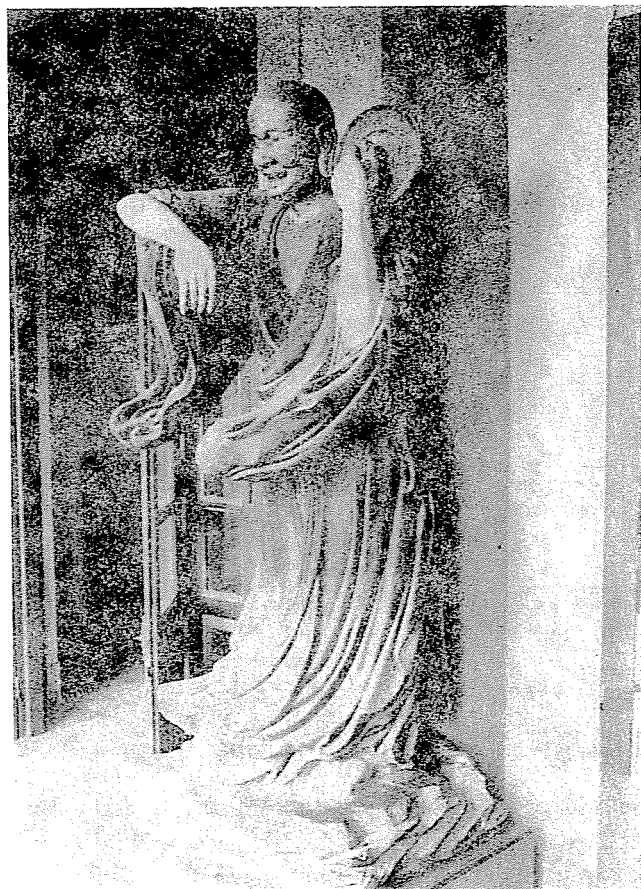


Fig. 15

restrictions in family lives, such as the right of decision of parents concerning their children's marriage, that are contradictory to actual progressive principles, hence are dying away.

Also community, social life has its peculiarities. Relations of the kind are of vital importance. Social strata are not exclusive, members strive to be on good terms with other members of the community.

Human behaviour, social justness underly strict bonds, national solidarity. There are different kinds of social relations: professional, religious, class, nationality relations, those between town and village, etc. In feudalist Vietnam, sharp controversies between peasants and feudal classes, as well as ruling classes, seriously hampered national development. On the other hand, working classes had strict relations, forwarding thereby development of the society.



Figs 15–16. Buddha statues, Museum of Fine Arts

Rural community buildings — the village hall

A piece of architecture fundamental to rural social life and relations is the “village hall”, “Dinh Lang”, in Vietnamese, built in common by the villagers. Its design and function reflect social conditions, social life, cultural traditions and peculiarities. Its functions comprise local administration, religious ceremonies. It accommodates the altar of the god, the patron spirit of the village. It is the scenery of festivities, elder meetings. It is also a house of culture. At festive occasions and by the time of Lunar New Year, villagers and guests from neighbouring villages gather in the village hall where festivals and other cultural events take place. Village halls, sited usually in busy village centers, along the main road crossing the village, forward communal, social relationships.

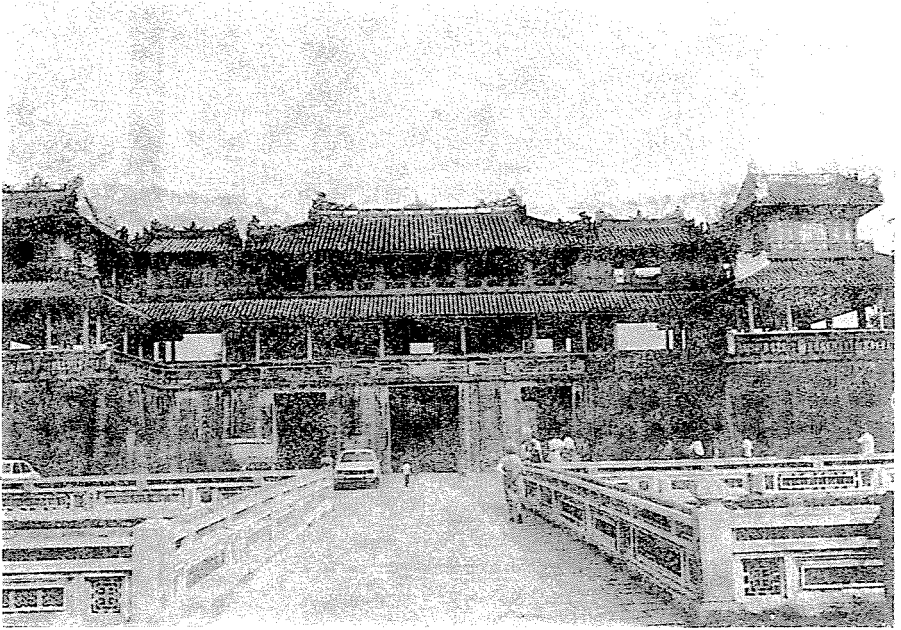


Fig. 17. Façade of the royal palace. Hué

Religious buildings

The other most important rural building type is the Buddhist temple, a complex of coherent pagodas, exhibiting features of Vietnamese architecture and attendant arts, the Vietnamese approach to religion, nature, society. Buddhist temples are usually built in some quiet, restful place.

Historically, Buddhism has been determinant in forming ideology and moral of people. Religious ideologies incite people's interest in each other and in nature, deep, mutual human relations. Religious precepts prohibit drastic intervention to nature, and specify orientation and design of houses and temples. At any rate, building rules and specifications of Buddhist ideology correspond from several aspects to up-to-date scientific views on a humane architecture.

Vietnamese attend temples not only for religious ceremonies but also to practice intimacy, deep bonds to gods, Buddhas, fellow men, and the beautiful, friendly natural environment. Mental-emotional conditions of Vietnamese visiting pagodas differ from those of European churchgoers. The Vietnamese faithful does not feel himself small in the religious atmosphere, among the gods, Buddhas bearing ideas close to everyday lives.

The quoted "human scale" prevails in Vietnamese village halls and temples, biggest of the rural buildings. Their scale and dimensions are derived

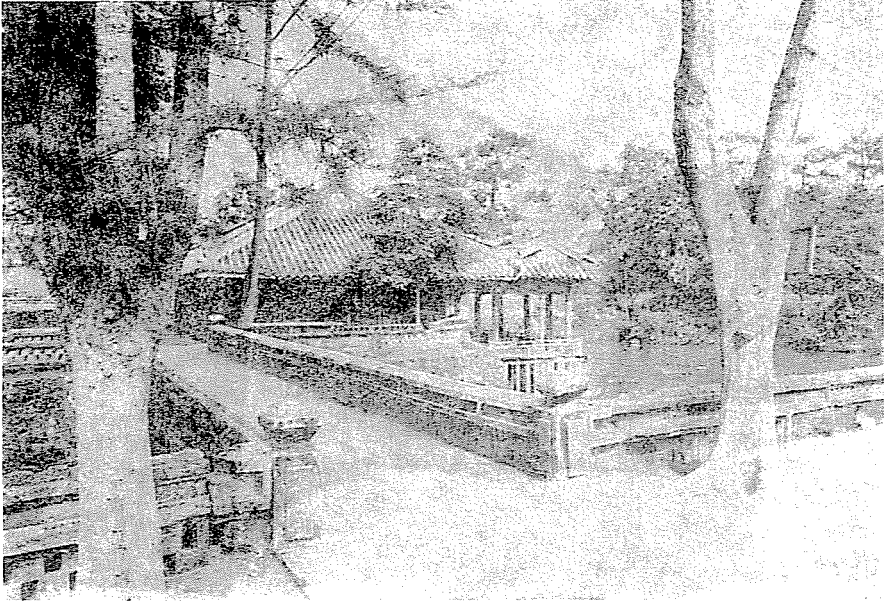


Fig. 18. Detail of the garden of the royal palace

from those of living houses. Village halls and temples are large enough to accommodate populations of entire villages though are not overwhelming the environment; they melt with the environment as if arising therefrom. Landscape and vegetation assimilate the built environment, buildings, building complexes with the pertaining small-scale nature, so that they can hardly be told apart. Inside the building, outdoor phenomena are perceived, while outdoors there is a feeling of indoors protection and intimacy. Buildings fit the landscape; their design, space system, decoration deliberately applying natural elements, practicalness and multifunctionality of buildings, the intimacy and quiet way of living of people, humanist ideology, balanced human relations, etc., all contribute to the harmony between man — society — built and natural environment.

Typical structures of Vietnamese architecture: roof structure and timber skeleton

A most typical and most important factor of Vietnamese architecture is the roof structure with roofing, imposed by geographic and climatic conditions. Wall structures are secondary, often of mere symbolic function. But warm, hazy climate, much of rain and intensive sunshine enhance the importance of the roof as a protection to man.

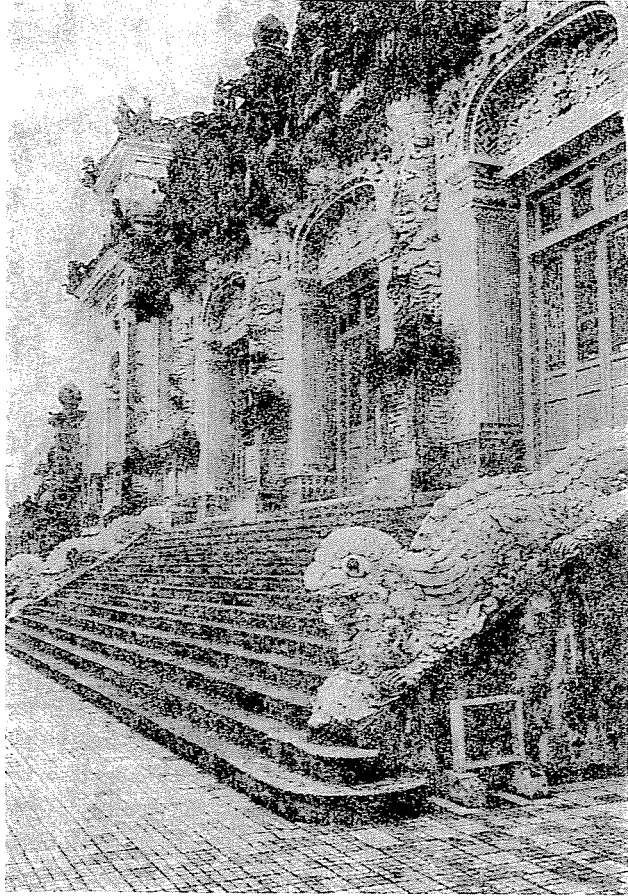


Fig. 19. Royal mausoleum, Hué

Roofs are steeply sloping, usually covered with ceramic roof tiles. Inner spaces of buildings are airy and open. Four (or at least two) walls of the village hall are no permanent stone or brick masonry but mobile wooden boards. At festivities or meetings, walls of the village hall are removed to accommodate population and guests under the roof.

Main load bearing structure of traditional Vietnamese architecture is the row of wooden posts, maybe a timber skeleton combined with brick or stone masonry, the so-called half-timbered wall. Vietnamese nationalities, settlements, villages have their peculiar local building materials each.

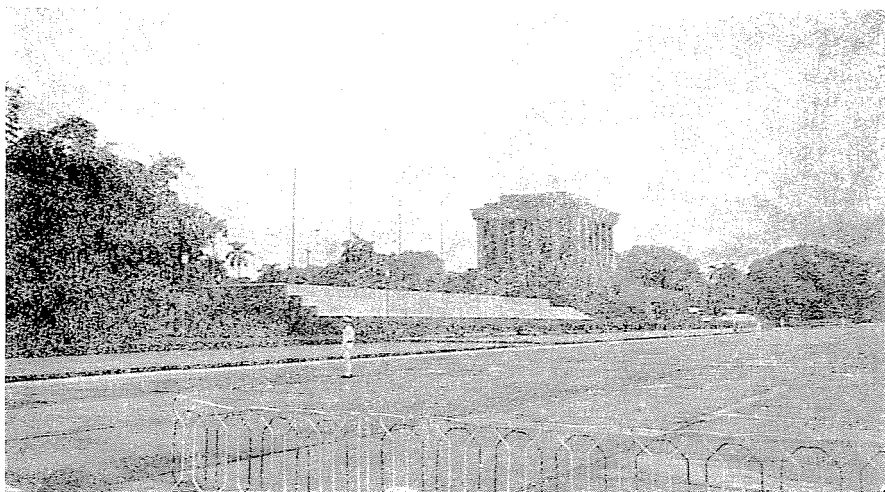


Fig. 20. Ho Chi Minh mausoleum, Hanoi

Moon and mentality

In traditional Vietnamese architecture — in addition to Sun, wells, and wind — Moon is another important factor. In addition to the Gregorian calendar, also the “lunar calendar” is in use in Vietnam. Relying on ancestral observations, peasants can foretell weather, crop yield, etc. from shape, mien, motion, etc. of the Moon. One of the greatest Vietnamese holidays is the Lunar New Year. Moon overrules the spiritual, emotional life and consciousness mainly of rural people. Formerly, moonlight illuminated village streets, houses and foliage at night. After a day’s heavy work in sunny rice fields, peasants rest, recover mentally and emotionally in moonlight, amidst their family, surrounded by nature. Also social life takes place at night, in moonlight. People feel empathy with moonlit elements, phenomena of nature. Houses, community buildings are oriented and designed to fit, in addition to the Sun, the wind and the landscape, also motion of the Moon, to elicit, so to say, a dialog between house and moonlight, to let in moonlight into the dwelling, the terrace, the court, the garden as much as possible, to help people enjoy the quiet beauty of cactus flowers and jasmines, the landscape, the moon, listening to the familiar folk tunes, instrumental music, to read and enjoy reading, to discuss life, arts, fellow people, business, while sipping a cup of tea.

Symbol of the Moon and conventionalized natural phenomena are common among architectural motifs, in folk-songs, sayings, poetry, literature and fine arts, underlying a strict relation between architecture and attendant arts.

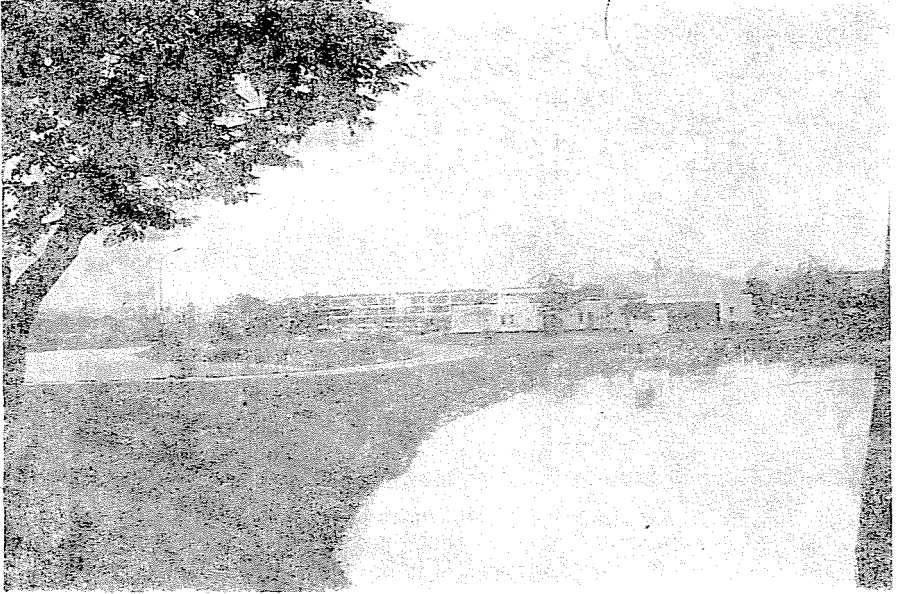
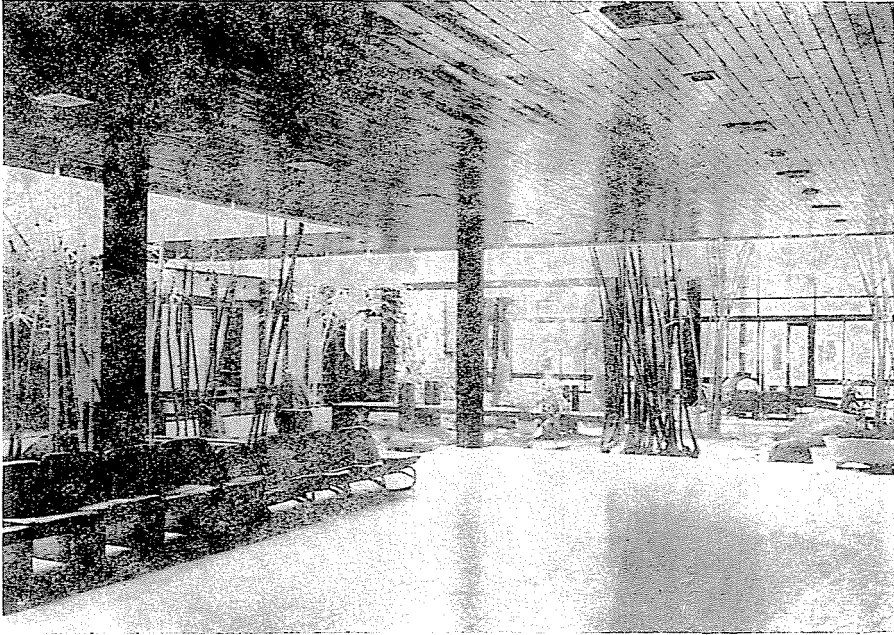


Fig. 21. Thang Loi hotel, Hanoi

Symbols in Vietnamese architecture

As stated before, Vietnamese are conscious of the proper language and spirit of natural elements, phenomena, therefore the symbolic purport of natural elements often are applied in architecture and arts, typical of Vietnamese architecture. Every flower or plant has its individuality and symbolic meaning. Vietnam, of tropical climate, is abundant in lotus flowers growing in swamps and lakes, symbolizing, with their quiet beauty, fragrance and growth, the self-consciousness, ideology and spirit of the Vietnamese nation. The "One-Footed" pagoda built in the 11th century, under the rule of the Ly dynasty, in the Vietnamese capital then called Thang Long (Rising Dragon), the actual Hanoi, looks like an immense lotus flower in a lake, merging with the natural environment as to beauty and mood.

Architecture and fine arts often apply the symbols of dragon, lion, tortoise, and peacock. Dragon is the symbol of self-consciousness, vigour of the Vietnamese nation. Tortoise is the symbol of eternity, steadfastness. Peacock represents beauty, solemnity, wealth. This is why symbols of these animals occur in the traditional Vietnamese architecture, on village halls, pagodas, palaces, shrines. The dragon, as symbol of the ancient, feudal Kingdom of Vietnam, seldom appears in present-day architecture.

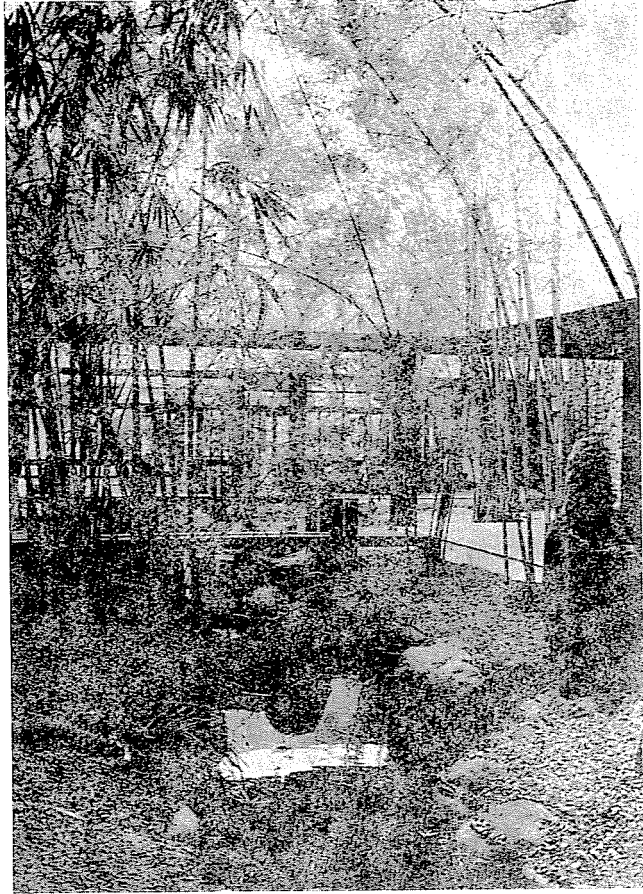


Cult of the water

Economy of ancient Vietnam relied on agriculture, mainly on irrigational rice cultivation. Rice cultivation, growing of different other plants and fruits are in constant need of rainwater and water sources. Also the desire of Vietnamese peasants for water is apparent in everyday life, traditional architecture and folk arts. Roofs of pagodas, palaces, village halls, houses are often ornamented with symbols of clouds, rivers, springs. Rain, rivers, lakes, swamps are water sources alike. Arts reflect the affection of man to them.

Affinities and differences between traditional Vietnamese and other East-Asian architectures

Confronting traditional architectures of Vietnam and the other East-Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, China, points to common features. Throughout the long historical development, geographic, climatic features, economic, social, cultural and religious interactions shaped each other's architecture and its peculiarities. In fighting foreign feudal powers, the Vietnamese nation was able not only to preserve cultural traditions but also to assimilate positive features of other cultures.



Figs 22—23. Thang Loi hotel, entrance hall and

In spite of the strict rule of religion and feudalism, traditional Vietnamese architecture kept free, easy and genuine, of “human scale”, in inseparable unity between man and nature, mirroring everyday life. As concerns settlement fabric, space system of building complexes, building exteriors and interiors, application of building materials, ornaments, colours, natural factors, Vietnamese architecture rather differs from those in other East-Asian countries.

Vietnamese houses, pagodas have more open, airy space systems than have Chinese or Japanese ones. In Vietnamese architecture, there is no strict boundary between interiors and architectural spaces outdoors, the two merge into a harmonic unity.

Arched forms and motifs of building roofs lend ease, naturalness, intimacy to buildings, at the same time they materialize the relation between

Earth and Sky for the human mind. As peculiar features, eaves, ornaments of the curved roof line of Vietnamese houses join at an angle pointing upwards, to the sky, at a difference from Japanese or Chinese architecture.

Also organic unity of architecture and attendant arts is typical of traditional Vietnamese architecture. Rather than a simple frame to accommodate other arts, an architectural creation or environment is a work of art itself. There is a two-fold connection between traditional Vietnamese architecture and other arts (literature, music, poetry, sculpture, wood carving, painting, etc.): a concrete, manifest physical connection between the building and artistic creations inside and outside it (statues, wood carvings, paintings, literary or poetic inscriptions on the wall, and other ornaments); and a higher-order, spiritual, hidden relation manifest to few. This relation arises from the building complex features (shaping, layout, colour harmony, material combinations, etc.), common mode of expression between the building and its (social, built, natural) environment, the treatment by common means. The building itself raises sensations, impressions, grasps human mind and emotions, just like a literary, poetic work or a painting. These two relations are interacting, deepen each other's effect. The effective value of Vietnamese architecture is due to the coexistence of concrete-physical and abstract-spiritual relations between architecture and attendant arts.

As to the rural architecture, principal ornaments of village halls are wood carvings, wood engravings, wood sculptures, boards with inscriptions, etc., representing everyday life: dance, swing, plowing, hunt, game of chess, rice planting, cock-fight, etc. Rather than by professional artists, these works of art have been made by peasants, workers, to truly represent life and society. Thereby arts approach real life and nourish spiritual and emotional life.

Architecture without architects

Being an architecture without architects had been determinant for the development of Vietnamese architecture. Popular architecture in villages and similar settlements is due to the population acting as architect, builder and occupant. People build their homes themselves aided by family members, relations and friends, form their environment based on experience and likings. Most equipment and furniture are made by themselves from available local, genuine materials.

Population prefers houses, community buildings and environment made by themselves, according to their likings. There are several registered masterpieces of popular architecture, highly appreciated by learned architects, artists, professionals.

Adherence to the homeland is typical of Vietnamese psychology, determinant for the mental factor of folk architecture, underlying harmony between man and environment.

Traditional Vietnamese architecture is positive, progressive from several aspects, thanks to material and mental requirements of life, of the ancestral national culture, human factors, to be followed by Vietnamese architects and others concerned with an up-to-date, humane environment culture as opposed to that of the actual, industrialized, mechanized societies.

National culture and international relations

This our time is featured by a world-wide mesh of economical, political, cultural and social relations. These relations are other than equivalent between different regions, countries, but their effects are known to be favourable to the economical, cultural and social development of the populations. Subsistence of these relations relies on the balance between national and international interests. Distinction has to be made between positive, favourable, and negative effects of international relations; these latter are those tending to blur peculiarities and cultural traditions of peoples, nations.

Essential problems of Vietnamese architecture — environment culture

Actually, a crucial social problem is economical development in Vietnam. Present economical difficulties restrain cultural-social development. Mass housing, infrastructure upgrading are a challenge to all social strata. Housing shortage, deficiency of a primary need, hampers the improvement of the living standard. Material bases for the subsistence of life and human conditions to develop spiritual, cultural values have to be created simultaneously, unless a development tending exclusively to meet material needs risks neglect of spiritual values. Omission of this problem directly results in a disequilibrium between spiritual and material life, as observed in developed societies and in mechanized ways of living.

In the post-war reconstruction of Vietnam, several mistakes have been made. Mass housing needs have been attempted to meet by repulsive, mechanistic, bleak new residential estates failing to satisfy human emotional-material requirements, attributable — rather than to the new, up-to-date technologies and building materials themselves — to their abusive application. To avoid similar problems and to improve the built environment, new scientific solutions and ways of thinking are needed.

A fundamental of the economical-social development of Vietnam is and will be the perfect, conscious and efficient use of physical and mental abilities of every social stratum, imposing, in turn, synthesis of, and equilibrium between, individual and social interests. Solving actual social problems requires to predict and premeditate future requirements.

Stress has to be laid on architectural culture, and on methods suiting housing with private means. In designing new settlements and in developing existing towns and villages, actual demands and resources of the population have to be reckoned with.

Architecture and society are in interaction. Architects and other professionals (sociologists, psychologists, economists, etc.) are expected to directly help development of a pleasant, humane way of living for the population. Human factors in the economical-social-cultural development to evolve under adequate living conditions to be created, have to be studied.

Raise of the living standard needs double bases: partly, to raise the general and complex erudition of strata and members of society, as spiritual, ideological basis; and partly, to develop built and natural environment, to create material resources of society such as to meet material and spiritual needs of people.

To raise the general, comprehensive erudition of society, physical and mental connection between social strata, classes, communities has to be established, such as between producers and consumers, artists and public, architects, professionals and population, else so excessively differentiated labour division physically and mentally separates social strata, physical and mental workers, hampers the principle of coexistence and reduces comprehensive, complex erudition. Labour division has to be such that provides variable, manifold jobs (both physical and mental) to people from different social strata. In socialism, work is not only an obligation but also a pleasure, so to avail of it, labour division has to be organized consciously. Now and ever, work takes about one third of a working day, so the feeling it raises is a factor of how much one appreciates his life.

Development of architectural culture relies on the national spirit of architects' education, namely skill, mentality, experience, moral of architects are decisive for the development of national architecture, respect and furthering of cultural traditions. Architects have to win the confidence of people, to forward activity, directly and indirectly the relation between population, built and natural environment, helped, in particular, by mass media such as TV, radio, movies, lectures, books and reviews.

Up-to-date, humane environment culture involves, among others, integer personal, family, community, social relations, mutual interest and selflessness. The Vietnamese society has to be spared difficulties encountered in the evolution of social life in developed countries, such as decomposition of marriages, loneliness of old people, decline of human, spiritual values, impoverishment of

cultural amusements. Propensity, interest in, understanding — from the part of young people, or even of the intelligentsia — of centuries-old cultural values (e.g. classical music, sculpture, painting) are known to have much decreased. (According to statistical data, in Hungary, public of classic concerts, museums, exhibitions decreased by 35 to 40% in five years as an average.) Youth prefer disco to entertainments involving deep thinking and emotional life. Development of humane behaviour is to be maintained, developed, as indispensable spiritual bases.

Technical development and environment pollution

Up-to-date technologies are indispensable to the developments of society, to the rise of living standard, involving to meet mass housing needs, construction of infrastructure, adequate nutrition, etc. The mentioned achievements of up-to-date civilization will be continued to be applied and developed to fight off negative effects, risks.

One of the most serious problems in medium developed (also socialist) countries is environment pollution due to careless industrialization, mechanization, chemization and drastic interventions to nature. It affects mainly cities but its effects hit agricultural settlements, too. Vital materials (water, air, food) contain chemicals noxious to health and to biologic processes. Environment pollution has serious consequences: ecological disequilibrium, interdependent sicknesses, indispositions, etc. Intolerable urban atmospheric pollution, traffic noise harms, acceleration of the life rhythm are destructive, or at least, injurious to, the aesthetic, emotional effect of built or natural environment.

Still in Vietnam, environment pollution is not a serious problem yet. Economical-social development, application of latest technologies bear, however, risks to be avoided by scientific considerations. Regional planning involving settlement fabrics, industrial areas and centers, as well as planning of settlements, villages, towns has to reckon with organic relationships, future demands on the actual work. Correlated processes have to be pondered and optimized. Such are in town planning e.g. distance between industrial and residential areas, economicalness, traffic, etc. An optimum solution would avoid excessive environmental pollution at economicalness of construction and smooth traffic.

Environmental engineering and monuments preservation belong to the most important problems, essential to the rise of the living standard, to the conservation of national cultural heritage.

In modern societies, inherent deficiencies of mechanistic ways of living, of abrupt urbanization processes can be avoided by simple means, conscious anticipations. In any case, the quality of human life is what matters, the final goal of society. In final account, basis of the development of human society and at the same time, final goal of human life is irreplaceable human spirit,

human thinking ability. Machine, technology, electronics are useful tools but no final goal in themselves.

Economical-social life in Vietnam is still exempt from intensive mechanization or automation. Their application is and will be a must, still favorable or adverse consequences for human life have to be predicted. For instance, to refer to statistics, over half of the total actual population of Japan is afraid from the future, a society of robots, computers and automata, not only because of the imminent unemployment but mostly for being separated from nature by a mechanized, electronized environment, risking mental and emotional decline of man, to be absolutely avoided.

In Vietnamese agriculture, in the construction of rural houses and community buildings, still man is the prime mover. Multiple controversies between village and town have decreased. Traffic, communications, electrification, mass media connect rural people to social life, at a gain of living standard and of general erudition. Ways of living based on national cultural traditions keep peculiarities. Strict, organic familial-social relations become increasingly humane.

In Vietnamese rural and urban traffic, pedals-propelled bicycles prevail, exempt from environmental pollution and urging man to physical effort. Accordingly, life in a society at a relatively lower development is seen to bear factors advantageous for the society to come, that have thus to be furthered.

Architects and other professionals concerned with the development of Vietnamese architectural culture are becoming increasingly interested in environment in the matter of new projects. A recent, major construction is the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, sited in one of the finest parklands of Hanoi. The Mausoleum has been built by different social strata as voluntary work. The frieze of its roof superstructure is ornamented with lotus petal motifs, lending ease and naturalness to this monumental, festive construction.

We are convinced that architects, other professionals and social strata relying on national high-niveau cultural traditions, adequate knowledge, skill, science, combined efforts, and conscious assimilation of international experience, will be able to create a fine, humane, high-niveau, up-to-date environment culture, to develop universal human culture.

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