



BỆNH VIỆN THỐNG NHẤT

Trần Đình Quyên, Y. Đan [for the People Hospital (former name: Thana Nhat Hospital) - Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam, 1972. © Phạm Thủy Loan, 2016.

Modern Architecture in Vietnam or Vietnamese Modern Architecture?

BY PHAM THUY LOAN AND TRUONG NGOC LAN

Architecture is one of the keys to the values of a society, a reflection of a people's aspiration, and a society's ideas and technological experiments over periods in its history. This paper will address "modern architecture in Vietnam" focusing on the general course of its development: its practice, discourse and the built environment throughout history. The guiding questions for the main content of this paper are very fundamental:

How can we define modern architecture in Vietnam?

How was it formed and developed through the modern history of the country?

Can we call modern architecture in Vietnam "Vietnamese modern architecture"?

The Analytical Framework

The MASEANA project offers a definite approach to the issue when it states that "the history of modern architecture in Asia is the history of how Asians have become modern; and has evolved through sustained interactions with the West". In other words, modern architecture accompanies modernity, or modernism, having undergone numerous upheavals in history, from colonization, decolonization, westernization, through industrialization, and urbanization, to nation-building and globalization. These are various phenomena that help define and shape Asian modernism today.

In this regard, we would like to go back to the beginning of Vietnam's modern history with milestones, emphasizing external influences and seeing how these encounters of modern thoughts shaped our modern architecture and generations of Vietnamese architects.

French Colonization (1858–1954): Strong Encounter with the West

The French colonization period lasted almost a century in Vietnam and Indochina. The quasi-feudal/colonial regime left a remarkable legacy in Vietnam; architectural heritage is nowadays one among many other assets.

Before 1920

When the French conducted their first colonization program, they undertook major construction works in the larger cities in Vietnam: public buildings, housing projects, infrastructure systems, ports, railway stations and factories. That was a significant period when comprehensive modernity was brought into Vietnam for the first time by the French.

The first aspect of modernity was reflected in urban planning. The French conducted a number of master plans for Hanoi, Saigon, Haiphong, Dalat city, etc. Western town planning principles of the grid, axes, boulevards, parks and

public gardens, and grand facilities such as theaters, schools, libraries and hospitals were put into use. The fundamental base for modernity to take shape was urban infrastructure, which had not existed in Vietnam before. Grand road networks with sidewalks for pedestrians separated from automobile flows, networks of water supply, sanitation, electricity, communication as well as greenery, were implemented. One of the most remarkable modern works of that time was the Paul Doumer Bridge (1898-1902). It was a beautiful iron bridge that consumed 30,000 m³ of stone, 5,600 tons of laminated steel, 137 tons of cast iron, 165 tons of iron and 7 tons of lead for the construction.

The second aspect of modernity could be found in buildings and architecture. Buildings of various Western styles were constructed in many cities. In the early colonial period, French architecture was directly imported to Hanoi: classical style, French regional styles, neoclassic or Art Nouveau. The most typical and outstanding examples of these types were the Hanoi Opera House (1901-1911), and the Residence Superior of Tonkin (started 1917) illustrating traces of modern architecture as seen on Art Nouveau entrance canopies. Until 1920, almost all the significant buildings in Hanoi were built by French architects. Together with these very exotic styles, they brought into Vietnam new construction technology and materials, such as reinforced concrete, steel, glass, cement, etc.

The third aspect of modernity was demonstrated in the social transformation of Vietnam. Local intellectuals began absorbing new ideas from abroad, thus gradually deviating from Confucian thoughts. Movements and organizations for cultural and educational innovation like "Duy Tan", "Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc"², "Khai Tri Tien Duc" (AFIMA)³ accelerated the change in the local people's awareness and lifestyles. With the perspective of learning Western civilization while preserving and developing traditional cultural identity, these movements and organizations exercised their



influences on the first Vietnamese modern buildings. An exemplar building of this kind was the AFIMA Head Office in Hanoi, which was designed in 1920 and completed in 1922. This building combined Western spatial organization and construction technologies with Vietnamese traditional form and ornaments. Unlike the old Confucius rectangular layout, its sector-shaped floor plan contains new functions like a billiards room, an auditorium and a dancing hall.

From 1920 to 1945

After WWI, the French implemented their second colonization program for economic recovery in Vietnam. Construction activities and urban expansion were carried out. Ernest Hébrard (1875-1933) – a famous French architect – came to Vietnam and made a great impact on Vietnamese architecture. With his sophistication and talent, he created a mixture of Western technology and adaptation to local climate and culture. Remarkable buildings by him were the Department of Finance (1924-1928, present-day Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Louis Finot Museum (1925-1931, present-day National Museum of History) in Hanoi; and Pétrus Ky high-school (1927, present-day Le Hong Phong high-school), in Saigon. Art Deco also came to Hanoi in this period. Many Art Deco buildings became important landmarks in the city such as IDEO Print Factory (*Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient*, 1929), Bank of Indochina (1931), Shell oil company headquarters (1938).

With Ernest Hébrard's role as a pioneer of the so-called Indochina style, buildings in this period shared a common expression of eclecticism of foreign styles and vernacular details from Vietnam, China, Khmer and Champa. Luckily, many of these buildings still remain today as part of our architectural heritage.

The First Generation of Architects:

The Indochina College of Fine Arts (1925)

Modernism was intensively developed when the French started training local intellectuals and technicians to

serve their colonial administrative systems. The Indochina College of Fine Arts was founded in 1925. The Faculty of Architecture, established one year later, educated the first generation of Vietnamese architects. Earlier, construction in Vietnam had been carried out by carpenters and builders based on indigenous knowledge and experience. This historical benchmark laid an important foundation for the formation of the architect as a privileged profession in Vietnam until today.

Before 1945, most of the Vietnamese architects played a minor role in the French design offices as assistants only. Some of them opened their own design offices, but their practice was limited to small-scale private villas and houses. Those first architects were greatly influenced by Western thinking and they quickly absorbed new knowledge, skills and building techniques which they applied to their practice with great passion. However, in this context of being influenced by the West, they developed a kind of resistant thinking when they wanted to confirm their characteristics and national identity as well as vernacular architecture in their designs. They disregarded the discrimination of the French and expressed their patriotism, national pride and the desire to create projects that would match the local characteristics and conditions, promoted the utilization of Vietnamese traditional elements in architecture.

One of the best-known names of the time was architect Huynh Tan Phat (1913-1989), who graduated as an architect from the Indochina College of Fine Arts in Hanoi in 1938. In 1941, he opened the first private Vietnamese architecture firm ever in Saigon. He was among the first of the Vietnamese modern architects to design several beautiful modernist villas in Saigon and Dalat. Huynh Tan Phat joined the Communist Party later that same year as a full member and became Ho Chi Minh's (1890-1969) trusted comrade from the south. He was a modern architect who paved the way for a modernist revolution in architecture of the country.

02 Un-specified architect, AFIMA head office, Hanoi, Vietnam, 1920-1922.
© Truong Ngoc Lan, 2016.



03 Ernest Hébrard, The National Museum of History (former name: Louis Finot Museum), Hanoi, Vietnam, 1925-1931). © Nguyen Phu Duc, 2015.



From 1945–1954: Indochina War

The period 1945-1954 was full of upheavals in the world's history as well as in Vietnam's history. On March 11st 1945, the Japanese army overthrew the French protectorate government in Vietnam and took control of the whole country. But only a few months later, WWII ended. On August 14th 1945, the Japanese army surrendered to the Allied Army. Vietnam fell into a chaotic situation. Seizing the opportunity, the Viet Minh (Alliance of Vietnamese Patriots) led by Ho Chi Minh came to power with a revolution in August that same year and declared independence by establishing the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on September 2nd in Hanoi.

However, subsequently, Vietnam commenced a war of resistance lasting almost 10 years against the return of the French troops to Vietnam. In 1954, as the Geneva conference was signed among the parties involved in the first Indochina war, the conflict finally ended. Vietnam was temporarily divided into two regions: North Vietnam and South Vietnam, which went different ways in terms of politics and economy.

During this period, almost no major buildings were constructed in both regions: South Vietnam and North Vietnam.

Country: Division or the Vietnam War (1954–1975)

Within two decades (1954–1975), Vietnam was divided into two states following two absolutely different socio-political models: North Vietnam – or Democratic Republic of Vietnam – was led by President Ho Chi Minh and supported by the Socialist Bloc, most notably by the former Soviet Union and China, while South Vietnam – known as Republic of South Vietnam – was led by President Ngo Dinh Diem (1901-1963) and backed by the United States of America. Nevertheless, that period was considered the golden years for modern architecture to flourish in both regions with a large number of large-scale and important buildings. There were three favorable conditions for such a vigorous

development of modern architecture in this period: firstly, both governments made great efforts to build infrastructure systems and urban facilities with different sources of investment: both domestic mobilization and overseas financial aid programs. Secondly, new development trends in thinking, style, technique, etc., from allied countries of both sides penetrated into North Vietnam and South Vietnam. Thirdly, Vietnamese architects played a leading role in Vietnamese architecture, no matter which political system it belonged to. They wished to confirm their national identity in architecture.

Notwithstanding, the panorama of architecture in each part of the divided country had its own interesting features.

North Vietnam

In North Vietnam, the government led by President Ho Chi Minh spent most of its resources on the liberation of South Vietnam from the USA's domination; thus, investment in construction was minimized. Most of the important buildings in North Vietnam were constructed with financial and technical support from the Eastern Bloc, such as the former Soviet Union, the Democratic Republic of Germany, and from Poland and China as well. Since 1964, due to the threat of the USA Air Force's air raids, construction in the North was halted for several years. On the other hand, in the centralized economy of the North, the construction market did not exist and the State was the only "investor" which seriously limited the diversity in architectural development.

In this period, architects who had previously graduated from the Indochina College of Fine Arts continued to play a major role. However, their creativeness and personality were limited due to a number of constraints: the shortage of investment, building materials and common design guidelines applied to all public-invested projects. Some notable works of this time could be named: the Auditorium of Ho Chi Minh in the National Academy of Politics (1958) by architect Nguyen Ngoc Chan (1911-1990), President Ho Chi Minh's Residence (1958) by architect Nguyen Van

Ninh (1908-1975), the office of Ministry of Planning and Investment (1960) by architect Doan Van Minh (1908-1973). They were mostly masonry buildings with small windows, simple stucco decorations and ventilation bricks. Popular vernacular architectural features were symmetrical layouts, three-arched entrance gates and traditional verandas. The only work that showed a difference was the Polytechnic University of Hanoi (1961-1965) by Russian architects E. S. Budnik and S. T. Airapetov.

Southern Vietnam

Modern architecture in South Vietnam enjoyed more favorable conditions. Vigorous urbanization sponsored by the USA offered plenty of opportunities for the architectural profession without war disturbance or interruption. Secondly, architects in the South could enjoy much more freedom to design without political guidance of their thoughts. Thirdly, the South with a capitalist economy offered plentiful design orders, clients, materials and technologies. Therefore, modern architecture in the South was more abundant and diverse in styles and expressions.

The first-generation architects from *École Supérieure des Beaux Arts de l'Indochine* or *Écoles des Beaux-Arts* played a significant role in contextualizing modern movements of architecture in Saigon. Some of their outstanding works such as the General Science Library (late 1960s-1972) by architect Nguyen Huu Thien (1914-1981) and Bui Quang Hanh (?-1992), Thong Nhat hospital (completed in 1972, present-day Vi Dan hospital) by architect Tran Dinh Quy-en (1932-), Caravelle Hotel (1959) by architect Nguyen Van Hoa (1916-2005) were nationally recognized. They were successful in contextualizing Western modern architecture to Saigon's tropical climate and responded to national traditional aesthetic perceptions. As a result, their buildings clearly demonstrated local identity, yet still looked internationally modern. Common features of modern architecture in Saigon could be described as: form follows function, asymmetrical compositions, use of general cubic or cylindrical shapes, use of flat roofs, reinforced concrete, metal and glass frameworks often resulting in large windows in horizontal bands, absence of ornament or moldings. At the same time, their works combined tropical climate adaptive solutions, especially the use of claustra and other traditional expressions and added details.

One of the most outstanding works in the South was the Independence Palace, designed by architect Ngo Viet Thu (1926-2000) in 1962 as a result of a design competition to replace the damaged Norodom Palace (French Governor's Palace) that had been bombed. While several neoclassical schemes were submitted, the commission for the Independence Palace was the modernist masterpiece by Ngo Viet Thu. He was one of Vietnam's most accomplished and prolific modern architects, had been educated in Paris at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, and was the only Asian architect to be awarded the Grand Prix de Rome in 1955. This confirmed the government's and public's acceptance of modernism over neoclassicism at that time.

Country Reunification (1975-1986)

On April 30th 1975, the People's Army of North Vietnam took over Saigon and reunified the two regions into one united country, officially named the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Pursuing socialism, the whole country embarked on a period of enthusiastic reconstruction, guided by the doctrine of centralized direction and management. The base of the socialist economy was the public and the collective sectors without any "room" for the private sector or market forces. That was also a period of economic hardship as a consequence of post-war exhaustion of economic resources, the embargo and sanctions by the USA and the ineffective centralized economy hindered by bureaucracy.

In respect of modern architecture, there were two remarkable phenomena in that period: the appearance of socialist collective housing projects (called KTT in Vietnamese) and the birth of the second generation of Vietnamese architects.

The KTTs

A KTT means a public housing estate, designed in the "micro rayon" concept imported from Eastern European Bloc, a "modified" version of the "neighborhood unit" concept of Clarence Perry (1872-1944) in 1923. In this period, housing was considered as a social service (similar to healthcare and education) and in-kind payment for low-paid civil servants that should be provided by the State. With financial and technical support from other socialist countries, many public housing neighborhoods were constructed in Hanoi, Vinh, Danang and elsewhere to accommodate the demand of the huge number of State employees and members of the armed forces.

These KTTs, a monotonous style of 4 to 5-story walk-up condominiums with identical, modest apartments, were built using various methods: from manual construction to the assembly of small components or large panels. This housing type quickly created a massive number of homes to meet the demand and, at the same time, followed egalitarianism perfectly as a familiar slogan during the period of Orthodox Socialism.

One good example of KTT was the Trung Tu project (1973-1980), which comprised 29 condominiums with a similar design: a 5-story walk-up, prefabricated structure, simple layout and details. Elementary and secondary schools were put in the middle of the neighborhood and kindergartens were located in the middle of 4 groups with 6 to 8 condominiums. No commercial facilities were planned and set-up as all food and necessities were completely provided by the State.

The Second Generation of Vietnamese Architects

In 1956, the Polytechnic University of Hanoi was founded as the first university of technology in Vietnam, with its first and foremost mission to train Vietnamese industrial engineers, including civil engineers and architects. Some of the first graduates in civil engineering from this university and some who were sent to study in Eastern Europe, Cuba and China in the 1970s and the 1980s became the second golden generation of Vietnamese architects.

04 E.S Budnik and S.T Airapeto, Polytechnic University of Hanoi, Vietnam, 1961-1965 © Trung Ngoc Lan, 2016.0s.



05 Doan Van Minh, Office of Ministry of Planning and Investment, Hanoi, Vietnam, 1960. © Nguyen Manh Tri, 2016.



06 Nguyen Van Hoa, modern housing, Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam, 1970s. © Trung Ngoc Lan, 2017.



07 Trung tu KTT, Hanoi, Vietnam, 1973-1980. © Redrawn from original map by Pham Thuy Loan, 2016.



08 Le Van Lan, The Children Palace, Hanoi, Vietnam, 1974-1977. © Pham Thuy Loan, 2016.



09 Ngo Viet Thu, The Independence Palace, Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam, 1962-1966. © Pham Thuy Loan, 2016.

Their designs were influenced so much by the Soviet style of modernism. Common features included architecture as a sculpture, functionalism, and socialist expressionism. Again, architects attempted to add local flavor to their works by adding local elements of expression like wooden-frame-like concrete structures, sloped roofs, verandas, and other details.

Remarkable buildings of this period included the International Department of Bach Mai Hospital (1986, present-day the Hanoi France Hospital) in Hanoi by architect Nguyen Vu Hung, Hoa Binh Theater (1985) by architect Huynh Tan Phat and An Dong market (1980s) by architect Le Van Rot (1942-) in Ho Chi Minh city, to name a few.

One of the most valuable buildings in those years was the Children's Palace (1974-1977) in Hanoi designed by architect Le Van Lan (born in 1938). The work was highly appreciated thanks to its modern, simple, asymmetrical form, smart East – West building layout and the use of claustra that proved to be very appropriate to the local climate; the conscious combination of spatial openness and enclosure, between architecture and artistic motifs (mosaic on columns, murals, paintings on glass); the utilization of existing trees on site and the creation of a roof-top garden for the first time in Vietnam; the use of reinforced concrete and recycled materials locally available, including war-torn buildings or left-overs from other buildings. Le Van Lan is also a well-known name among the second generation of local architects. Having graduated from Hanoi University of Polytechnics in Vietnam in 1959, he attended an internship in Russia in 1961, and practiced as assistant architect in the office of architect Nguyen Ngoc Ngoan (1912-1990) – a desperate admirer of Le Corbusier. He did his 3-year internship in civil building design in the Democratic Republic of Germany (East Germany), and developed a strong passion for modernism applying its principles in his works with his own creativeness and sensitivity. Other than the Children's Palace, architect Le Van Lan designed Thong Nhat Park Southern Gate and Video Game House, Hanoi Hotel – the first high-rise building and redevelopment of Dong Xuan historical market in Hanoi. All of them are important examples of architecture in Hanoi today.

The Post Reform and “Open” period (1990s onward)

In order to tackle the severe post-war economic stagnation, the Vietnamese government adopted integrated and consistent reform across many aspects of the economy and society. The adoption of the Doi Moi policy (meaning “renovation” or “reform”) in 1986 triggered a profound economic change: the introduction of market mechanisms into the hitherto orthodox socialism of Vietnam. In line with the structural shift in the economy, there were many efforts to reform the construction sector, but not until 1990 did construction and architecture witness real major changes. As of 1990, the private sector emerged strongly enough; external resources began to pour into the country after the withdrawal of the long-standing economic embargo by the USA. With an initial success in the efforts to improve diplomatic relations, Vietnam marked its integration into the world through a series of important events: joining the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

(ASEAN) in 1995, the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in 1996, the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in 1996, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1998 and, most notably, becoming the 150th official member of the WTO in 2007. By this process, Vietnam transformed from a centralized socialist economy to an open market economy, and eventually to the international market economy it is today. Though they are not yet ranked among the world's major cities, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) continue to be two powerhouses in terms of international capital exchange, education and training, business and commerce.

Diversity and Competitiveness

In the subsequent two decades, steady economic growth, rapid urbanization and global integration have opened up huge opportunities for new construction and architectural diversity. Vietnam welcomed an outbreak of various design styles ranging from classical colonial style, European classical style, through modernism, Soviet style and Expressionism, to postmodernism and Neo-modernism. Two centuries of the world's architectural history seemed to be recreated in Hanoi within just two decades.

Notable modernist buildings in these years were the Hamatco Headquarters (1990) by architect Vu Hoang Hac, the United Nations Development Programme Apartment Building (1994) by architect Nguyen Khoi Nguyen (1936-), the Hanoi International Convention Center (1997) by architect Nguyen Thuc Hoang (1940-) and architect Dang Kim Khoi (1958-), Noi Bai International Airport Terminal 1 (2000) by architects Luong Anh Dung (1942-) and Than Hong Linh (1965-) and their team in the Vietnam National Consultant Corporation (VNCC). In this new context, as Vietnam has become a vital hub for construction, it has attracted a wave of foreign architects. This is the third wave of influences from the outside world, not only from the West but also from countries in the region such as Japan, South Korea, Singapore and others.

Since 2000, iconic buildings such as the National Convention Center (2004-2006), the Hanoi Museum (2007-2010) and the National Assembly House (2009-2014) have all been designed by German architect Meinhard von Gerkan (1935-) and his partners in GMP. Architekten von Gerkan, Marg und Partner. The position of Vietnamese architects has been dramatically challenged as they face global competitiveness within their home country. Such a circumstance, at the same time, pulls them back to the quest for cultural values and the identity of the nation. The fight is not against the colonists but the danger of being a non-entity or having no identity in the era of globalization.

Vernacular Modernism

Failing to compete for big projects, Vietnamese architects have a great opportunity and favorable conditions to design private houses. Since the end of the 1990s, there has been a construction boom in private housing construction across Vietnam, accounting for as much as 70-80% of the total new housing output every year. Design of private houses in Vietnam is an interesting arena, because it is

possible to see how modernism is continuously absorbed and disseminated by the Vietnamese architects and people. Beyond boxy modernist forms, light and slender sunshades and screens were added that represent a flavor of modernism which may not be seen anywhere else in the world. Vietnamese modernism became a distinctive-Vietnamese style, a kind of vernacular architecture through the experimentation as showcased in these houses. Nowadays, contemporary Vietnamese architects have continued this intellectual experimentation in composition, and contemporary Vietnamese modernism is therefore richer than the Western mainstream in its use of lines, planes, volumes, voids, materials, patterns, textures, and colors. In response to global issues of environmental degradation and climate change, local architects are paying more attention to energy efficiency and harmony with nature in their designs. They are also busting open the townhouses by introducing open stories or atria within the houses, using double building envelopes by means of stacking green walls and roofs, thereby turning the townhouses from a tube-like cave into truly tropical houses that allow more indoor/outdoor experiences.

Concluding Remark

Influenced by various overseas schools of thought and styles throughout different periods of history, modern architecture in Vietnam was formed and has developed vigorously. It is not a kind of modernist doctrine but a rich and diverse mixture in which modern and vernacular elements have been blended in order to adapt to natural conditions and local cultural, political as well as economic contexts. As a result, an eclectic and vernacular modernism has been shaped. We can call it Vietnamese modern architecture. Generations of Vietnamese architects, apart from absorbing international new ways of thinking, still continue to seek, experiment and confirm national identity in architecture as well as professionalism in their designs.

In Vietnam, the work on architectural history was begun in the late 1980s, initially focusing on monuments or religious buildings, and later on colonial architectural works. Postcolonial architecture (after the 1950s) received little research attention for a number of reasons: most of these works are not considered "legacy" in general terms because they are less than 100 years old, and with their simplicity of form and decoration, their value is not fully appreciated. The state of the art of documentation of modern architecture in Vietnam is still primitive at the level of preliminary, unsystematic and non-comprehensive inventories consisting of names of buildings without detailed documentation, information and records on buildings and their architects. In the context of fast economic development and urbanization in Vietnam today, modern works in Vietnam are at risk of being torn down to make space for new projects. This fact arises from the general unawareness of the meaning and value of modern architecture and the lack of documentation and records of these works of architecture as the basis from which to argue their significance in order to protect them from the risk of destruction.

Vietnamese architects are now promoting the establishment of **docomomo** Vietnam, joining with **docomomo** International and **docomomo** in other countries to share and to learn information, knowledge, experiences in research, conservation, adaptation, utilization of Modern Movement buildings and neighborhoods, and to promote its essence and spirit in our time.

Notes

- 1 "Duy Tan" literally means "new thought", or reform, renew in thinking and action. It is a name of a social reform movement, initiated (in 1906) by a wellknown Vietnamese intellectual name Phan Boi Chau (1872-1926) in the central Vietnam then suppressed by the French colonization government (in 1908). The movement advocates nonviolence, restoring the country by enhancing its intellectual level, reforming society in all aspects, including economic, educational and cultural, with practical activities such as open up the economy, set up big traders, open modern teaching schools: teach the national language, sciences and foreign languages as well as towards democratic politics.
- 2 "Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục" (Chinese: 東京義塾) literally means Tonkin public free school. It was a movement established in Hanoi by the intellectual Phan Boi Chau (1872-1926) and other intellectuals in March 1907 and ended in November 1907, to carry out social reforms in Vietnam. The purpose of the movement was to educate the people by opening free teaching classes (to be called literate) and to hold lectures to exchange ideas movement among the population.
- 3 Khai Tri Tien Duc (in French is *l'Association pour la Formation Intellectuelle et Morale des Annamites - AFIMA*) is a private association with a policy of cultural exchanges between Western and Vietnamese scholars in the early 20th century (1919-1945).

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Pham Thuy Loan

(b. 1974, Vietnam). Associate Professor, PhD, architect, Deputy Director of the Vietnam National Institute of Architecture (VIAR), in charge of research, training and international collaboration. Master and PhD studies in Urban Design (The University of Tokyo, Japan, 1997-2002). Senior Lecturer at Faculty of Architecture and Planning, National University of Civil Engineering (NUCE) (2004-2014).

Truong Ngoc Lan

(b. 1974, Vietnam). Architect, lecturer and researcher, Master of Architecture (National University of Civil Engineering (NUCE), Vietnam). Senior researcher at Vietnam Institute of Architecture (VIAR) (1997-2006). Lecturer of Architectural History and Theory at the NUCE (since 2006). Co-founder and architect of International Architecture JSC (known as 1+1>2 firm) with Hoang Thuc Hao.