IN TRANSIT:
A Shifting Approach towards Design and Preservation
in Rapidly Changing Ho Chi Minh City

A project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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BS, MS, MArch

School of Architecture and Design
College of Design and Social Context
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Declaration

I certify that, except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Hoanh V. Tran
10 April 2015

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I acknowledge the patience and the support of my wife, Thom, and my two children, Khoa and Quynh-An.
This is dedicated to
my father Tran Viet Y, the builder
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Abstract

This research documents my architectural practice within the partnership of HTA + Pizzini Architects in the rapidly changing environment of Ho Chi Minh City. The practice includes an American partner, Archie Pizzini, and myself, a native Saigonese, returned from the US with a professional background in both architectural preservation and architectural design.

This research traces three central themes that have shifted over the course of our practice: a focus on the local setting, Vietnam; an association of history with design; and an adaptation of Western architectural design to the context of Vietnam.

I reflect on these themes through the designs of the projects to demonstrate: 1) an evolving stance towards the local setting, changing from engagement to commitment, 2) the shifting identity of our practice, changing from a commercially focussed practice to an ideas-focussed practice and 3) reconciliation with rapid and constant changes in the setting of Vietnam.

These reflections have clarified our design approaches, which encompass maintaining the accumulative nature of Ho Chi Minh City, maintaining the existing urban and social fabrics and negotiating new design into the existing setting.

Research Questions

How do I practice architecture with the lens of preservation in the rapidly changing environment of Ho Chi Minh City?

How can I provide new designs that are sensitive to the existing context?

As a returning architect from the US, how do I utilise my experiences and knowledge in Western architectural design in the local context of Ho Chi Minh City?
The Outline of the Document

This document consists of five chapters:

Chapter 1 identifies the accumulative nature of Ho Chi Minh City.

Chapter 2 traces the widening of my interpretation of preservation, from one of solely preserving the physical architecture to one including the maintenance of the social and urban fabrics.

The reflection after chapter 2 develops my framework based on the discoveries from chapters 1 and 2.

Chapter 3 unpacks a group of 4 projects to demonstrate our evolving stance towards our setting, Vietnam.

Chapter 4 traces our shifting role through the designs of our workspaces.

The reflection after chapters 3 and 4 identifies our design approaches and shifting role, respectively.

Chapter 5, our concluding project, focusses on most major issues of the document.

In the document, the black text is the main text. The rust colour text is narratives. Narratives sometimes are independent stories that compliment the chapter in which they are located. Narratives do not appear in the Table of Contents. The photo captions also often take a narrative tone.
CHAPTER 1:

ACCUMULATED CONTEXT

Right: Microscopic photograph of the paint layers taken from the Victory Theater, with the titles of the performances that were correlated with the paint layers. Image courtesy of Building Conservation Associates Ltd., New York.
1.1 The Early Saigons

How early can one go back? For me, early Saigon was the 1960s when I was growing up and the ‘70s when I was leaving. My father’s early Saigon was that of the 1930s when he first moved here from the North. My early Saigon was his late Saigon.

Each of us has a personal perception of the city, and the perception is shaped by the memory that we have of the place. I remember my father often said the trees on our street were planted by the French in the early 1930s. As a little boy, these ten-metre trees could reach the sky.

Recently, the Transportation Department started to chop down these trees. It is harder now to remember because we are losing the traces.

I came back to Saigon, now called Ho Chi Minh City, in the 1990s. The city I rediscovered had traces of its earlier selves. The street layout mostly conformed with the original French design. The streets that had been widened by the Americans to accommodate the demands of the war were still around. The trees were still there. There were also buildings that I had never seen because they had been built by the new communist regime after 1975.

Because the pace of change was slower compared to the present day, and the eradication of the built environment has not yet happened, I was able to recognise the city as I remembered it. At the same time, I soaked in yet another version of my town.

That could have been me in the picture and that could have been my father on the right. The city we shared was at war, but there were many peaceful days. People still flocked to the streets; sidewalk cafes were always packed; Saigonese went on with their business. The war at hand was fighting off the heat of the glaring sun. Photograph by John Dominis, 1961. From www.Saigoneer.com/old-Saigon/old-Saigon-categories/2477-45-photos-of-1961-Saigon-from-Life-magazine. (Accessed February 2015). Creative Commons attribution - non commercial - no derivs 3.0 unported licence.

Whose Side Are You On?

During the Tet Offensive of 1968, American soldiers occupied our house. It was the tallest building in the neighbourhood and it faced the temple across the street, into which the communist revolutionaries had barricaded themselves. The soldiers were in our house for days. I remember being grabbed and pulled away—either by my father or my mother—from touching an M16 leaning against the wall. Later, I peeked out of a window to watch a soldier taking cover against a tree on the sidewalk in front of our house—a memory that also ends with me being snatched away from the window.

The war bookended my dreams. When I put my head on my pillow, I would listen to the bombing and the explosions before I fell asleep. I heard a lot about the war from my parents’ conversations; I heard about their fear for my soldier brothers’ lives. It was a calamity, like a deadly storm, that occupied the country—a calamity with no clear sides. My father was born in the North and had been a Viet Minh revolutionary against the French as a young man. Years later, caught below the line when the country was divided, he made his home in the South, doing construction work in Saigon.

My many brothers’ fates were tied up in wildly different varieties of encounters with the war. Some were drafted into the South Vietnamese Army, which earned them a prison sentence after the end of the war. Another hid in his room for four years, successfully waiting out the war and being honoured for his heroic act of self-preservation later. Other brothers worked in the communist government after the war ended, one rising to a rather high post before later emigrating to America.

In that battle on the streets during Tet 1968, the revolutionaries were counting on the population of South Vietnam to rise up and overthrow their oppressors to finally win the war. It is impossible now for me to know what my father was thinking, but he reacted like a family man, not the young Viet Minh he had been. He packed up his family and we all went to wait out the battle at a small house he owned outside the centre of town.

The last time a major battle was fought in Saigon was in 1975. It ended the war and brought down the American-backed South Vietnamese government. My father decided that three of my older siblings and I should leave Vietnam through a connection he had.

Over the years, my brothers, who had been on opposite sides of the war, lost their close relationships with each other. They were simply people in uncertain times taking whatever opportunities they found or dealing with whatever adversity they had been handed. They focussed less on identifying with the groups they found themselves in and more on finding a personal solution.

As for myself, all my life I have resisted being pulled into a ‘group’. I prefer to be able to adapt within many camps, taking what I find valid from each school of thought I encounter.
1.2 My Father the Builder

My father was mainly a builder, though he did design a few houses and churches. His father had been a woodcarver specialising in temple doors. My father’s side of the family came from Cao Da, a village near Hanoi that once specialised in carpentry. In northern Vietnam during the early twentieth century, there had been many villages that each specialised in a certain trade. My father kept his profession when he moved to the South in 1929. He became a construction labourer while a teenager, a carpenter in his twenties, then a construction crew leader shortly after that.

Between the 1930s and the ‘50s, my father worked for Brossard et Mopin, a French construction company that was responsible for the construction of many of Saigon’s institutions at that time, including Ben Thanh Market, the Treasury Building, the National Bank of France on Ham Nghi Boulevard, the Vietnam State Bank on Ham Tu, and 213 Catinat. By the time my father started at Brossard et Mopin, the above-mentioned buildings had been built already. For the company, he worked as a site supervisor for the construction of the Plaza Eden Building. The Eden had a cinema. As a boy, I remember going to see films and was always reminded by my older brother that “Dad built this”. Recently, the Eden was demolished to make room for a shopping mall called Union Square.

By the time I was born, my father had his own construction company. During the 1960s, his wealthiest client was the US government, who gave his company the contract to build the Brinks Bachelor Officers’ Quarters on Hai Ba Trung and to renovate The Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) headquarters on Tran Hung Dao. His other American-funded project was the Metropole Saigon.
Hotel, which also served as a Bachelor Enlisted’s Quarters. Both the Brinks and the Metropole were bombed by the communist revolutionaries but were quickly repaired. After the communist victory, both the Brinks and the Metropole were demolished to make way for the Park Hyatt and the Pullman Hotels. Capitalism seemed to have its way in the end, but this time supported by the state.

In addition to these bigger projects, my father worked on many smaller residential projects, mostly the typical Vietnamese tube houses of the type in which I grew up. For these small projects, he both designed and built. The children grew up listening to discussions about how much ventilation each room needed (total size of openings equivalent to one-third of the room area), how our toilets did not stink (drainage with water trapping the smell), and that a house’s façade should never be clad in ceramic tiles (so not to resemble a gigantic toilet).

My father was part of the Saigon modernist era, which extended from approximately the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. This was a period in local architectural history in which construction technology was successfully matched to the local conditions. Many of his projects focussed on natural ventilation.

I have a personal attachment to my father’s work and a special focus on the Saigon architecture of his own company’s era, the Saigon modernist era.
In the early 1990s, I took a few friends my age from France to visit my father in Ho Chi Minh City. They came with questions about the places where their older relatives, who had lived in Vietnam during the colonial period, had spoken about. They only knew the locations by their earlier French names. So my father drew us this map of the centre of Saigon with its street names during the colonial time, during the period when South Vietnam was a republic and during the current communist period. The city to him was an accumulation of different versions of itself.
After my father left Brossard et Mopin, he formed his own construction company. Many of his residential projects were tube houses that he designed and built. These are his sketches for four typical tube houses done in the modernist language and detailing of the 1960s period. Effective natural ventilation was provided by a void in the middle of all projects. Photograph previous page by the author.

Most of my father’s projects were designed without air conditioning, so he often employed screens as shown in this sketch on the right. The elaborate design was typical of the period. The house I grew up in had these screens, as shown in the photograph above with my brother. A few years after my father died, I designed his grave surrounded by these screens. My design was never built because the cemetery was being evacuated to make room for more development. Even after death, many were displaced.
1.3 Displaced from Saigon

It was a day in late April 1975, about a week before the fall of Saigon (or the liberation of Saigon, depending on one’s ideological position). We had packed very lightly and were speeding towards the airport in the back of a jeep. I did not recognise the severity of the moment I was living through. Maybe a 12-year-old kid cannot comprehend such finality. If I had understood it, saying goodbye to my father would have been impossible.

The jeep dropped us at one of the gates punctuating the chain-linked fence around the airport, all heavily guarded by well-armed young American marines who were making life and death decisions about who to allow in and who to reject. Perhaps they were also too young to realise the years of consequences that would come as a result of the choices they made that day.
Once past the fence, we were led to one of the corrugated metal Quonset huts inside the airport grounds. Over the next five months, we were to live in many such huts in various refugee camps. That day, we gathered and waited in the hut for many hours before being lined up to board a plane. Many people were crying. Many were just terrified. I remember walking up a ramp into the huge belly of the plane (which I later discovered had been a cargo plane). It was my very first plane trip. I remember flying out sitting backwards, facing the city I was leaving behind. Somewhere in that city was my father, who was losing four of his children.

As members of the first wave of Vietnamese refugees, we were flown to a US Marine camp in Guam where we stayed in the soldiers’ barracks. Later, we were flown to a refugee camp in San Diego to await our final destination in the US. In the fall of 1975, we arrived in Sulphur Springs, a tiny town outside of Dallas, Texas, where for months we lived in a trailer home—a shoebox of a house on wheels, ready to move down the highway at any moment.

From an early age, my perception of place has always seemed to be framed by events in flux, entwined in situations that are constantly changing.
1.4 The Layers of New York

In New York in the late 1980s, I lived facing the Hudson River on Riverside Drive, walking distance to my preservation architecture studios at Columbia University, which emphasised renovation/preservation/innovation.

My first internship was with preservation architects in Union Square. Ironically, my first task was to draw up a demolition plan. This was part of an effort to remove add-ons to reveal the original art deco design of a historic building. The second preservation architect I worked for was on Fulton Street, where my window faced Cass Gilbert’s Woolworth building.

My work included building inspections that were required by the city for exterior and interior conditions of older buildings. These seemingly banal exercises gave me experience in scrutinising buildings for defects, leaks and cracks, something that I still do. But more astoundingly, I found myself inside literally hundreds of New Yorkers’ homes. I was a voyeur inside people’s dwellings, which included everything from artist’s lofts to banker’s flats, from Jewish tenements to Chinese shops. Near Union Square, I went into a place that probably had not changed since the early 1960s, with a round, pink sofa and purple ottoman. While I often wish I had taken photographs, these places did leave imprints in my mind. The experience led me to realise that New York City was made up of such cultural layers.

These layers functioned as evidence of individual lives from the many cultural strata of the city. It was the 1980s, a time when Manhattan still accommodated a wide variety of social classes, from labourers to the wealthy. This early exposure allowed me to become aware of the
existence of cultural layers. In recent years, Manhattan has changed dramatically and is no longer easily accessible to the working class in the way it once was. This type of urban transformation is accompanying development trends in other cities around the world, including in Asia, and is one of the key concerns that impact on my practice in Ho Chi Minh City.

With my new Master of Preservation Degree, I joined Building Conservation Associates as a preservation consultant in 1990, and worked on the Victory Theater and the Amsterdam Theatre on Times Square. Our client was the Disney Company. This made me uncomfortable because I liked the urban grit of Times Square and suspected Disney would turn it into a theme park, which it did to some degree, with assistance from me.

The general public evaluated the change differently, and Times Square became much safer. One could now walk around after dark without being harassed, and the porn theatres became family-friendly cinemas, but when the tourists arrived, I felt myself missing the old roughness. Perhaps I was sensing the distinction between an urban enclave that is inhabited and a venue that is just visited. The old gritty Times Square had had a community (which admittedly could be rough), while the new theme-park Times Square seemed to be a part of the urban landscape that had been cleansed of its community in order to fulfil a purpose unrelated to the primary function of the urban fabric, which is to accommodate its own community.

I came to feel that Times Square had been erased as a place and had become a mere destination.

I was also in charge of BCA’s laboratory, where I analysed materials—mortar, terra cotta, marble and wrought iron, just to name a few—for projects including the Museum of New York, the Cooper Hewitt Museum, Chelsea House and Baruth College, all of which are architectural masterpieces that left a major impression on me.

Meanwhile, I started to feel the need to get an architectural design degree, not only in order to obtain a license to practice architecture, but also to pursue my growing desire to design architecture, not just to preserve it.

I enrolled in the Master of Architecture program at SCI-Arc in Los Angeles, setting up a duality—preservation and design—that is present in much of my professional work. This overlaid other dualities in my identity, such as one between science and art (I majored in chemistry and liberal arts while in college) that had been present since my higher education began, and East and West, which had been with me all my life.
Top and right: Microscopic photograph of the paint layers taken from the Victory Theater with the titles of the performances that were correlated with the paint layers. Photograph and image courtesy of Building Conservation Associates Ltd., New York.
The Paint Layers Visualising History

I have a respect for history, and I specialised in architectural historic preservation. But soon after entering this profession, I discovered that many preservation projects remove layers of history to show an arbitrarily chosen version of history.

When I think of cities and their layers, I remember my experience preserving the old Victory Theater in Times Square.

One of my jobs was to microscopically analyse slices of paint layers taken from the wall. To discover all the earlier coats of paint, we would take several paint samples and inspect them under the microscope. If the old paint layers were never stripped before new paint was applied, a well-selected sample could reveal the full history of a wall. Each layer of paint would represent several decades of time, rather like the sedimentary rock studied by geologists. For the Victory Theater, the paint sections revealed different palettes for different periods, starting with brighter palettes, including gold and silver, in the early years, and ending with mostly black and red throughout the 1970s, when the building served as a porn theatre. Going through the archives, we were able to identify all the performances and films that the building had witnessed, and we correlated these to the colours we had found in the paint sections. At the end of the project, the project architect chose a palette for painting the walls. It was a seemingly random choice, plucked from generations of old paint layers. The workers applied a new coat of paint, covering up all the mysteries that we had uncovered. I felt we had lost something.

The prioritisation of one layer and the complete exclusion of all the others negated the rich history of the old building. Cities can suffer worse fates. Erase the layers and the city itself disappears. All that is left is a place on a map.
1.5 Accumulated Layers of Ho Chi Minh City Obliterated

I came back to Saigon, now called Ho Chi Minh City, after Vietnam introduced doi moi, the ‘market economy’. Doi moi literally means ‘to change anew’. The full slogan was “Doi moi: Hien Dai Hoa & Cong Nghiep Hoa” or ‘To change anew: Modernise & Industrialise’.

The doi moi policy has had drastic consequences on the accumulated layers of Ho Chi Minh City and other cities in Vietnam. Under the name of progress, and supported by the state, big chunks of the city have been obliterated to be replaced by symbols of modernisation and progress.

Buildings of the French colonial era have been eradicated, sometimes in entire city blocks. This antipathy towards French architecture can be partly explained by an attitude among more communist-orientated Vietnamese, who do not value architecture of this period due to its associations with the French colonialists. In a similar manner, Taipei holds a grudge against its colonial Japanese architecture and many Japanese houses have been left derelict. 1

Most recently, a colonial apartment building on 213 Dong Khoi (originally named 213 Rue Catinat) was demolished to be replaced by a multi-level building to house the various municipal departments. Currently, the city departments reside in colonial-era villas across town. Once the city departments moved to their new location, most of the villas are planned to become available for demolition.

Political motivation also played a part in the demolition of the former US embassy in 1998. The building itself was famous because it was on the news throughout the war between Vietnam and the US. When

1. Conversation with Taiwanese architect Roan Ching-Yueh during his visit to Ho Chi Minh City April 2014

I had a corner office on level 4 of the Mondial Building. I found the space for Denton Corker Marshall when I was the director of their Vietnam office. I knew the building because on the ground floor there had been a café called La Pagode that I used to pass by as a little boy. At the entry, there was an ornate canopy. Inside, there was the original elevator still working inside its wrought iron cage. On the balcony of the top floor, I would have my cigarette breaks looking at the building next door, 213 Dong Khoi. Photographer unknown. Photograph from www.Facebook. Saigon Cho lon now & then. (Accessed February 2015). Public domain.
the US Government decided to demolish the building to build a new consulate, the Vietnamese people, in general, did not object to seeing a symbol of American imperialism demolished. America, on the other hand, was relieved to erase a layer of history that it did not want to remember.

The rush to delete traces of history when the Berlin Wall was removed has created a void for the city and its people. Similarly, the removal of French colonial architecture will jeopardise the visual history of Ho Chi Minh City. Once visual history is erased, the collective memory will follow and history can easily be distorted. A more sensible approach would be to maintain the physical context, renovating the original structures and build the new architecture alongside the remains of history.

In present-day Vietnam, however, the overriding agenda is, in fact, an economic one, with political and historic agendas taking the back seat. When the developers’ profit-driven agenda happens to align perfectly with the authorities’ political agenda, the ongoing obliteration of Ho Chi Minh City steams ahead without any restraint. After the American embassy was demolished, many other buildings were subject to the same fate. Those demolished during the last ten years were done so for commercial rather than political motivations.
1.6 Identity Crisis

Architecturally, Vietnam has experienced an identity crisis. Immediately after the fall of Saigon in April 1975, the communist victors built a few Soviet-style apartment blocks. In the 1990s, when Vietnam came to fully embrace the market economy, private developers started to introduce high-end apartment projects. They had to confront the Vietnamese people’s aversion towards the poorly built and ill-managed chung cu (Soviet-style housing blocks), which most people associated with the term ‘apartment’.

French colonial architecture also carries associations of wealth and power among some Vietnamese. Many developers take advantage of this conception by constructing faux colonial projects.

In some projects, the faux colonial designs result from a distorted definition of restoration. For Ho Chi Minh City’s Union Square shopping mall, several original colonial buildings—including three nineteenth-century shophouses, a four-storey art nouveau structure, an art deco building and a 1950s block—were demolished to make way for a suburban Californian caricature of European architecture. This confusion is not limited to commercial projects but also occurs in the ‘restoration’ of schools and hospitals. A few years ago, a full wing of Le Quy Don High School was completely torn down and replaced by something vaguely resembling it. This approach is often referred to as ‘restoration’ in Vietnam. Similarly, a wing of Paediatric Hospital Number 2 had its original cast iron brise soleil removed and then replaced by a crude variation of the original.

In addition to faux colonial, anything evoking contemporary America is also revered. Office towers clad in un-shaded glass absorb the heat of the tropical sun. Single-family houses come equipped with front and back lawns and a two-car garage. Villas boasting fireplaces have been constructed in Ho Chi Minh City, a city that is seldom colder than 20 degrees centigrade.

Perhaps the closest recent (within the last century) examples of what could be called ‘native’ Vietnamese architecture are the colonial-era buildings and the modernist-era buildings of the early to mid-twentieth century. Although these employed European colonial styles such as neoclassicism, art deco, modern and the International Style, they superbly adapted themselves to the climate of the country and the lifestyles of its people.
Fakes

There had already been a Hard Rock Café in Vietnam before the genuine Hard Rock Café opened in Ho Chi Minh City in 2010. The earlier cloned version was so complete that you could actually buy fake Hard Rock Café T-shirts. I sometimes wonder what the difference is between a real Hard Rock Café T-shirt and a fake one. Both were probably made in China and might have even come from the same factory!

Vietnam already had a ‘Hilton’ before the Hilton Corporation arrived here. It was called ‘Hanoi Hilton’. This notorious French-built prison was located right in the centre of the city. The government of North Vietnam kept it in operation during the American-Vietnamese war. It was called Hanoi Hilton by the press because it interned a large number of American prisoners of war.

Inevitably, the prison was torn down years after the end of the war to make way for a large Singaporean development.

The Hilton Corporation eventually managed a genuine Hilton in Hanoi—at a different site, of course—judiciously naming it the Hilton Hanoi Opera, just to make sure guests booked their stay at the right location!

Top left: Vincom 1 Tower is a typical glass tower that was designed without consideration to the local tropical heat or the scale of buildings in the vicinity. Photograph by the author.

Top right: To make way for the construction of Union Square shopping mall, one full block consisting of several generations of buildings such as the Mondial and the Plaza Eden were demolished. Photograph by the author.

Bottom: Phu My Hung development in District 7 promoting single-family houses. Photograph courtesy of Le Ngoc Dang.
1.7 Accumulated Identity of a City

A city is enriched by accumulations over generations.

These accumulations happen vertically in layers and concentrically like tree rings, as can be seen in so many older cities like Rome or Paris.

The result is a complex, multi-dimensional composition. Time is the fourth dimension, and history, economics, politics, religion and various other factors act as the drivers of change.

The accumulation of city fabric builds culture.

History has many examples of victors of war or colonisers eradicating the cities of the defeated and the colonised. In the past, the eradication of the city was a deliberate act whose ultimate goal was the obliteration of the culture. This was the fate of ancient Troy and Tenochtitlan, the ancient Aztec city obliterated by the Spanish conquistadors and completely covered by their new city. Even the temples were disassembled and their stones used to make new Christian basilicas.3

The obliteration of a city fabric is a time-proven way of erasing culture.

To be sure, cities that grow through the process of accumulation do so incorporating a degree of destruction. Accumulation incorporates destruction but keeps enough fabric to retain cultural identity, while obliteration erases everything, including the cultural fabric. The difference is in the amount of destruction.

A photomontage resembling the three main layers of Ho Chi Minh City: the Colonial French period (bottom row), the Saigon modernist period (middle row) and the current period (top row).


3. As seen at an exhibition called Mexico at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1990.
1.8 Ho Chi Minh City Colonised and Re-Colonised

Officially, Ho Chi Minh City is just over three hundred years old. Known as Saigon until it was renamed Ho Chi Minh City by the new communist government after 1975, it was already settled by Vietnamese when Nguyen Huu Canh claimed it from the Khmer ruler in 1698. According to written records, the area had been settled by various ethnic groups before the Vietnamese arrived. Due to its position located among waterways that lead to the sea, Saigon served as a major trading post during the eighteenth century.

Not much remains from the time of those early settlements. The city that is visible today is a mere 150 years old, dating to the arrival of the French. While some claim that the scarcity of architectural remains is due to the deterioration of wooden buildings in the tropical environment, the eradication of earlier settlements, which was standard French policy for colonisation, is the central reason for this absence. Eradication was a deliberate tactic of the French administrators. The French arrival precipitated Saigon’s first recorded instance of obliteration and it erased all built traces of the existing Khmer and Viet cultures. The French laid out Saigon in Haussmann’s urban style. In part to help justify their colonial venture here to the French people, the colonial governors went out of their way to build colonial Saigon as the Paris of the Orient.

Saigon grew for the 150 ensuing years in an accumulative fashion evidenced by the existing examples of structures from different eras of its history—the early French colonial buildings of the late nineteenth century, which are mostly shophouses and small lofts; the early twentieth-century shophouses transitioning into the small factories and apartment blocks of the art deco and modern periods; the tropical high modernist blocks of the late French and American War periods, the brutalist Soviet institutions of the late 1970s; and all of the adaptations and improvisations that have tied buildings from all of the above periods together. This accumulated fabric with all of the accommodation of history, culture and climate is fully visible when one passes through the streets of Ho Chi Minh City.

Two decades after reunification, communist Vietnam began its doi moi policy, or socialist-oriented ‘market economy’, also known as ‘red capitalism’. The Vietnamese economy became one of the fastest growing among the emerging economies in the region.

Prosperity has made Ho Chi Minh City’s urban landscape much more unstable because existing buildings are increasingly demolished for new developments. Supported by government policies, the profit motive has become the driving force reshaping the city. Some believe that post-doi moi Ho Chi Minh City has lost more buildings than the city did during the last two wars that were fought here against the French and the Americans.

In the last fifteen years, and especially in the last five years, the pace of destruction and the size of the areas being destroyed has escalated to a new level. At this rate, I fear that nothing at all of the past will be
kept, and so none of the cultures embodied by the city’s buildings will remain. As will be explained below, the people who made up the old city cannot exist in the new urban fabric – they will be displaced.

The scale of the ongoing demolition of Ho Chi Minh City resembles the obliteration of Singapore to a tabula rasa during the 1960s and ‘70s. Singapore’s case was a government-led policy, and demonstrates the intensity of destruction when business interests and government policy align, as is arguably the case in Ho Chi Minh City.

Watching French colonial architecture being eradicated in the same way that its colonial creators eradicated what had existed here before, fills one with a sense of irony. This time, the local government is fully supportive of the new colonialism in the form of business-friendly policy. Once again, Ho Chi Minh City is being stripped of its visual memories. As a result, the city may quickly lose its unique identity as it follows a course of “erasure, demolition and forgetting.”

The key issue at risk is the identity of the city, which is being traded and swapped for something that did not originate from here.

Hans Georg Gadamer uses the metaphor of an onion, explaining that “truth does not reside in any single layer, but each layer adds to those descriptions that have gone before, giving the description greater acuity as the layers accumulate.” This neatly sums up the situation of the accumulative city and contains an admonition to respect the accumulation.

The obliteration of a city, especially a complex and dense city such as Ho Chi Minh City, eradicates its complex layering, replacing it with bland, mass-produced architecture that one sees in all parts of the world. The culture residing in the urban context is lost, and the new city fabric renders the city ‘placeless’.

In order to maintain Ho Chi Minh City’s identity, policymakers would arguably be better to recognise that the city’s identity cannot be re-fabricated or applied as a veneer. Identity has been acquired by the city through the accumulation of the many versions the city has existed in through its history. The eradication of a city’s identity is an irreversible act; it cannot be undone.

As a city’s identity is important in conveying its uniqueness and its history, the layers we contribute become part of the current stratum in this archaeological cross section of the city. What we build reflects our time, our history, our politics, our religion, and the less we destroy, the more we accumulate. The objective is to participate in the evolution of our city.
1.9 Negotiating Design

An accumulative approach to new design would avoid erasing the existing urban fabric wholesale, and instead aim to negotiate new design into the existing fabric. New design can be accommodated, and it can be inserted into the city in a way that does not ignore the accumulative nature of a city’s identity.

New design can participate in a compatible way in the making of the current layer. This involves an understanding of regional qualities. My design partner, Archie Pizzini, has come to understand these regional qualities by observing Vietnam through photography. My understanding comes from my accumulated experiences within different versions of this city.

New buildings designed in foreign isolation ignore the local specificities, making them incompatible with the context. Local specificities start with an understanding of the local climate, and may extend to an understanding of the way of life, the value systems, the history, the politics and the religions of a region. The particulars also include the available local building techniques, the available human resources and the lives of the end users.

The scale and target of a new development determine the level of disruption. If a project necessitates the demolition of one whole city block, the disruption is immense. If the object of demolition is an architectural landmark, the consequence is a cultural calamity.

It is unrealistic to ban demolition altogether. The city is an organism. It must change and evolve. Older structures that become unfit yield to newer structures. But if the rate of this process is noticeably sped up by those who seek to profit from it, and city blocks are bulldozed at an alarming rate, then policymakers must define a limit to preserve the cultural identity and social viability of the city.
1.10 The Local Specificities, a Partial List

1. The local craft: Each region in Vietnam specialises in a particular craft. In the construction trade, one generally finds that the better carpenters are from central Vietnam and the better masons from northern Vietnam. We rely on the long-existing trades for better craftsmanship, such as carpentry, plastering and stonework. Choosing available materials and levels of finishing is the most realistic option unless one has the time and resources to train local builders.

2. Custom-made design: One of the best characteristics of construction in Vietnam is that many items are not ordered from catalogues. Doors, windows and cabinets do not have to follow standardised sizes and configurations. In many instances, designers have access to a range of options for forms that far exceeds those available in the West.

3. Individual-based workforce: The typical Vietnamese builder exceeds his peers in the West in terms of tolerance and patience. In designs requiring atypical techniques, a trial-and-error method is often required. If the inherent flexibility of Vietnamese builders and craftsmen is utilised in a way that emphasises their strengths, and available materials are exploited, then many projects that could otherwise not happen become possible.

4. The local construction responses to climate: Because of the relatively high cost of energy and the unavailability of Western conveniences such as air conditioning, Vietnamese construction developed ways to mitigate the climate through passive means. Common practices include cross ventilation, sun screening, high ceilings and partial wall partitions.

5. The local ingenuity: Due to a long period of poverty and a lack of resources, many Vietnamese have developed skills in making and maintaining everyday items from discarded materials. The main ingredient required is ingenuity. My partner, Archie Pizzini, is Mexican-American and identifies this as something similar to "rasquachismo", the Hispanic culture of repair, improvisation and making, and also the ability to make whatever one needs from whatever is at hand.
CHAPTER 2:
EXPANDING PRESERVATION

Giovanni Bellini and Titian and Dosso Dossi, *The Feast of the Gods*, 1514/1529, oil on canvas, 170 x 188 cm, Widener Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. Open access.
At the other end of the spectrum to the eradication of a city is the preservation of its built environment. Although I do not support the reckless eradication of Ho Chi Minh City that is currently occurring, this does not automatically mean that I advocate the type of preservation practice whose sole purpose is the preservation of physical buildings and the physical urban fabric.

I believe that historic buildings should not be demolished wholesale. But I also believe that a greater range of options exists than simply the detailed preservation of historic buildings. As I argue for the evolution of buildings, I therefore support the addition of new design to existing structures. The level of this new design intervention depends on each individual situation.

For me, the issue is broader than merely the question of the physical buildings. I would argue that the urban fabric of Ho Chi Minh City should not be eradicated either. But this does not mean that we should prevent the evolution of the urban fabric, in the way that some preservationists such as those who preserve Hoi An (a historic town in central Vietnam) advocate. Instead, new design interventions should be allowed to participate in the making of the city. Again, the level of intervention depends on each situation.

Furthermore, I also believe that we should help maintain the existing social fabric of Ho Chi Minh City, which consists of a healthy mix of different classes of people. Often the poorer class of people can be displaced by either the eradication or the preservation of the built environment. In both cases, the new buildings would be unaffordable to the people currently living on the existing sites. As a result, the existing social fabric of Ho Chi Minh City would be replaced by one homogeneous class—the wealthy. Concurrently, the existing heterogeneous urban fabric would be replaced by one type of urban design—that of the higher end.

Maintaining the existing urban and social fabric is an act that contributes to the maintenance of a more tolerant culture that accommodates different classes of people and multiple types of design.

2.1 Preserving the Physical Architecture

My practice of architectural preservation in New York during the 1990s involved the straightforward preservation of physical buildings. This necessitated a respect for historic architecture. Once it was established that a building was a historic landmark, preservation would take place with the intention of returning the building to its original design. The work also encompassed the conservation of materials to match the original materials as closely as possible.

Around this time, I became interested in the preservation of the monuments and landmarks in Hue, Vietnam’s nineteenth-century capital during the Nguyen dynasty. I took time away from the US and travelled back to Vietnam accompanying the World Monument Fund to attend UNESCO conferences in Hanoi, Hue and Danang.

My relationship with the World Monument Fund also enabled me to visit its project at Preah Khan temple in Siem Reap, Cambodia. At this time, a number of different nations were contributing money and expertise to various monuments in the area, including Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom. During these trips, I was able to compare and contrast the methodologies employed by different groups of preservationists. Some preferred to restore the monuments closely to their original...
When I was a preservationist in New York, the protocol was to preserve anything that was historic. Once a project was defined as a preservation project, we did not even spare the old mortars. Everything historic, from a piece of stone to a piece of wrought iron was relevant. When we had to rejoin and replace the mortars, we had to duplicate their original proportions of lime, sand and water as best as we could. The work was tedious, but it was straightforward. Photograph courtesy of Building Conservation Associates Ltd., New York.

design while others preferred to limit their efforts to the structural consolidation of the ruins without attempting to re-create something that had already vanished.

Afterwards, I returned to New York and worked on the Victory Theater. As mentioned in the previous chapter, when the project architect made a practical decision to paint over the earlier paint layers, thereby concealing the passage of history, it left me feeling perplexed.

Finally, I came to realise that preservation of buildings is by no means a straightforward matter. The dilemma I describe below, which I had encountered while working at the National Gallery of Art (Washington DC) a few years earlier, bears some strong parallels.

Danang 2010

I was amongst a group of preservationists travelling through Danang in 1993 as a guest of the World Monument Fund and UNESCO. I was a young graduate student in Los Angeles at the time.

The group stayed at the Bach Dang Hotel overlooking the Han River. The hotel, the only real choice in Danang at that time, was nothing special. Built in the 1980s, it was looking ancient only a decade later. One of my colleagues was upset with the accommodations and made no secret of it to me. Perhaps my expectations were more realistic given my background and understanding of the country, and this helped me to appreciate the location, with its view across the sleepy tree-lined boulevard to the wide expanse of river beyond. Fishing boats drifted slowly by in the heat, the traffic on the street was mostly bicycles and xích lớn (cycle rickshaws), and it was a slower, quieter Vietnam.

Two decades later, the original Bach Dang Hotel—looking neither better nor worse than when I first saw it—is soon to be demolished and replaced.

The river is now spanned by a major bridge close to the site, and the boulevard features a shady riverside promenade populated by tai chi acolytes before dawn and strolling couples in the afternoons. But the boulevard is still rather quiet, and the fishing boats festooned with nets, masts and huge arc lamps still move slowly in the heat, up the river and past the hotel.
When I worked at the National Gallery of Art in the conservation department, my colleagues were inspecting a painting called *The Feast of the Gods*. The painting was originally painted by Giovanni Bellini, who finished it in 1514. Typical procedure at the gallery was to inspect all paintings using X-ray. The X-ray analysis revealed that the painting had been reworked by Titian years later; it revealed the two artists’ different styles and brush strokes. Titian had taken the liberty of completely changing the background scenery! Further X-ray examination revealed yet another layer of intervention by a lesser-known court painter named Dosso Dossi, who intervened between Bellini and Titian. Of course, there was no real possibility of removing Titian’s work to reveal Bellini’s original painting, but philosophically, it raised an intriguing question: Whose version of the painting was the ‘real’ painting?

Architecture presents a parallel situation. Architects add to other architects’ work all the time. History is filled with agglomerated buildings. If one were to try to uncover the ‘real’ building, how far down would one need to go?

Once a building is being used and has a history, new versions of the building are being constantly generated. Like *The Feast of the Gods*, there is not a real version; there are multiple real versions. It is the job of the architect to decide what the next incarnation of the building will be. How much of the previous incarnations the architect keeps and how he modulates the task depends on the architect and what he wishes to achieve.

By the time I founded my design practice in Vietnam in 2004, my interpretation of preservation had already shifted away from the notions of traditional practice. Preserving every detail of the historic buildings was no longer my sole motivation and the level of my new design interventions in the historic buildings varied from one project to another, as demonstrated in the design and the preservation of Bun Ta project, which will be discussed in the following chapter.
Giovanni Bellini and Titian and Dosso Dossi, *The Feast of the Gods*, 1514/1529, oil on canvas, 170 x 188 cm, Widener Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. Open access.
2.3 Maintaining the Urban Fabric

With the current rate of destruction in Ho Chi Minh City, my concern can no longer be limited to a handful of landmarks, but now consists of the entire city. A city’s urban fabric gives it its identity, and some of our recent projects emphasised their setting within the urban blocks in order to help maintain the urban fabric.

These projects align with a trend that has emerged in Ho Chi Minh City for cafés, fashion shops and architect studios to rent spaces in the older buildings in the city centre. Cheap rent is often the reason for the move into such spaces. This trend may be considered from multiple perspectives. It helps to create awareness that there is value in the old buildings and that these buildings can be preserved and reused. Meanwhile, a wishful thinker might hope that occupying such buildings may prolong their existence long enough for the buildings to be eventually maintained. More pessimistically, we could also assume that these buildings will indeed disappear soon and that occupying them amounts to an act of making the best of whatever still remains.

Although many of the existing buildings are examples of well-designed architecture, my urban concern sublimates any aesthetic assessment of the buildings to focus on the need to maintain the urban fabric itself.

Moreover, my concern about the maintenance of the existing urban fabric does not necessarily mean I am against new development altogether. I am only concerned that the existing built environment is being replaced recklessly. Since new developments are inevitable, they can be coordinated into the existing urban fabric.

2.4 Maintaining the Social Fabric

The urban fabric is created by social systems while at the same time housing social systems. While urban fabric and social fabric are intertwined, preserving one does not necessarily mean preserving the other.

In Hoi An, a historic port town near Danang, the authorities completely forbid all new construction to preserve the urban fabric. As a result, the town has turned into something between a museum and an amusement park—a museum because the architecture is not permitted to evolve, an amusement park because it is managed strictly for entertainment and it is no longer allowed to grow as a living town. The authorities sell tickets for entrance to Hoi An and have installed speakers on all street corners playing muzak and announcements. In this case, the urban fabric is successfully preserved, but the social systems have been displaced. Many people have moved away, and the old houses have become souvenir shops, in a manner that is similar to the transformation of Times Square discussed in chapter 1.

In Ho Chi Minh City, the occupation of old downtown buildings by non-residents may also lead to the displacement of the original tenants. However, in our case, we hope that our act of embedment allows us to become a member of the community, therefore part of the current social fabric. By embedding ourselves, the existing social fabric is nurtured and maintained. This notion of embedment will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

Ho Chi Minh City has its unique social systems, encompassing a range of activities related to how people operate their lives each day, from having their kids taken to school by a neighbourhood xe om
(motorbike taxi), to buying food from the vendors in the alleys, to doing tai chi at the neighbourhood park. The lifestyles of the people are part of the social systems. These lifestyles are supported by the existing built environment - street corners made legal for xe om, alleys made available for vendors, and neighbourhood parks to be close and safe enough for all people. If the built environment is replaced in a way that brings marked change to its structures, then the lifestyles must also change. In many cases, the existing residents cannot afford the new lifestyles imposed by the new built environment. If the new built environment only provides taxi stands and supermarkets and health clubs, those who cannot afford these services are forced to leave.

By demonstrating the viability of using the existing built environment, the momentum of the current destruction can be mitigated, and the social fabric can be maintained for longer.

Although concern about maintaining the social fabric may appear to resemble nostalgia or a preference for stasis, it would be more accurately described as a preference for diversity and heterogeneity. It welcomes the new ways as long as the old ways can be maintained and not excluded.

In Hoi An, most of the historic houses have been preserved. New construction is forbidden. While the built environment is preserved, the social fabric has been largely displaced. Most of the houses now function as souvenir shops without residents. Photograph by the author.
2.5 Preserving the Local Knowledge

The preservation of local knowledge can play a role in the maintenance of the existing built environment and the accompanying social systems.

Recently, Vietnamese builders have been exposed to more modern building technologies, including curtain wall, frameless glass, and drywall systems. As in the developed world, many of these new systems have supplanted earlier crafts. If this phenomenon is allowed to unfold on a global scale, then construction methods end up the same everywhere, resulting in a homogeneous architectural landscape worldwide. As mentioned in the previous chapter, trades and crafts in Vietnam are regionally specialised. While this is less the case than in earlier times, regional trades and crafts add to the uniqueness of each region. There is value in maintaining this regional uniqueness.

In HTA+pizzini projects, we have strived to preserve Vietnam’s existing crafts by allowing builders to maintain their skills. When we designed the light fixture for Avalon, the steelwork demanded nothing beyond what the fabricators had always done. The final fixture was fabricated specifically to the design after a few samples were submitted. While the implementation involved the most basic of craftsmanship from Vietnam, the end result showed the sophistication of a high-end design product from Italy or Japan.

Recently, many Vietnamese builders have formed large construction corporations. While this is important in order to be able to erect high-rise buildings, there are good reasons to promote the smaller companies. Our projects range in scale from high-rises to smaller houses and galleries, so we have experiences working with both big and small construction companies. For example, Coteccos built Avalon when Coteccos was a smaller company. It was managed by a director and an in-house project director, and both had good intentions. On the Coteccos’s side, all issues were decided by one of these two individuals. Avalon is still their best product. Coteccos grew in size at the end of our second project with them and eventually became a public listed corporation. The company’s projects are now managed by more people with different motives. The quality is harder to predict.
In contrast, Minh Chuong Construction Company has been much more consistent. Like the small construction company my father founded after leaving Brossard et Mopin Company, Minh Chuong is a family-run business. I began my working relationship with an older generation of directors, Mr Minh and Mr Chuong, both of whom have now passed away. The company is currently managed by Mr Bang, the son of Mr Chuong. Staff numbers have remained constant since the first time I engaged Minh Chuong for a project in 1998, and most members of the workforce have been there since our first project together. I personally know the leaders of each trade within Minh Chuong, and I often request particular individuals to work on our projects. Over the years, these individuals have improved their skills in their trades. This phenomenon is a regional luxury that should be preserved.

For Le Loi Atelier, we decided to use Minh Chuong instead of a larger company. We did not tender it. The construction involved a lot of improvisation so the builder could not provide an exact cost estimate. The general agreement was very loose and very much based on trust. It was a Vietnamese-style transaction.

Le Loi Atelier was constructed by individuals who I knew personally. We enjoyed better communication than what we would have had with a bigger company.
Since I believe a well-functioning city is acquired through time and built up through layers of accumulation over the generations, I prefer not to practice the type of preservation where one must choose one particular layer over any other and where one is forced to remove the rejected layers of history.

Similarly, I do not support the reckless eradication of the city for the purpose of building new developments because this practice also eradicates the accumulated layers wholesale.

I position myself in between traditional preservation and typical eradication.

The accumulative nature of Ho Chi Minh City deserves to be maintained, therefore its urban fabric should be allowed to evolve and change through new design interventions.

Similarly, the social fabric should be maintained for the same purpose of maintaining the accumulative nature of Ho Chi Minh City. The social fabric should not be displaced rapidly by either demolition or preservation of the existing built environment. Instead, it should be allowed to change over time.

My positioning in favour of the accumulative nature of Ho Chi Minh City recognises that change is inevitable.

My positioning also allows me to contribute new design to the city and to participate in the making of the city’s current stratum.

New Architecture Design to Be Negotiated into the Existing Layering

To maintain the accumulative nature of the city, I propose architecture that can be negotiated into the existing layering. To be able to design such architecture, design cannot be done in isolation. Instead, it must involve the city’s specificities, as discussed in chapter 1. One must also take into account the available human resources, the technical resources and the material resources.

The best-case scenario would be for our new design to be inserted into the existing urban fabric with a minimum of destruction to the urban and social fabric. However, I realise that there are occasions when the urban and the social fabrics are replaced justifiably by designs that offer different contributions to the city.
Preserving the local knowledge: For Vietnam, it is crucial that its unique phenomena such as regional crafts, handmade fabrication and the individual-based workforce be preserved and maintained.

Occupying the Existing Buildings

One way to maintain the urban fabric is to use the existing building stocks.

Recently, many cafés, shops and architects studios (including ours) have started to move into the older buildings in central Ho Chi Minh City. In our case, cheap rent was the decisive factor, but there are other issues worth considering. The proliferation of design offices, trendy shops and trendy cafés in these old buildings raises awareness about the value of old architecture.

When gentrification occurs, there is a tendency for the new dwellers to displace the original tenants. In such cases, the urban fabric is maintained while the social fabric is not. But in reality, the displacement caused by the large-scale demolition of the buildings is much faster than the displacement caused by gentrification.

There is no perfect situation. In the best-case scenario, we, as the newcomers, can try to become part of the community when we move into the existing buildings, and by doing so, help to nurture a part of the social fabric of the city. Perhaps we can prolong the life of these buildings. Perhaps we can just make the best of their final chapter before they meet the wrecking ball.

Expanding Preservation

1. New design intervention in historic buildings: While practising preservation in the US, I already had started to shift away from the notion of preserving every bit of the physical historic buildings. After I founded the practice in Vietnam, I always incorporated my new design interventions into projects involving historic buildings. This method aligns with the notion that the design of a building accumulates and evolves.

2. Maintaining the urban fabric: I do not support the current obliteration of the urban fabric by the new developments in Ho Chi Minh City. Meanwhile, preserving the urban fabric and not allowing it to evolve and accumulate is unrealistic. Instead, the urban fabric should be maintained to incorporate new designs.

3. Preserving the accumulated nature of the city: Instead of a narrow focus that concentrates on preserving the historic buildings and the current urban blocks, we should aim to preserve the accumulated nature of Ho Chi Minh City. This means that new designs should be allowed to be incorporated into the existing fabric and to participate in the making of the current layer of the city fabric.

4. Preventing the social fabric from being displaced rapidly: The built environment is intertwined with the society that creates and uses it. It is inevitable that both the built environment and the accompanying society evolve over time. But large-scale demolition of the built environment forces people to be displaced abruptly, and not allowing enough time for them to adapt.

5. Preserving the local knowledge: For Vietnam, it is crucial that its unique phenomena such as regional crafts, handmade fabrication and the individual-based workforce be preserved and maintained.
Renovation as Melded Practice of Preservation and New Design

Another way to maintain the urban fabric is to renovate the existing buildings. A renovation approach pays respect to the past but at the same time is not too timid to contribute for the present.

Renovation is generally a practice of care—the care for the existing structure. Renovation is a less strict practice of preservation. In contrast to restoration, renovation does not require identical replication. It does not require strict conservation of the existing materials, as one would provide for a high profile landmark. Renovation practice allows physical alterations to the existing building to adapt to new use and design. It does not treat the existing architecture as a museum artefact.

I see design opportunities within the framework of a renovation project and find renovation more challenging than designing for an empty site.

Ho Chi Minh City can best be dealt with using the lens and tools of a renovator. As such, it can be renovated by salvaging as much as possible of the existing built environment, while also adding new design interventions.

My role has evolved from practising preservation and new architectural design separately, to a merged role of being an architect of contemporary design with emphasis on the maintenance of the urban context.

This practice allows me to contribute to the current stratum of Ho Chi Minh City, transcending the role of only preserving the pieces.
INDEX OF SELECTED PROJECTS

Since the founding of our practice in 2004, we have done approximately 40 projects, proposals and competitions. Among these, 17 projects were built. From this body of work, I have created five groups, as discussed below:

(All images and photographs by HTA+pizzini, with the exception of Bun Ta)

THE EARLY PROJECTS

Interestingly, three of our four early projects (2004-2005) are included in this research document. Both Bun Ta and Galerie Quynh engaged the street while Avalon utilised local methodologies. The early projects were already Vietnam-conscious. At the same time, Bun Ta and Galerie Quynh involved maintaining existing buildings while Avalon involved preserving local ways of design and fabrication.
THE TOWERS AND THE WHITE VILLAS

With the exception of the Botanic project that was built and we were able to allow the design to accommodate the Vietnamese lifestyles, most tower projects in this group were only proposals whose designs have not been developed enough to relate to Vietnam their setting.

Among the villas designed, five were built. Most were for foreign and Viet kieu (returned Vietnamese) clients whose agendas differed from the issues discussed in this research. They are not included in the discussion.
THE LE LOI ATELIER PROJECTS

These projects include the design of our Le Loi atelier and the projects designed while we were working from Le Loi atelier. Two projects from this group are discussed in the research document: the design of the Le Loi atelier itself and the unbuilt design of Thi Sach apartment building in Hanoi. The design for Le Loi celebrated Vietnam by repurposing historic architectural remains. The design for Thi Sach maintains an existing local architectural typology. They both are Vietnam-conscious projects. The other projects in this group that have not been selected for discussion are also place-specific designs. The Mekong Delta Blues competition could have been included in the research since its design employed local materials, technology and methodologies. The Saigon Airport Plaza, designed as a gateway to Ho Chi Minh City for those arriving and departing the airport, was also place-conscious.
THE HOA HUNG STUDIO PROJECTS

Only the design of the Hoa Hung studio is included in the research document. Our occupation of a hẻm (alley) is the main discussion in the document. The design of the villa itself is a minor issue. While we were working from the Hoa Hung studio, Vietnam experienced a recession. We therefore worked slowly on a big project in the coastal city Danang - the Danang Hilton. The design for this project, now under construction, does not relate to the issues of the research, so it is not included.

THE LY TU TRONG STUDIO PROJECTS

Two of three projects from this group are included in the research. The design of our Ly Tu Trong studio mainly is about our embedment into the local setting. Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi, our concluding project, involved maintaining the urban layers and confronting changes.

Our most recent project was a design for a sky-bar in Nha Trang for the Sheraton Nha Trang. The design did not involve the issues of the research, and it is not included in the discussion in this document.

For the following chapters, I have selected a total of nine projects for discussion: The first group of four projects is titled Engaging Vietnam; the second group of four projects is titled Shifting Role; and the final project is titled Embedment and Reconciliation.

The two main schemes that run through all projects are: 1) Maintaining the accumulative layers of the city and 2) Adapting my Western-trained expertise to the local setting of Vietnam.
CHAPTER 3:
ENGAGING VIETNAM

Projects:
Bun Ta Restaurant
Galerie Quynh 1
Avalon
Thi Sach

Avalon lobby light fixture. Photograph courtesy of Archie Pizzini.
Economic motivations appear to be the decisive factor determining the fate of Ho Chi Minh City’s remaining colonial-era buildings. These include residential villas, apartment blocks and state-run institutions such as post offices, museums, schools, churches and hospitals. The monetary cost of replacing state-run institutions has been difficult to be budgeted by the city authority. Therefore, the threat of demolition of the villas and the apartment blocks has been more immediate since the private sector has many methods to finance the development.

As apartment blocks are on larger lots of land, it is more profitable for private developers to replace the colonial apartment buildings with new developments. The colonial villas, on the other hand, are on smaller lots and the allowable plot ratio (total construction area over land area) is often too low for developers to build anything profitable, unless they can develop a city block that was full of these colonial villas. In reality, it is easier for a developer to buy out the poorer residents of an apartment block than to buy out multiple villa tenants. This accounts for the continued existence of many remaining villas... for the time being.

3.1 BUN TA RESTAURANT

The villa that housed Bun Ta restaurant is one such colonial building. Originally built as a residence, it was used as an office for several decades. In 2004, my clients, Huy and Kevin, approached me to convert it into a chic restaurant.

Maintaining the Physical Building

Vietnam’s remaining colonial buildings are anything but worthless. They are arguably the most valuable architecture we have in Vietnam today.

At the time of the Bun Ta project, quite a number of colonial villas still existed in Ho Chi Minh City. Most of the villas were covered with additions, some hidden in the interior, some exposed to the outside. The general population was oblivious to the architecture hidden beneath and tended to regard colonial villas as old and obsolete buildings.

When Kevin and Huy approached me to renovate one of these villas into a chic restaurant, I recognised this as an opportunity to maintain the building. Kevin was also a Viet kieu from the US and Huy was a well-travelled native of Ho Chi Minh City. Having been exposed to places where historic architecture was more respected, the clients were sympathetic to my impulses to maintain it.
Bun Ta was a renovation project, the transformation of a neglected and much-abused colonial-era villa into a chic restaurant with a landscaped garden in the heart of Ho Chi Minh City. This might seem like an obvious strategy given the innate charm of such structures, but it was a truly radical move in Vietnam in 2004. Photograph courtesy of Tam Son Co.
Top: 110-112 Vo Van Tan is now for sale for 35 million USD. Only high-rise development with maximum construction area would justify the purchase cost. Photograph courtesy of Archie Pizzini.

Left: 161 Pasteur was the residence of Nguyen Van Thieu, president of South Vietnam during the ‘American War’ (as it is called in Vietnam). After the fall of Saigon in 1975, the villa was given to General Tran Van Tra, the communist general who led the Tet Offensive in 1968 and played a major role in the Ho Chi Minh Campaign in 1975. In 2002, I was working for DCM when it proposed a 21-storey building on this site for a relative of Mr Tra. The proposal was rejected by the city authority based on the historic significance of this building. The city administration of that time has now retired. The current administration may have different agendas. Photograph by the author.

Bottom: 21 Pham Ngoc Thanh is now used as RMIT District 3 campus. Photograph by the author.

Top: Many villas are hidden behind shops. Photograph by the author.
The Fate of the Villas

As Saigon fell, many colonial villas were abandoned by members of the ruling class of the previous regime. With the communist victory, the abandoned villas were given to the revolutionaries - the higher the rank, the larger the villa. RMIT’s District 3 campus was a villa given to a famous general. The smaller villas were given to the lower-ranking cadres who, when they retire, tend to move into the former servants’ quarters and rent out the main building to companies and foreigners. The more business-minded sell them to the higher class of this regime for an exorbitant price.

In some cases, there is not yet economic gain to be had from demolishing the colonial villas because of their relatively high price. Developers refrain from buying and developing them until the maths begins to work to their advantage. At current prices, a typical villa less than 500 m² in a hem (alley) can be worth two to three million US dollars.

There is a wonderful street-front villa at 110-112 Vo Van Tan that is listed for thirty-five million US dollars. At that price, it is certain that the villa itself is of no interest to the buyer. The villa occupies a large lot of 2800 m², just big enough for the developer to justify the purchase cost.

This villa is a wonderful example of high-end French colonial design, with bracketed eaves, sculpted balconies and wonderful decorative lanterns at the ornate wrought iron gates. On top of being stunning, it is a landmark piece of Saigon’s history. It once served as headquarters for the French Air Force Command, then as headquarters for the South Vietnamese Air Force. Now it seems to be a private property. A few years ago, it was an antique shop. A few months ago, Archie and I trespassed and wandered inside until the current owners came and chased us away.

Let us hope that there is less risk of having to face the wrecking ball for the mansions at 97 Pho Duc Chinh, since they now house the Ho Chi Minh City Museum of Fine Art.

Even though this complex was built by the Hui Bon Hoa company in the late 1920s, three decades after Hui Bon Hoa had passed away, many Saigonese still call it nha Chu Hoa, or ‘Uncle Hoa’s house’. Many myths about the house, including the one about Chu Hoa locking up his daughter in the room upstairs because of her leprosy and her ghost coming back after she died, are simply myths because Chu Hoa never lived there.¹

Chu Hoa was born as Huang Wen Hua in Xiamen, China in 1845. He moved to Saigon when he was twenty. Starting business as a pawnshop dealer, he later became one of the largest land and property owner in the region. Chu Hoa’s company was responsible for 97 Pho Duc Chinh, the Majestic Hotel, Tu Du Hospital, many Chinese schools in Cho lon and many shophouses in District 1.

My father was involved in the construction of the seven villas in an urban park on 01 Ly Thai To complex, another Hui Bon Hoa project. The villas now serve as government guesthouses. In 2010, the office of the Prime Minister gave permission to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to auction off the complex.

¹ Tim Dolin, Exploring Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam: The Gioi Publisher, 2014), 118.
Maintaining the Urban Fabric

Bun Ta maintained a physical layer of the city that had been forgotten. Many colonial-era buildings have been neglected and later renovations were often added in an ad-hoc manner. The main motivation for this project was to make obvious the evidence of the city’s history and to maintain part of the urban fabric. It was fortunate that the villa was still there to be maintained. Currently, many villas in Ho Chi Minh City are being demolished to make way for new construction.

Reverence, Orthodoxy and Nuance

At the beginning of the design process for Bun Ta, even after my perplexed experience in thinking about how preservationists removed traces of history at the Victory Theater in New York (as discussed in chapter 1), I was still intending to apply the same default practice of peeling away all that was added onto the original building to reveal its original colonial architecture. It was an automatic response. My attitude towards things historic was one of reverence.

Physically, the villa was still layered with many decades of additions. My first task was to draw up a demolition plan. I removed layers and layers of additions, some interior and some exterior. The old villa was revealed as a villa. At a time when colonial architecture was being neglected and replaced by newer structures, Bun Ta was being maintained.

During the course of design for the project, however, my interpretation of preservation strayed from orthodoxy when I felt required to add my own design to the historic structure. To accommodate new needs and requirements, internal walls were demolished. The false ceiling was removed; the original structure of dark timber beams and the underside of the terracotta roof tiles were exposed. Some windows became doors. I added a welcoming glass canopy to connect the street to the main room, and added timber pergolas on the sides. The original patterned floor tiles were too damaged to be salvaged, and I replaced them with a raw concrete floor. The removal of the wall facing the street was also unorthodox in terms of preservation practice since the wall was part of the original historic architecture.

As architects, we make these decisions all the time, regarding what to remove and what to maintain. The final design resembled a ‘traditional’ preservation project because I had decided to remove most of the later additions as they were not appropriate for the building’s new function. As a result, the original colonial architecture was revealed.

My new design interventions for Bun Ta represented my participation in the making of the current layer of the urban fabric.

This represents an early instance in my practice where I deliberately broke preservation protocol to accommodate an agenda I felt to be more crucial. Bun Ta was one of my turning points.

Bun Ta attracted wide attention in the local media; even a TV show was made about it. The publicity worked well. Bun Ta became a project that informed and bent local attitudes towards the older buildings. Thereafter, many colonial villas started to be converted into restaurants and cafés. The first Quan Ngon and the current Quan Ngon, together with the Highland Café on Nguyen Du Street are examples of more thoughtful renovation projects.
Western Ideas Adapted in Vietnam

I would not have been able to do Bun Ta if I had not had Western knowledge and ideas. The design interventions - such as exposing the ceiling, accentuated by the new steel beams supporting the historic timber trusses - were the result of my years spent inside the attics of New York landmark buildings wondering why the structure was never made visible. The pigmented and polished concrete flooring was also a Western import appropriated for Vietnam, as was the new glass and steel canopy at the main entry. The imports, however, were placed in their local setting in a way that enhanced the local conditions.

It was only possible to enhance the local conditions as long as the existing urban fabric is maintained and not eradicated.

The idea that historic architecture could be highlighted was also an imported idea.
Engaged Attitude towards the Street

Although the client intended the project to be a high-end chic restaurant, I wanted the project to engage the street. As is typical for Indochinese colonial architecture, this building had a high wall separating the colonists’ home from the street. I requested the demolition of this wall, even though it mitigated the exclusiveness that the client had initially intended. My intention was to expose the restaurant so as to welcome passers-by. The client agreed, and we lowered the wall, adapting it into planters half a metre high.

Even under communism, Vietnam is a class-conscious society. Class barriers had existed between the peasants and the mandarins under the phong kien feudal system, which was in place before French colonialism in the late nineteenth century, and in colonial times between the culis (peasants) and the colons (colonists). Under the new market economy of doi moi, similar barriers exist between the haves and the

have-nots. Lowering the front wall of Bun Ta was a gesture towards mitigating that barrier. Incidentally, Bun Ta literally means ‘our noodle’, but it can also be translated as ‘the people’s noodle’. This project may represent my reaction to the exclusionary nature of many venues in Vietnam at the time. In 2004, little mixing between local Vietnamese and foreigners took place. An unspoken evaluation occurred at the entrance to places like hotels, up-scale restaurants and shops.

Having been subject to exclusion many times (I did better when people mistook me for a Japanese) and also noticing the proliferation of new exclusive venues and gated communities in Vietnam, I suspect that my design motivation at Bun Ta was the desire to inject more of a sense of equality between those on the street and those in the restaurant.

In Bun Ta, the design of the wall exposed these two broad social groups to each other by lowering the physical threshold. Of course, the two social groups remained intact, which was fine. The point was not to merge the cultures into one, but to mitigate the hierarchy implied by the wall.

The project was located right in the heart of the once colonial city, with its French-period trees. Lowering the wall resulted in the visual expansion of the shaded garden dining area, releasing it to the expansive tree-shaded sidewalk and providing views across the wide sidewalk to the lush grounds of the Independence Palace beyond. The interplay across the threshold was two-way, which supported the transmission a message about the worth of colonial-period buildings.

Between new Architectural Design and Preservation

It is straightforward to preserve. It is also straightforward to obliterate and design anew. It is much more challenging to design with respect for what already exists.

When I was a strict preservationist in New York, the procedure was to preserve anything that was historic. Later on when I was working for the commercially orientated architectural firms, we seldom discussed what was already there when we began to design. Most designs started as if they were being built in a vacuum. There were no site issues to deal with. Every site was a blank page, regardless of where it was.

More recently, I prefer a less cut-and-dried approach.

Bun Ta was a good example of this positioning somewhere in between. I chose not to be obliged to follow the strict preservation protocol, and I chose not to ignore the historic structure. Instead, I carefully designed around it.

Operating within this gap requires respect for both the historic design and one’s own design. At its best, it represents a collaboration with the original architecture.
In the early 2000s, Vietnamese contemporary art was overtaken by commercial paintings sold to tourists and expatriates living in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Most of these paintings were landscapes or figurative paintings painted in a vaguely impressionist-influenced style. They were not unpleasant and accommodated the tastes of a large percentage of potential buyers. This situation made a few commercially minded artists rich. Some could even afford assistants to produce more of the same paintings, which were then authenticated with a signature. These artists’ ‘knock-offs’ of themselves parallels the many other fake items available in Vietnam: the fake Louis Vuitton bags, the fake Hard Rock Café (as discussed in chapter 1), and the fake colonial architecture.

This was the Ho Chi Minh City art scene when Quynh Pham decided to open her first gallery.

3.2 GALERIE QUYNH 1
Maintaining the Urban Fabric by Occupying an Existing Building

Galerie Quynh 1 was an effort to maintain an existing layer in the urban fabric. The building was not a landmark of any sort, but it has been there since the mid-twentieth century. I supported the client for not renting a space in one of the new office buildings, since allocating a gallery on the ground floor of an existing building would assist in maintaining the physical traces of history.

The renovation effort for this project was more straightforward than Bun Ta’s since I did not have to deal with any later additions.

This was early in my career, and I realised that the existing building not being a landmark allowed me more possibilities to contribute my new design input. Once a historic building becomes a landmark, it becomes a cultural symbol. Ben Thanh Market, the cathedral and the main post office are examples of such buildings in Ho Chi Minh City. Architects who alter the physical remains of landmark buildings in any way run the risk of tampering with the cultural symbols of the city. Existing buildings that are not landmarks, just as the one that housed Gallery Quynh 1 and the buildings that house Le Loi Atelier, Ly Tu Trong Studio and Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi, are simply parts of the layers of the urban fabric. Because they do not have any cultural symbols attached, I find these buildings more easily adaptable to new design interventions.

Next page: The gallery did not turn its back on the street, but engaged the street. This condition forced the artists to confront the public. Photograph courtesy of Phu Nam Thuc Ha.
Western Inputs Adapted to Vietnam

The architecture of Galerie Quynh 1 was a new concept, imported from the West. In its day, it was probably the first space finished with polished concrete flooring. Polished flooring was common in Vietnam for kitchens and toilets, but never in a gallery or a high-end restaurant. My father always pigmented the concrete flooring in the houses I grew up in, but these were only in the front yard or the kitchen. At Galerie Quynh 1, the naturally finished steel door and the sliding steel gate hidden inside the white wall were the results of my infatuation with unpolutioned materials, widely used in southern California and promoted at SCI-Arc in the 1990s.

Again, the imports were appropriated, instead of imposed, on their local setting. The unpolutioned finishes were appropriate to the abstract art that the gallery was showing and also to the unpolutioned urban grit in that part of the city.

Quynh’s expectation of me was to design a Western-style space for her gallery, which coincided with my motivation to contribute Western contemporary architecture. We were both operating on the assumption that Vietnamese expressionist abstract art – itself an imported idea – would be at home with a Western space.

So I designed a concrete floor. I designed white walls. I concealed electrical conduit in the floor. I designed a raw steel sliding gate and a raw steel front door. We included top-of-the-line lighting. Midstream during the project, an opportunity to situate the project back in Vietnam arose.
Top: The steel door was left naturally finished. Photograph courtesy of Galerie Quynh.

Bottom: The interior was finished with polished concrete flooring. The steel window frames and furniture were made of naturally finished steel. Photograph courtesy of Archie Pizzini.
Engagement with the Local People

Two large windows that took up most of the wall that faced the street presented the issue of engagement to me, as an architect, once again. The gallery was a tiny space, with wall area for hanging art at a premium. It was essentially a one-room gallery, with one and a half short walls (when you subtracted the doorway), and two long walls, one of which was the wall taken up by the windows. I pressed Quynh not to fill in the windows.

At first glance, it seemed it would be better business-wise to fill in the windows in order to gain much-needed wall space for hanging artworks. Regardless, Quynh agreed to let me leave the windows untouched, which would allow people outside to see the art inside the gallery.

Quynh’s motivation was to expose Vietnamese abstract art to a larger global audience. My motivation was to expose her art to the street—to let it spill out to the uninformed and the unexposed.

The design positioned the gallery both in urban and philosophical terms, intertwining itself with the existing setting, the street and the sidewalk, and also making clear the design intentions. The design also forced the artists to be conscious of exactly where they were, not behind closed walls but right there by the street. This was particularly obvious during art performances where the art inside reflected the lives people led outside. The design allowed interaction across the threshold.

Boundary Blurring

A relationship can be seen between the lowered front wall at Bun Ta and the opened windows at Galerie Quynh. For both projects, the design was not done in isolation from the street or the local context.

At the gallery, exhibition opening events would always spill out onto the wide sidewalk—involving street vendors in the process—with guests sitting on the windowsills chatting with others who looked back through the glass to the works on exhibit. Inside and outside bled into each other through this transparent membrane, a feature of site-specificity that some exhibiting artists incorporated explicitly into their works, as art installations occasionally billowed out to incorporate the entire street area.

In some of the more striking shows, the Vietnamese general public, who had never viewed contemporary art before, found themselves transfixed by what was happening inside the gallery. One performance caused minor traffic jams and piqued the curiosity of street cleaners in the wee hours.
Although the lack of wall space to hang art was serious, I saw the existing windows as a unique opportunity to expose the inside of the gallery to the street. The proposal aligned with my desire to embrace the context. There was no need to demolish the windows, but more importantly, there was no need to turn our back on the street. Instead, the distinction between the room and the street was blurred. As a result, many exhibitions were designed conceiving of the street and its inhabitants as art viewers. Meanwhile, during openings, the art viewers poured out onto the sidewalk, looking back at the artwork. Photograph courtesy of Phu Nam Thuc Ha.

Artists and art patrons gathered on the sidewalk during art openings, forcing them to acknowledge the presence of the street and the local context. Photograph courtesy of Phu Nam Thuc Ha.
Spatial Justice

The interaction and the relationship between the art and the street, between the artists/patrons and the people on the street, mitigated the gap between supposed high culture and supposed low culture.

My design motivation was the idea that art was for all people. This impulse resonates with William Lim’s idea of spatial justice. To me, it was a revealing exploration of how an architectural design could reflect and act on a designer’s convictions about a sociological issue. This relationship between the art, the artists, the city and the public was to be explored further in later designs.

The interaction between this gallery and the street was the antithesis of the way many other projects were designed – off limits to all people who have no business there.

An art performance/installation attracted street cleaners and other passers-by, mitigated the gap between supposed high culture and supposed low culture. Photograph courtesy of Sue Hajdu.
Being able to maintain the existing local qualities and being able to import and appropriate foreign ideas into Vietnam, I was hoping that I could position myself between Vietnam and the West and become a mediator in this project. My role was to evaluate and select from both sides. The exercise was an acknowledgement that both sides had much to offer.

3.3 AVALON

Maintaining an Existing Design Method

What was maintained in the Avalon project was not physical. Maintenance, here, was more about maintaining a way of designing and a way of implementing the design.

For Avalon, I tried to revitalise the way architecture had been designed in Ho Chi Minh City.

In the early days of colonised Vietnam, the French architects imported their design directly from France without much consideration for the local conditions. The cathedral and the Hotel de Ville (now the Peoples’ Committee) are examples of the approach during this period.4 In later years, colonial architects were much more adaptive and site-specific, not only visually, but also in terms of the function and dealing with the local climate. The Gralle Hospital and the Lycee Petrus Ky are examples from this period.

During the 1960s and ’70s, Vietnamese modernist architects were doing exactly the same. While the International Style and the modernist language were used, the manner was very site-specific. Local materials, local ways of construction, local climate control and local lifestyle were all considered in the design process.

I wanted to maintain that practice for Avalon. So I designed the building specifically for Ho Chi Minh City. Not only did I consider the climate (as shown by the brise soleil, the timber shutters, the ceiling fans and the high ceilings), but Avalon was also designed to be built by local builders with available local materials and existing fabrication processes.

The design of Avalon complied to a Western design brief, but also opened itself up to the city outside, in recognition of values offered both by Vietnam and the global world. Photograph courtesy of Archie Pizzini.
Avalon was a Western product adapted into Vietnam. Avalon re-introduced the modernist language, a Western import, to the city.

In the mid-2000s, a few high-rise apartment projects were built in Ho Chi Minh City. The most noticeable project was the Manor, a 30-storey condominium project in faux-colonial style with Mansard roofing, designed by an architectural office in Seoul. Its neighbour, the Saigon Pearl, was a 37-storey project designed by an architectural office in Hong Kong. Such projects were generally designed by firms oblivious to the surrounding context, and the design had to rely mostly on visual status symbols. As a result, they were realised as foreign objects imposed upon the landscape and the skyline.

When the client, John Caffin, approached me to design Avalon, he had a more focussed vision. John was an architect-turned-developer from Melbourne who had been living in Ho Chi Minh City for over a decade. We started the project with an agreement not to do a faux-colonial-style building, which was popular at the time. The client and I shared a commonality regarding the use of the modernist language. John’s reason was most likely because he was trained as an architect during the 1960s. My motivation was my belief that modernism had already been adapted to Vietnam before, and it had been proven to work, specifically, in this place.

Avalon readapted modernist architecture in Vietnam, not only by utilising the modernist architectural language but by responding to the local climate, taking advantage of the locally available materials and the existing construction methods. Photograph courtesy of Archie Pizzini.
Adapting Western Lifestyle in Vietnam

Avalon imported a new lifestyle to Vietnam. The client gave me a very precise design brief: Avalon was to cater to foreigners and Viet kieus, with all the amenities expected by them. I met all of the client’s expectations. All apartments were equipped with dry bathrooms featuring enclosed showers and baths, forsaking the slippery-floored Vietnamese-style bathrooms where the whole room is essentially a shower. All apartments were provided with washers and dryers, doing away with clothes hung out to dry on the balconies. It was also one of the first projects in Vietnam with a Western-style open kitchen. The client and I thought it was an appropriate decision because I was designing it for a specific group of end users. I noticed afterwards that other projects copied the open kitchen idea and disappointed many Vietnamese apartment buyers who preferred to cook in an enclosed kitchen, due to the smell produced by the preparation of Vietnamese food. This demonstrates how a Western idea being applied without consideration of the local conditions can be inappropriate.

For Avalon, being both a high-end project and an apartment building was a Western idea. In Vietnam, at that time, the chung cu apartment blocks were never high-end. Many chung cus were basic buildings built by the state for people who can not afford to live in tube houses or villas. By that time, even the luxury apartment buildings built during French colonial times had become housing for the lower classes. The challenge I faced was how to convince the Vietnamese that it was possible to have a luxury apartment building. The Western import was the notion that high-end apartment living can be appropriated into the new Ho Chi Minh City.
Saigon Modernist Tradition

The modernist architectural tradition of Saigon flourished from the 1950s to 1975, when construction halted due to the post-war economic hardship throughout the country.

This created a legacy of modernist buildings, designed by Vietnamese architects, which were superbly well-adapted to the local climate and lifestyles.

Ho Chi Minh City’s modernist buildings of the ‘50s and ‘60s show a special willingness to adapt the International Style to climatic and cultural situations far removed from where the style was conceived. Wood was largely avoided due to the rot and termite problems inherent in Vietnam. Large expanses of glass were seldom exposed directly to the sunlight because of the need to mitigate heat gain. Window walls were designed to open up through pivoting or stacking panels. *Brise soleil* and air-permeable screening flourished in both abundant numbers and types as designers developed various ways to screen views and direct heat while still encouraging airflow. Wide canopies provided shade for the many public spaces used for everyday functions, whether commercial or personal. Roof terraces and specialised trellises appeared in many configurations to accommodate lifestyles tuned to taking advantage of the evening breezes. Terrazzo floors and stairs accommodated the yearly inundations easily, while retaining coolness that made napping on the floor viable during the hot early afternoons. Stairwells were centrally placed in the long narrow French colonial plots, often using half levels to visually offset rooms while maintaining open layouts. The stairwells were left open at the top to form a chimney effect, exhausting hot air at the top and pulling in cooler air through the spaces.

In this way, the international modernist language was adapted to become a product of the restrictions of the climate, the lifestyles of the population, the local craftsmanship and available materials. Saigon’s unique brand of Modernism was tightly tied to its people and location.

The few large projects built after 1975 were mostly late ‘70s Soviet-style housing projects, post-*doi moi* Greek revival and faux-colonial speculative housing and offices. During this period, I feel that Ho Chi Minh City’s architectural identity largely dissipated and was replaced by a void, evidenced by the confusion seen in turn-of-the-millennium construction consisting more of signifiers and impulses than coherent thought. It was quite common then, and not unusual now, for architects to be required by clients to add things like Mansard roofs or arched windows to their designs.

Avalon, in its modernist language, aimed to re-align the architectural discourse in Ho Chi Minh City. I wanted to bridge the gap between the Saigon modernists and the present day, by once again showing that contemporary language could be used to craft buildings tightly tied to specific places and societies.

The siting, the garden approach, the exterior building sun screening, the interior visual screening, the many layers of operable louvres at the apartment windows all aimed to revive the combination of detailing and contemporary language that the previous generation of modernists had used so well.
In the years since Avalon, Ho Chi Minh City has experienced a burgeoning in contemporary architectural language, which is now becoming a signifier in itself, although clients’ demands for maximised saleable space often supersede the need for public breezeways and buffer spaces. By the time the President Place office building was constructed in 2012, its screen and its contemporary façade were not only not questioned, but were displayed proudly as symbols of its cutting-edge design.

The larger impulse behind the Saigon modernist approach - the adaptation of ideas from the West to the specific situation of Vietnam, runs through much of my work, even in projects that do not emphasise the use of modernist language.

This villa belonged to the family of Madame Nhu, the famous ‘Dragon Lady’. She was the sister-in-law of Ngo Dinh Diem, the first president of the Republic of Vietnam. Since Diem never married, Madame Nhu was considered to be the first lady from 1955 to 1963. Photograph by the author.

5. Tim Dolin, Exploring Ho Chi Minh City, 118.
The Local Light

The design and the fabrication of the main lobby light fixture for Avalon demonstrate our effort to utilise therefore to maintain an existing way of working in Vietnam. They also demonstrate that Vietnam offers conditions enabling us to design and build in a way that is inconceivable in the West. The availability of raw materials, human resources and craftsmanship, are all embedded in a system that is accommodating and flexible.

The motivation to take advantage of what Vietnam could offer was increased when Archie arrived in Ho Chi Minh City near the end of Avalon design process, and we collaborated on the lobby design and its focal point, the pendant lights.

What contributed to our partnership, both in general and specifically regarding the design of this light, was our fascination with this city. I sensed that many things could be done here that were not possible elsewhere, such as:

1. Direct access to materials: We came to a dead end with the light design when the metal mesh we needed turned out to be only available as an import from Japan that would be beyond the budget. Knowing Ho Chi Minh City was a place where one could source materials from places other than catalogues or the Internet, we went to Cho lon, the city’s Chinatown. We looked at many metal shops and finally came across some stainless steel mesh. The shopkeeper told me that the mesh was used as material for conveyor belts for sorting shrimp and fish in factories. We took some samples back to our studio to show to our builders the next day.

2. Individual-based workforce: In Ho Chi Minh City, an architect can engage with the process at a personal level. I arranged with the client to exclude the light fabrication from the general contractor’s scope of work. I wanted Minh Chuong Construction, which was a small company, instead of the bigger general contractor to fabricate the fixture. Minh Chuong made us a sample of the light from our drawings. We went back and forth to their shop, touching up the details, and finally agreed to it. The light fixture was erected on site.

3. Negotiating process: For me, the Avalon light fixture is a product that could not have been made anywhere but Ho Chi Minh City. It manifests a complex negotiation process in a unique set of circumstances.

The design and the fabrication of the Avalon pendant light fixture was a turning point in my practice. Not only did I now have a partner, but my practice was now comfortable in its setting. Our wish was to make our design sensitive to this place.
Almost all of our projects are built by people we know. We have good relationships with a few building contractors. In some cases, we have known each other for 10–15 years. We also know each contractor’s strengths and weaknesses. Some have better masons. Some have better carpenters. Once we have built a good relationship with the builder, we start to request particular individuals for our jobs. These tradesmen also know exactly what we want, since they have built for us before. We rely on them. Photograph courtesy of Archie Pizzini.

Stainless steel mesh usually used as conveyor belt material in the fishery industry was sourced as the glittery fabric for the Avalon pendant light fixture. Photograph courtesy of Archie Pizzini.

An early sketch of the light. Image by HTA+pizzini.
Preservation of Local Knowledge

The Avalon project did not involve the preservation of any building. On an urban scale, it simply presented the task of physically positioning the tower into its city block. With regard to preservation, the design of Avalon mostly concerned the preservation of social agendas or social qualities found in Vietnam. These qualities include the way the design was conceived, rather than being acquired as a bought item; the sourcing of the materials directly at markets; the engaging of individuals, not corporations, to fabricate the design; the flexibility of the individual builders; and the skills of the craftsmen.
The Avalon lobby light fixture resembles a high-end imported item but was actually fabricated in Vietnam by local craftsmen using modest local materials. Photograph courtesy of Archie Pizzini.
Maintaining a Typology

What was maintained for the Thi Sach project was an existing architectural typology. The tube house is a Vietnamese phenomenon resulting from the property tax system in earlier times, where the tax rate was based on the frontage of the building. To minimise the tax, lots were designed to be as narrow as possible, typically about three to four metres maximum, and sometimes as narrow as just two metres wide.

To be efficient in city block planning, tube houses are stacked side-ways the full length of the block, with the rear of the property lot butt-joining other properties. Because of this typical urban layout, tube houses are often designed with a void in the middle to allow natural ventilation.

Living in a tube house is still popular among the Vietnamese people, even though more of the younger generation are now moving into apartments. In Hanoi, during the time of the American War, the communist authorities built many public housing projects. Most were neither well-built nor well-managed. When affordable, most people prefer to live in the tube houses, even though these are often not well-ventilated because of their shape.

For Thi Sach, maintaining the architectural typology of the tube house was crucial in retaining an existing living condition specific to Vietnam.

Western Inputs

While maintaining a Vietnamese phenomenon, Thi Sach included many examples of Western input. The geometric play, where the volumes interlocked with each other, was a derivative of Le Corbusier’s Unite project near Marseille. The idea of interlocking was an import, though it was perfect for solving a site-specific problem that our project needed to resolve.

The elevator serving the tube houses was also an import. Tube houses are usually walk-ups. In that sense, the design of this project was a hybrid of an apartment building and the tube houses.

Adapting Vietnam

The client had expected her ten apartments to be arranged in the standard manner, with the core in the middle and apartments facing the street in the front and apartments facing the small void in the back. Wishing to improve the living conditions for the rear apartments, we resisted. Besides, her expectation would result as an apartment building in the middle of a block lined with tube houses.

We proposed to stack ten tube houses on top of each other, adapting a familiar typology that would also make the design compatible with the street. Our ten tube houses were designed to avoid the monotony of ten apartments hidden within a volume, as is the standard design. We also resolved the ventilation difficulty by taking advantage of the site’s unique geometry.
We made this model to assist the client in understanding the complex geometry of the project. Photograph courtesy of Archie Pizzini.
Because of the unique shape of the site and other site constraints, the design process was a combination of splitting, staggering and interlocking the volumes. At the same time, the apartments wrap around a triangular core allowing all the rooms to easily adopt a rectilinear shape.

Each residence has a distinct front and rear half. To the front, the open-plan lounge, dining and kitchen areas bathe in light that enters from the floor-to-ceiling windows on the street-side elevation. On the top floor, a master bedroom faces a similarly generously sized window across the downstairs living room’s double-height void. Because of the interlocking configuration, each residence enjoys a private lift lobby.

Each residence occupies only half the width of the eight-metre site frontage. The apartments are articulated as tall, vertical tube houses that are staggered, left and right, as they climb up the front elevation. The apartments then twist 90 degrees to a stacked horizontal configuration on the rear elevation, occupying one floor each. A decorative dark line that runs along each flank of the building indicates this twist and the interlocking shapes that it creates. The staggering of the apartments at the front, combined with the interlocking twist, allows each apartment to have an entire upper floor at the back where three smaller bedrooms lie behind the horizontal rear face. The view from the large windows is unobstructed, and a setback from the property line ensures light and air circulation, should neighbours build to the rear in the future.

The design of Thi Sach is another example of our practice of embracing what already exists in Vietnam and adapting it to suit a contemporary situation, and at the same time importing ideas from the West and appropriating them to the Vietnam setting.
Left: Aerial view showing tube houses densely stacked against each other, making it difficult to have effective natural ventilation. Before the widespread use of air conditioning, most tube houses had a light/wind well in the middle to release hot air and to assist natural ventilation. Photograph by the author.

Left and right: As shown in the diagrams on the left and the model on the right, in our design, the tube houses (apartments) were stacked side by side and on top of each other. Left image by HTA+pizzini and right photographs courtesy of Joshua Breidenbach.
REFLECTION:
NEGOTIATING DESIGN

Designing from Within

Vietnam revealed that it has much to offer. The local environment offers not only opportunities but also resources and the conditions to do a different kind of design.

Vietnam is working very well on its own. By observing how Vietnam already works, we can incorporate what it offers into our design.

In 2008, Archie and I presented in a forum organised by Ho Chi Minh City University of Architecture. The opening message of our lecture was that Vietnam already works.

With a lens focussed on Western-biased references, often distorted by suppliers of Western products, Vietnam and all things Vietnamese are implied to be sub-standard and backwards. Unfortunately, many Vietnamese have accepted this as truth. In our lecture, we suggested changing the lens, rather than changing Vietnam itself.

Once it is understood that Vietnam is a living, breathing and fully operating system, it is possible to learn from it, chart its advantages and unpack its complexities. One of our members of staff attended the forum and later told us that it was the first time he had ever been proud of his own country. His architectural references had just been doubled, because all of his understanding of Vietnamese architectural space and the societal skeleton that went with it—all of which he had previously negated—had suddenly been validated.

Situating Design in Ho Chi Minh City while Providing Global-Standard Design

While Galerie Quynh 1 and Avalon both expected Western design products, my desire was to situate the projects in Ho Chi Minh City. Quynh desired a clean-lined space with materials used in a Western and contemporary way. John Caffin, the developer of Avalon, wanted contemporary architecture to cater to his Western buyers.

I satisfied Quynh’s expectations. The white walls and the concrete flooring worked compatibly with the abstract art Quynh showed. She was able to communicate with her mostly Western art collectors in a space that spoke a familiar language. But I also satisfied my agenda of relating the project to Vietnam by engaging the Vietnamese general public, even though they were not directly gallery clients. Preserving the large windows to the street subtracted wall space from Quynh’s small gallery, but exposed her space to the street. By positioning the gallery on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City, my personal agenda was satisfied, and the decision may have ultimately also proven to be commercially beneficial for Quynh too.

I also satisfied John Caffin’s expectations. Avalon was one of Ho Chi Minh City’s first contemporary apartment projects, not only in terms of architectural language, but also in terms of space planning and amenities. The design imposed a Western lifestyle with open kitchen, dry bathrooms and laundry appliances, and John succeeded in selling all fifty-one apartments within a few months. His buyers were Westerners, Viet kieus and wealthy Vietnamese. Many Vietnamese buyers rented their apartments out to foreigners and Viet kieus, proving the tenant-specific design worked effectively.
Personally, I had entertained an additional agenda, which was my desire to relate Avalon more closely to Ho Chi Minh City. Knowing the shortcoming of many projects designed from overseas, where the architecture was oblivious to the surrounding context, I designed Avalon to sit compatibly on its block and utilise local climate control techniques throughout the design. The project was localised most obviously in the design of the lobby pendant light fixture. The design and fabrication of the fixture illustrate that Vietnam offers us unique benefits, such as the availability of raw materials, human resources and craftsmanship, all embedded in a system that is both accommodating and flexible.

Loosening Boundaries of Preservation to Allow New Design Interventions

Before I arrived in Vietnam, I was already uncomfortable about the idea that some preservation practice deleted traces of history when later additions were removed to reveal the original design. At Bun Ta, even though I applied the typical modus operandi of removing all additions to reveal the original structure, it was also my earliest effort to negotiate my own design input into the historic building through the removal of the ceiling, the lowering of the wall, the removal of all interior walls and the transformation of windows into doors. This early transition project sewed the seeds that loosened my impulse to preserve completely, that loosened the boundaries of preservation in my practice. I was awakening to the possibilities that exist beyond straight preservation, such as renovation.

What was also emerging was an approach of ‘blending’ in my practice. In ‘preservation’ projects such Bun Ta, I started to allow the incorporation of design, while I was enriching ‘design’ projects like Avalon through an informed understanding of Vietnam’s historic architecture.

In general, I learnt that my projects often tackle the notion of being in-between in terms of how I adapt my Western-based architecture to Vietnam, how I situate my practice between preservation and new architectural design and how I engage the Vietnamese people and culture in my design.
CHAPTER 4:
SHIFTING ROLE

Projects:

HTA Company Ltd.
Le Loi atelier
Hoa Hung studio
Ly Tu Trong studio
4.1 HTA COMPANY LTD.

Competence and Professionalism

After finding and leasing office space for HTA Company Ltd., I designed and built generic furniture and moved it into place. The spartan look of the office’s black and white design reflected my intention of building an efficient team that would produce smart and competent architectural design.

I had just come from a job running the Ho Chi Minh City office of DCM, a branch of the multi-national architectural company. I had been the director of the local office, mostly involved in pursuing leads for new projects, so I was very much aware of the role that image played in attracting clients. I had designed the office for DCM earlier, bringing a contemporary interior to a wonderful art nouveau building on Dong Khoi Street.

My intention was to produce a clean, efficient office interior that projected HTA’s ability to design and produce any type of project that a client might request. This included large architectural endeavours such as apartment and office towers and even large complexes of them. The large corporations were driving the game in Ho Chi Minh City at the time, and my office design was intended to make these corporations feel comfortable hiring us to do their jobs.

This design intentionally limited its personality, not only in order to accelerate the design and build out, but also in order to accommodate a larger range of potential clients by not revealing the design passion of its designer. Like many corporate designs, the office was somewhat of a blank slate, refraining from expressing design passions in order to broaden its appeal.

I regularly received demands for towers with mansard roofs and thirty storeys of stacked arched windows complete with plaster flourishes. Even clients for whom we had already constructed apartment buildings in a contemporary language were not averse to returning from Taiwan with a gaudy ersatz French chandelier to hang in the entry lobby.

After Archie arrived in 2005 and joined my practice as a partner, we split our responsibilities. I was to find projects and deal with clients; Archie and I were to do the concept and the design development together; Archie was to lead the team to do construction documentation; both of us were to be responsible for the training of our young staff.

Archie had also just left a position as a director in a corporate firm and his identity very much revolved around professionalism, which in his case meant the ability to produce for his clients whatever they needed. Archie felt that he could contribute his capability and expertise to the company in the design of Western-style, large-scale building construction systems. His aim was to build a team of similarly capable young Vietnamese professionals in order to further enhance our ability to produce what our clients and the market demanded.

We wanted to set up systems for detailing, putting together drawing sets, choosing materials and choosing building components. These were to be organised into a large, ever-growing system of building
The Missing Partner

A year into the construction of Avalon, I was committed to work on two more high-rises. One was the 20-storey Botanic Towers, and the other was a documentation service for the Horizon tower. I invited Archie to come to Vietnam and become my partner in the firm because I was overwhelmed with projects.

Working for a commercial architectural office in Houston, Archie had also had a fear—that he would never be able to work for a design-oriented office again. He decided to make the move to Ho Chi Minh City.

Our shared motivation to design was the genesis of our partnership. We both recollected each other from university days because we had both been committed to design, and we felt that our partnership now would benefit from this commitment.

Ours is a partnership where both partners are designers, and this forces us to operate differently from the more common practice, where the division of labour is more distinct—where one partner is a designer, another partner a manager and a third partner covers marketing.

HTA+pizzini has never had the marketing/businessman/politician partner. This missing expertise is the reason why we are only modestly successful commercially.

Being commercially successful was never on top of our list, however. When we formed HTA+pizzini, our concern was to make good design and preserve our capability to do so. We turned down projects, let go of some lucrative ongoing contracts and created a studio deliberately meant to discourage a large portion of the potential clientele.

Vietnam became our third partner, substituting for a business-minded partner.

by the author.

construction knowledge that would constantly add to the capability of the company.

By 2007, we had already built two high-rise projects and were detailing and specifying a third. We had also completed a smart, contemporary penthouse in a new building in Phu My Hung.

Around that time, we noticed a trend in the market that paralleled the bubbles we had seen in the US and realised that we needed to find a hedge, something that would feed the office’s income when the crash came. We started to provide construction documentation for other architects such as KYTA (Singapore) and RTA (Japan), who had a string of buildings lined up for years into the future for Phu My Hung, one of the biggest foreign corporations in town. We treated these as bread-and-butter projects to support more design projects, many of which remained unbuilt and were not paid for by the clients.

By 2007, our staff had outgrown the original office and now occupied an annexed office down the corridor. We started to see that we could not make the best use of our staff in such a situation and that the cramped and fragmented nature of our office was holding us back from our intentions for the company/practice. Some of these intentions were still the same while some had started to shift slightly with the changes in the business market, our experiences with our clients and the changes starting to be visible in Vietnam.

Ho Chi Minh City real estate development was going through a period of economic expansion. Some projects were real, but we also started to understand that many were just developers’ speculative projects, meant to turn a very quick profit without necessarily even breaking ground. Many local business people became real estate developers overnight. The level of competence was questionable. Archie and I began to refer to these types of projects as ‘mirages’.

Compared to our earlier clients, who had been individuals with good intentions to develop quality projects, the current clients were larger corporations with the full intention of selling the project before it was even built. For them, the end product as architecture, or even simply as a building, was irrelevant.

I intentionally designed the first office to have minimum personality. Efficiency and productivity were the main agendas. Photographs by the author.

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Vietnam became our third partner, substituting for a business-minded partner.
The Vietnamese real estate development industry had changed the way business was conducted, and I had a vague fear that we were catering too much to the developers’ cause.

We therefore decided we needed to build a new space for our practice, after first re-evaluating our intentions. We could then tailor our new space to better accomplish those aims.

In the design of our next workspace, we had the opportunity to respond to the understandings we had arrived at.

4.2 LE LOI ATELIER

Autonomy to Search for Identity

We designed our Le Loi atelier in the midst of such circumstances.

When the unit next door became available, we decided to rearrange our rentable area to create one continuous space.

The agendas we chose to address were what we cared about most—Vietnam and Ho Chi Minh City.

Due to our disenchantment with our latest developer clients, we designed our atelier feeling no pressure to accommodate their expectations. We were our own client for this project and enjoyed a sense of freedom and optimism. Due to this autonomy, the design came closer to our design identity compared to the design of the previous office. The design agendas were ours only.
The antique shutters at our Le Loi atelier. Photograph courtesy of Le Ngoc Dang.
Maintaining the Urban Fabric by Occupying an Existing Building

Even at the time I had been looking for office space for DCM, I did not inspect office buildings. Instead, I found a space inside the Mondial Building, an old colonial building on Dong Khoi Street (see images in chapter 1-5). After leaving DCM, I was looking for my own office space in a few old buildings on Dong Khoi but I was not able to find anything suitable. I found a space on Le Loi on top of a five-storey building. The building had personal relevance. It once housed a club called Olympic where my father had often entertained clients during the 1960s. By the time I was looking for an office space, the building had already been converted into an office building, and much of the original building had been renovated.
Preservation Shifting Scale

The design of our space did not involve any physical remains, traces of the original building or earlier layers. Without any particular intention initially, we introduced historic elements, the antique remains of other parts of the city. It was as if we needed something to respond to. This conforms to my usual design preference, which is to respond to an existing situation rather than to start a design from a blank page.

My thinking about preservation shifted in terms of scale through this project. The actual task of preservation shifted to the architectural elements—old shutters and other found items—which are on a micro scale. My ultimate concern, however, was how we should respond to the fact that our city was being eradicated at an alarming rate. In other words, it expanded to encompass the whole city.

The antique shutters installed into Le Loi atelier were not trimmed or altered but were incorporated as found. Photograph courtesy of Le Ngoc Dang.
Clarity in Differentiating New Design Interventions from Historic Remains

I insisted that the antique shutters that we recycled should not be trimmed and cut. I wanted our design to incorporate the items, as found, and not to alter them to fit our design. This decision was a deliberate move to make a distinction between the historic remains and the new materials.

In 2008, Archie and I flew to Hoi An to investigate how we could incorporate existing historic timber structures into our design for a potential resort project. We visited an architectural junkyard outside of town and saw historic timber structures being disassembled. Some were reassembled and transformed into new structures; some were sold in pieces; some were cut up to make steps and landscape elements. One modified structure, which could be considered representative, was made combining original timber and new timber. The whole structure was intended to be varnished and made to resemble fully original. The approach could arguably be lacking in clarity.

Thinking about the design for the resort, Archie and I discussed how we should preserve a few of these structures without altering them, incorporating our new contemporary design around them. In this manner, we would be able to differentiate the old from the new. We would pay respect to the historic remains while at the same time contribute our new design.

The Le Loi atelier was similar to our aims in the Hoi An resort project, in that we minimised the alteration of found historic elements and incorporated our new design around these existing found objects.

Similarly, at Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi (to be discussed in chapter 5), we instructed the workers not to refinish the existing surrounding areas, so that our new design intervention would be more obvious.

For Le Loi, the clarity that allowed one to distinguish the old and the new was important to me. This conformed to my preference for being able to see traces of history and how they could accumulate over time.

Design is never that straightforward, however. For Bun Ta, while I was able to make obvious the distinction between the old buildings and the new design interventions, I also replicated the doors and their frames in the original design idiom, blurring the distinction between the new and the old.
**Dialogue between the New and the Old**

When we made the new design interventions and the historic remains distinguishable from each other, we allowed them an opportunity to relate to each other.

For the Le Loi atelier, we chose to bring history into our space, in contrast to Bun Ta where I was forced to confront and respond to history in the renovation of the historic villa. In both cases, the artefacts were left relatively untouched. The level of new intervention was also similar. New designs were incorporated to accommodate the artefacts, but in general, the new did not overpower the old. Nevertheless, these two projects were milestones along my development towards a bolder design intervention at Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi.

Top: At the reception area, the new and the old were allowed to co-exist.

Bottom: I insisted that the peeling paint layers on the shutters not be removed. Since layers of paint are applied chronologically, exposing them reveals time and history. For the next few years, the paint continued to peel off, exposing the passage of time. I realised that my desire to expose the peeling paint layers for this project was a reaction to the incident at the Victory Theater, where I had felt so perplexed by the project architect’s decision to cover up all the layers of paint with an arbitrary choice of paint.

Photographs courtesy of Archie Pizzini.
Preserving Crafts and the Individual-Based Practice of Construction

While preserving the physical remains of history, we try to preserve local knowledge to enable the local workforce to stay in business. For the Le Loi atelier project, we employed builders to do what they have been doing for decades.

Vietnamese carpenters are highly skilled at what they do. Recently, however, with the arrival of the dry wall system, most walls are no longer made by carpenters. If timber walls continued to be designed, carpenters would stay employed. For this project, we conceived the main feature wall to be made of timber studs with an infill of MDF or plywood. The old shutters were to be hung on this wall. Our wall visually resembled an American-style timber-framed wall built with 2x4 inch pine studs. Mr Thuan a Vietnamese carpenter who had never seen an American-style timber-framed wall design, started by cutting dau do, a Vietnamese timber, into studs, 50x100 mm in size. He then assembled the whole wall with a minimum use of power tools.

To preserve such an individual-based practice of construction, we engaged Minh Chuong as it is a family run company. Le Loi atelier was built by three teams: Mr Thuan led the carpenters, Mr Phuc led the electricians and Mr Hoang led the painters. I have worked with these individuals for 10 years to 15 years and on no less than 10 projects. I know their capabilities, and they know my expectations. We have a personal relationship.

The personal nature of our relationship assisted us in being flexible with each other. I find the arrangement more effective in achieving our design, especially because our design is often not typical.
Western Input

My preference to preserve historic artefacts for Le Loi atelier is related to the American-style preservation practice that I applied in New York. But in Vietnam, even when architectural landmarks (such as the Hanoi Opera House and the Saigon Opera House) are ‘preserved’, many original materials are discarded and replaced with new materials. For Le Loi atelier, I insisted that the antique shutters not be cut up and that our new design should accommodate their existing dimensions and qualities. My compliance with the respect for historic elements is not consistent throughout our projects, however. In our later projects, I removed found elements and replaced them with our new design. Straightforward guidelines do not exist for us. It is more a matter of whether to allow our new design to overpower the existing one, or vice versa.

Turning our workspace into an atelier was a Western idea. Architects’ offices in Vietnam are more formal. Architects are considered professionals as soon as they leave school, and so the idea that they still study while working is a foreign idea. At the time, Archie and I felt that the idea was appropriate because we realised our staff had been trained differently from the way we had been trained in the US. The Vietnamese architectural school system focusses on the engineering side of architecture, unlike the focus on conceptual design that is typical in many universities in the US. With an atelier, Archie and I felt we would be better able to engage with our Vietnamese staff as teacher-employers. For our staff, the atelier idea was refreshing. Most of them had come from more corporate architectural offices. For some, the new environment was like going back to school, with salary.

The composition of the floor plan was also Western in inspiration. The idea of interplay between positive and negative space came from Leon Krier’s study of the phenomenon at the urban scale, and is similar to the way in which Kline and Motherwell composed their paintings. However, the imports were applied to acquire site-specific aims, in this case doing away with compartmentalisation, and to synthesise site-specific design.

The open loft space was also an imported idea, the result of my years working and living in converted lofts in New York and Los Angeles. Again, the new idea was adapted into the local setting of Ho Chi Minh City in order to give flexibility and durability to our workspace.

2. Many paintings by the abstract expressionists Franz Kline and Robert Motherwell were compositional studies that accentuated the shapes of the negative spaces between the solids. Architect Leon Krier studied the same phenomenon in his book *Town Spaces*. 
Recycling - Our new design accommodated recycled glass that came in different designs, shapes and qualities. Photographs courtesy of Archie Pizzini.

**Immersion in Vietnam**

We designed Le Loi atelier to be immersed in the city. Our fascination with Ho Chi Minh City’s streets was expressed by bringing the streets into our space, using architectural discards from demolished buildings around the city that we had found at a nearby antique/junk shop, and assembling them in a three-dimensional composition.

We used the found items to position our design within Vietnam. I had been trained as an architect to design in a time-specific architectural language, but now it became important to me that the design language also be place-specific.

To immerse the project in Vietnam, we integrated many local factors into the design:

1. **Recycling materials**: Many things are not thrown away in Vietnam due to economic necessity. Instead, they are recycled and reused. When raw materials are scarce and labour is plentiful, recycling makes sense. For our atelier design, we recycled old shutters and old timber beds that we bought cheaply at a junk/antique shop. Found objects and new materials co-existed comfortably.

2. **Unpolished aesthetics**: The rough manner in which the design was implemented was not simply the result of our personal preferences. It originated in the aesthetics of the streets of Ho Chi Minh City. When we employ Vietnamese workers to use Vietnamese materials in a Vietnamese way, the products we get are often unrefined in feel. Unpolished aesthetics is the local idiom.
Unpolished aesthetics - The atelier space always looked unfinished or ‘in-progress’, which I found motivating. It gave us the urge to design. Photograph courtesy of Le Ngoc Dang.

Recycling - Until recently, many houses in the countryside of Vietnam placed a multi-purpose platform in the front room, usually on the side of the main ancestral altar. In the days when hardwood was still in abundance, the platforms were made of wooden planks about 6 to 7 cm, and sometimes up to 10 cm in thickness. Most platforms were made by joining four long pieces together, 35 to 40 cm wide each, resulting in a platform a little over 2 metres long. The platform we found at the antique junk shop had four planks, but one had termite damage, so we bought only three planks. We put two planks together and made a conference table while the leftover plank served as a bench. Photographs courtesy of Archie Fizzini.
Having this local aesthetic in our atelier increased our productivity as designers. While minimalist design products are inescapably finished products, rough designs are always 'in-progress'. We found our workspace worked better for us when it was always in a process of evolution. In the way that Ho Chi Minh City’s streets motivated us, our space helped to activate our design mood. In his research, Archie investigates the fertility of places and how such fertility is cultivated by certain environments. I would argue that the unpolished environment of our atelier also better supported the day-to-day operation of architects.

3. Misusing materials: One often sees materials being misused in Ho Chi Minh City. When resources are scarce and people are forced to use whatever is at hand, materials are assessed according to their intrinsic properties, rather than the specified usage. We applied the same approach to our design at Le Loi. Found items were used for purposes not originally intended, but in a way that exploited their intrinsic properties. Old beds were used as a conference table and as benches. New materials were also used for purposes not specified by manufacturers – ceiling tiles were used as pin-up wall surfacing and MDF sheets were used as flooring.

4. Lack of standardisation: Working in the contemporary construction industry makes it impossible for us to oppose standardisation. However, we do feel that standardisation has had a negative impact on the way architects design in the US. In the worst scenarios, architects turn into assemblers of standardised items instead of designers. In Vietnam, standardisation has not yet come to completely dominate the construction industry. We take advantage of this, and as a result, we are freer and less locked into predictable outcomes. Le Loi atelier was made possible because of Vietnam’s lack of a fully systematised way of design and construction.

5. Accommodating detailing: The detailing for Le Loi was forgiving and accommodating. Electrical conduits were suspended from the ceiling. No details were concealed. We often avoid minimalist details for projects in Vietnam due to the unavailability of certain types of high-end materials and manufacturing facilities.
Our atelier had a look that is now being approached worldwide in trends such as the Brooklyn look, which is also becoming popular in Ho Chi Minh City. Nevertheless, we feel our work is operating at a deeper level than the superficial level of a trend because our work is a response to the values embedded in this place. The ways in which we do this are discussed below.

6. Ingenuity: Our work brings in the ingenuity found on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City. Typically, designs are assessed based on the final products, but for us, how they are designed is also important. On the streets of Ho Chi Minh City, how things are designed with minimal resources intrigues us. People employ their ingenuity to come up with ideas and inventions that would not be explored if there were an abundance of materials and ready-made resources. Because of the minimal budget for Le Loi atelier, we did not want to build a new glass wall system to separate our offices from the staff. All we had available were the junk shutters, and somehow we had to incorporate them into a wall system that would be effective as a separation, but that could also be opened to the staff when needed.

7. Delight: Grass-roots designs found on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City are often delightful. Delight is the stimulated state of mind that arises when one is confronted with a surprise—it is an unexpected high. For Le Loi’s design, we tried to engender surprise instead of predictable solutions. We had the added concern that predictable designs often border on cliché. Le Loi atelier did not resemble any known look in Vietnam at the time. It was the result of a series of explorations and choices. The materials used employed a strategy of misuse. Surprise was designed to stimulate a sense of delight and joy, not only for our staff and ourselves, but also for visitors and people passing by in the corridor.

8. Flexibility: Functions were interchangeable in a way that resembled the Vietnamese way of using space in shops and houses. For example, the meeting area could become a lunch area and afterwards a siesta area. The conference table was an old converted bed platform, now used for meetings, eating or sleeping.

Selection of Clients and Projects

As a result, the design of our atelier narrowed our list of potential clients and potential projects. Many corporate clients were uncomfortable with the design of our workspace. Phu My Hung Corporation, for whom we were providing construction documentation services, never gave us a design contract after their design director visited our space. On the other hand, Quynh visited and must have thought well enough of it to entrust us with the design or her next gallery.
During the ensuing recession, office rents dropped everywhere in Ho Chi Minh City and office-tower space became available at discount rates. Regardless, I decided to move the practice into my house, an old villa in an alley in District 10.

The decision to move the practice there was not smart business-wise. The location was too far away from the city centre and was not as easily accessible as locations on a main street.

More in line with our agendas, the move into a hem was also a gesture to help maintain a unique feature of the physical urban fabric of Ho Chi Minh City.

4.3 HOA HUNG STUDIO

Embedded in a Hem

The occupation of a colonial villa in a hem reinforced our commitment to the city. It was our partnership’s first true act of embedment, to be reiterated even more emphatically in our next studio.

A hem is a type of urban space unique to Vietnam, the result of the layout of relatively large city blocks. The network of hems in Vietnam’s cities allows traffic circulation to penetrate deep into the city blocks, as capillaries circulate blood within the organs of the body. Hems vary in width, length and configuration. Some are less than a metre wide, barely allowing for a person or motorbike to squeeze through; some are up to five metres wide, allowing cars to negotiate them. Most hems average between 2 to 3 metres in width, allowing access for a xich lo or ba banh (locally made vehicles, to be discussed at the end of section 4-3).

Before motorbikes replaced walking in Ho Chi Minh City, more social interaction occurred in the hems, but even now, people eat their morning bowl of pho, get their hair cut, get their nails polished, play badminton or just gossip in the hems of Vietnam. This is where community life happens.

Vietnam’s hems are equivalent to the longtangs of Shanghai and the hutongs of Beijing in that they are a type of space that is a synthesis of the construction types, urban layout, climate, and social customs of the city.

Sadly, new urban designs in Vietnamese cities, often designed by foreign-based companies, do not have hems. City blocks are designed primarily to promote car traffic, ignoring the lifestyles of the Vietnamese. Xich los and ba banhs are banned. In some new developments, street vendors are banned as well. One wonders what will arise as the result of eliminating hems, which are the main characteristic that gives Vietnamese cities their unique identity.

Until recently, street vendors were abundant. They catered to almost all needs, but mainly provided ready-made food, fruits, vegetables and even live fish and shrimp. This was before the supermarkets arrived with their ga cong nghiep (industrial chickens). Instead, the vendors, like everybody else, were serving ga di bo (walking chickens), implying that the chickens were raised on farms where they were free to walk around. I am sure pesticides existed in Vietnam in the ‘90s, but one did not read about abuse as much then as one does since they now have become widely available and cheap. Now, vendors are discouraged and even prohibited in many parts of the city. The official excuse is hygiene. Photograph courtesy of Archie Pizzini.
A corner store like this one saves the neighbours from making trips to the market. Most corner stores open most of the time. Even when they are closed, one could always knock on the door when desperate for a bottle of fish sauce or eggs or detergent. Corner stores make hems safe. Parents feel safe when their children play near corner stores because the store owners offer a degree of security. Photograph by the author.
Social Life in a Hem

The first week we arrived in the Hoa Hung hem, an elderly neighbour in his 70s came by to visit and give me some books. This hem was known for having a healthy social life. It was a dead end alley with limited through traffic and adjoined a school, qualities that also promoted other uses by the community. Everyone seemed to know each other and each morning before 7 o’clock and every evening after 4 o’clock, the hem would be packed with people from the neighbourhood who came to play and exercise there. Vendors pushing carts came selling snacks. Before class, the hem functioned as an impromptu playground for the students at the adjoining school. They also practised there for their annual parade. Even Archie, usually arriving late in the morning, struck up a friendship with a lady who walked through the hem pushing a cart of sweetened tofu pudding, singing her invitation to come and eat with a strong lilting cry.
Maintaining the Social Fabric

Ho Chi Minh City’s hems, the houses in the hems, its motorbikes, xich los and ba banhs, its vendors and sidewalk markets are all part of a social system that works effectively. The city’s inhabitants rely on this system for their daily live functions, be it garbage collection, grocery shopping or socialising. Maintaining the urban fabric means maintaining the social systems, and through that, the welfare, lifestyles and urban identity of the city’s inhabitants.

If Ho Chi Minh City’s existing hems are maintained and new hems are included in new urban designs, unique Vietnamese social conditions, which are central to the lives of the majority of the city residents, can be maintained. If cars and trucks are unable to fit into hems as garbage or ambulance vehicles, then the xich los and ba banhs should also be maintained.

Observing the apparent lack of interest in maintaining the hem structure of the city, one must assume that developers of the new sections of Ho Chi Minh City anticipate different groups of end users after the original inhabitants are all displaced because they cannot afford the new lifestyles imposed by the new built environment.
When our builders, Minh Chuong, built more counter space for the kitchen, I asked them to carefully remove the existing tiles that were to be covered by the new counter. They were able to salvage about 80% of them, enough to re-patch the new bathroom walls. With the leftover tiles, I made tables on wheels, which were pushed around the house for different functions. When I moved away, I took the tables with me, carrying with them the trace of the house. The tables are now my desks at my studio. Photographs courtesy of Le Ngoc Dang.

Maintaining the Urban Fabric by Occupying an Existing Villa

Occupyng a colonial-era villa was a gesture that helped to maintain the urban fabric. A few years before our studio moved into this villa, around the time when I was renovating the Bun Ta villa, there were still many villas left in the city, albeit in a state of neglect and buried beneath later additions. So when we were moving our studio into this villa on Hoa Hung, I felt hopeful that living and working in villas would help maintain these types of buildings. The confidence was justifiable because there were still enough villas left in the city.

For this project, since the actual design input and the construction were relatively less than what I had done for Bun Ta, the task of maintenance became the more dominant one. My role was only to consolidate. By doing so, a small part of a layer of the city could be maintained.

A decade has passed since Bun Ta, and Ho Chi Minh City’s remaining villas have started to be demolished. It is no longer a matter of neglect, but of demolition.
Accumulating Instead of Replacing

While designing Hoa Hung studio, I found myself much more at peace with the city and its streets and alleys. I felt no need to escape or to improve anything. The studio design was about embracing the existing architecture, the existing setting, and the existing social systems.

Working within the physical colonial architecture at Hoa Hung involved a design process of adjusting, tweaking, and refining of what was already there. With the exception of the kitchen, which I renovated for my family, no major alterations took place.

The original Hoa Hung villa had two parts. The front was early twentieth century while the rear additions were from the 1950s. The house had been renovated a few times before we moved in. I moved into the house twice—the first time with my family when taking up residence in 2010; the second time when relocating the company with Archie and the remaining staff. Each time I renovated more.

I did not aim to demolish all additions to reveal the original colonial building as I had at Bun Ta. Instead, I designed on top of the additions. I preferred to maintain the layers that had been made through time, respecting the accumulation of history.
Being a live/work space, the design had to accommodate my family and my practice at the same time. The arrangement required a mindset of flexibility and accommodation. The most important rule was adaptation to whatever was at hand. Photograph courtesy of Archie Pizzini.
Right next page: Currently the old *xich lo mays* (motorised *xich los*) are mostly for transporting goods on those roads where they are not yet banned. When I was a child, a *xich lo may* was my favourite because it was wide enough to fit my mother, my brother and myself. I also liked it because it was fast. I could feel the wind blowing through my hair while I pressed my head against my mother on our way to Mass or to visit relatives. Photograph courtesy of Archie Pizzini.

Left and top: The *xich lo* is used to transport people and goods alike and is the most convenient means of transportation for many people. Usually, the driver is someone from the neighbourhood, so people feel comfortable having their children taken to school, their goods delivered to the market or groceries delivered home. *Xich los* can be waved from the sidewalk, and a ride can be bargained for if one does not know the rider. Photographs courtesy of Archie Pizzini.

Left: The *ba banh* are strictly for transporting goods. A motorised version can handle heavy loads such as construction materials or garbage. Photograph courtesy of Archie Pizzini.
When I first returned to Vietnam in the early 1990s, many xich los still existed. The vehicle could have acted as the symbol of Vietnam even though it had been designed by a Frenchman during colonial times. Later, xich los were banned from many of Ho Chi Minh City's streets, the official reason being “urbanisation and modernisation” (slogan for Vietnam's transition to the market economy) of the city. To some, xich los represented poverty. In a similar way to how a poor family throws away its bicycle as soon as it can afford to, the xich los were ‘thrown away’, despite their important role in the life of the city, providing transport for elderly people and particularly for food vendors who had to transport their pots, dishes, vegetables and cauldrons of soup across town. Xich los could easily navigate the tiny twisting hems without causing disruption to other hems functions such as street cafes in the way that SUVs now do when they attempt to inch their way through. Interestingly, Ho Chi Minh City allows a small number of xich los to operate under Saigon Tourist Company. These do not play a part in the daily life of Vietnamese citizens but take tourists around sites instead. The drivers are Saigon Tourist staff with monthly salaries.

The xich los were not the only victims of urban modernisation. Other, once-popular vehicles such as the ba banhs shared the same fate. Ba banh, which literally means ‘three wheels’, came with and without engines. They were the best means for transporting a small load across town and through the small alleys. Ever since the ba banhs were banned, people have been forced to rent trucks, big and small, or taxis to transport their loads even a few blocks away. The new modernised practice crowds the city streets and wastes the city’s energy resources.
4.4 LY TU TRONG STUDIO

We moved to our current space on Ly Tu Trong in 2012. The economy was still in downturn, and with our minimal staff, we were small enough to move into an old residential building. At the time, rent for space in office buildings in Ho Chi Minh City was at a discount rate due to the surplus of new office buildings, although it never occurred to us that we should take advantage of this. Doing so would have been so much in conflict with our values.

Maintaining the Urban Fabric by Occupying an Existing Building

Occupying a colonial-era apartment is an act of maintaining the urban fabric. The apartment building where our workspace is located is part of a physical layer of Ho Chi Minh City that was built by the French.

The urban fabric of the city is threatened by the rapid rate of demolition of these buildings. Many have been replaced; others are left as vacant construction sites, as scars upon the urban landscape.

Over the past five years, several major colonial apartment buildings in the centre of Ho Chi Minh City have been razed, including 213 Dong Khoi, 203 Dong Khoi, and 135 Le Thanh Ton. Other buildings, such as 158 Dong Khoi, are already on the death list. This destruction is not limited to District 1. District 5 has lost rows of shophouses, Districts 8 and 4 have lost rows of old colonial warehouses. District 3 has lost a number of old stately villas while District 10 has lost large blocks of market areas.

Renting a small space in a modest building may not impact much on the course of development of the city, but it does conform with our position: by moving in, we assist in consolidating the existing setting. It is an act of passive resistance. It also conforms with our desire to make the best of whatever still remains.

Recently, it has become fashionable among some people to move into colonial-era buildings. This trend is encouraging because it indicates there are many people who see value in these buildings. When customers come to the cafes and the shops inside these buildings, they also see the value in these buildings. It is encouraging because only five years ago this phenomenon was uncommon.

While our occupation of the building on Ly Tu Trong enhances the urban fabric, what it does to the social fabric is more complex, as discussed below.
Embedment in a Colonial-Era Apartment Building

Our move into an existing colonial-era residential building downtown is an act of embedment, which further reinforces our commitment to the city. The effort, however, was not without challenges.

When we first moved in, there was some uneasiness between Ms Thu, the bike attendant, and our company and staff regarding bike parking and mail collection. The parking fee was somehow higher for us than everybody else in the building, and there was a mail collection fee that turned out to be a new creation just for us. In typical Vietnamese fashion, my wife intervened not by arguing the issues at hand, but by coming by to say hello to Ms Thu, bringing along some toys for Ms Thu’s grandson. We never heard about the mail collection fee again. Afterwards, I continued the good relationship through casual greetings and very small gifts during Tet (Vietnamese New Year).

Soon after, Ms Thu and her grandson cashed in by selling their apartment and moving to the countryside. The new owner rented it out to a fashion shop on the second floor. Ms Thu’s departure can be seen as one of the first instances of gentrification in this building. Her bike attendant job is now done by Mr Hai and Ms Lan. We continue to be the good neighbour. I interviewed Mr Hai’s nephew for a job—he just graduated from the local architecture university. Ms Lan recently broke her leg because there was no light in the stairwell. She fell while walking down early before dawn to unlock the building’s front doors. Before we could react, another good neighbour installed a rope of light bulbs. Now the stairwell can be lit before and after dark.

An old lady in her 70s lives on the fourth floor and hardly gets out at all. One day, seeing her struggling with her grocery bags at the landing, I offered to take the bags upstairs for her. She insisted that I come inside so she could offer me some of the bananas she just bought from the market.

These are tiny incidents, but to be truly embedded in the building, one must understand how this place operates on a social level. The above examples are not bribes lubricating the process; they are genuine gestures among neighbours that trigger goodwill and discourage people from taking advantage of each other. As for us, we have become part of the community.

The social fabric is enhanced by us being totally embedded and becoming part of the community.

Professionally, our studio’s location forces us to be aware of where we practice. Designing while situated within the social fabric enables us to inject a deeper social dimension into our projects.
My search for a new office space took me to about ten old buildings downtown. While Ho Chi Minh City does have official real estate agents with licences and offices, they would not know of available spaces buried inside these old buildings. The most efficient ‘agents’ are the bike attendants in front of the buildings. Since they receive a commission from the landlords, they can be very helpful. This practice is so common that landlords make a point of notifying their bike attendants whenever they have vacancies. Talking to these attendant-agents, I realised that Mr Binh from the L’usine building knew Mr Quang in the Bar Chu building and Ms Thu in our building. They exchanged information regarding the vacancies via mobile phone. I assumed that the commission would be split fairly among those who contributed to the referral. These unofficial agents are called co nha (‘commission house’). They comprise a very efficient network and system that bypasses all the official real-estate agencies. Sometimes one sees the cigarette ladies on the sidewalks with hand-written signs listing all the land for sale in the area. They are called co dat (‘commission land’). In Vietnam, anybody can be a real estate agent!
Gentrification

Our decision to inhabit a colonial-era apartment building has both negative and positive social consequences. When we moved in two years ago, we were the second non-residential tenant. With 24 apartments on the upper floors, two offices did not cause much disruption in the original tenants’ lifestyles. In the last six months, three fashion shops have opened on the second floor. The number of customers visiting increases as more people find out about these boutiques. Soon the original tenants’ lives will be disrupted due to the arrival of more outsiders.

More fashion shops, cool cafés, architects’ studios or artists’ studios will come to inhabit in these buildings. Increased demand will raise the rent, and soon many original tenants will move out. Such displacement is the consequence of gentrification around the world. Then, one day, the architects and the artists and fashion designers will find themselves unable to afford the rent, and they will also have to move out, victims of their own ‘improvement’. The rents charged at other buildings in the city that are more suitable for high-end business are so high that only the multinational corporations such as Starbucks, Mango or Gucci can afford them. All locals have been displaced and replaced by international brand tenants.

For our particular building, however, the threat of demolition is more serious than the threat of gentrification. Gentrification requires time. Given the pace of eradication around the city, this building will probably be demolished before it is completely gentrified.
Left and top: The furniture in our current studio has been accumulated through several incarnations of our practice—tiled table and shelves from Hoa Hung studio, the meeting table from Le Loi atelier, mobile filing cabinets from the first office. We did not repaint them to unify the design but left them as found to reveal the accumulative nature of our workspace. We maintain our workspace as a studio. An office is a place for business. We would like our space to cater to design and making, not only to doing business. Our part-time accountant has a corner space to take care of our minimal paperwork. The space is rough. Archie brought some of his power tools here. We store all of our files and our books and our material samples here. There are long worktops, some on wheels for mobility, where we can spread out our drawings or photographs. Photographs courtesy of Archie Pizzini.
Quiet Architecture

Interestingly, the project in which we did the least designing led to a provocative observation. In the same way that John Cage’s 4’33” silent composition forces the listener to hear only the background noise and this noise becomes music, our zero design intervention for Ly Tu Trong forces one to see only the existing surroundings. Those surroundings become the architecture.
Because of the minimal nature of our intervention at our current studio, the surrounding becomes the focus. Coming to work every day, we are aware that we work within Ho Chi Minh City. Photograph courtesy of Archie Pizzini.
Top: 95 Pasteur is an art deco residential building occupied by a few cafés, a gallery, and a photography studio. Currently, there are more apartments there than commercial spaces. Photograph by the author.

Left: 14 Ton That Dam is a dilapidated building. Many residents have moved out. Taking their places are cafés and shops taking advantage of cheap rent. Most newcomers are young Vietnamese operating on minimal budgets. They often use cheaply acquired repurposed materials. Banksy Café (top left photograph. Not related to the graffiti artist.) used salvaged tiles for its flooring. Photographs by the author.
The Newcomers

Affordable rent and an atypical environment attract some adventurous individuals to rent space inside the colonial-era residential buildings to open cafés, fashion boutiques, architecture ateliers and art studios.

There is a wonderful building at 14 Ton That Dam, which Banksy Café, Things Café, and Mockingbird Café occupy, taking advantage of the view to the old bank building next door. The Catinat Building at the corner of Dong Khoi and Ly Tu Trong houses Loft Café, Schiller Café and the Vietnam Cooking School. 151 Dong Khoi is home to Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi and L’usine, as well as several other cafés and boutiques. 95 Pasteur houses Vin Art Space and another Loft Café. 58 Phan Boi Chau houses Rice Creative while our building at 42 bis Ly Tu Trong houses the boutiques Rue de Chat and Selected, as well as our studio.

Left: Workshop café occupies the top floor of 27 Ngo Duc Ke. Bottom left: We almost moved our studio into the Catinat building. The space was bigger than what we were looking for, so we moved to our current space on Ly Tu Trong instead. If we had set up our studio inside the Catinat, we might have had to move out soon since the lot is a developers’ dream site. Bottom: 151 Dong Khoi is home to Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi. Quynh has received a notice from the owner informing her to leave by mid-2016. The building is to be demolished. Photographs by the author.
**Chung cu**

*Chung cu*, to most people in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, refers to the housing projects built between the 1960s and the 1980s.

Very basic buildings of reinforced concrete framing with brick infill, most *chung cus* are four-to five-level walk-ups, though the taller blocks have lifts where one must pay for every trip. Stairs always have a ramp in the middle so people can push their bicycles up and down. Typically, the floor plan has an interior double-loaded corridor, so corridors are often dark.

Life in a *chung cu* requires tolerance among tenants. Not only do three generations often share an apartment, but the apartments themselves are jammed together, forcing people to interact at all times.

To make more room, many people extended their apartments beyond the building’s original boundary, producing a Vietnamese version of the illegal architecture that Roen Ching-Yueh documented in Taipei. At Galerie Quynh, Hanoi artist Nguyen Manh Hung recently exhibited a beautiful sculpture of a typical Hanoi *chung cu*, with detailed depictions of all its illegal adaptations.

*Chung cus* in Ho Chi Minh City house mostly working-class people, but as the history of socialism is longer in Hanoi (most *chung cus* were built during the socialist period), tenants come from a range of different classes. When I first went to Hanoi in 1991, I visited Mr Dinh Quang, the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Culture, at his apartment in a *chung cu* on Giang Vo Street. It was noteworthy to see a high-ranking communist living among working class neighbours.

Two decades on, these buildings have aged considerably, and the generation that practised this brand of communism has dwindled in numbers. Members of the younger generation who have the means, prefer to live in houses or higher-end apartments, and leave those who can’t afford anything but *chung cus* to make the best of their circumstances.
Shifting Role from Commercially Focussed Office to Design Studio

Our practice’s identity has shifted from a commercially focussed company to an atelier, to a studio. This paralleled a shift in the locations of our workspaces, which paralleled the way each workspace’s design related to Vietnam.

I founded HTA Company immediately after resigning as the Vietnam representative for Denton Corker Marshall, having been managed directly by DCM Hong Kong before DCM split up. I gave my practice an identity based on the model I was familiar with, which was that of my previous employer. Though design has always been important for me, the commercialism of DCM Hong Kong was embedded in my professional mindset. This assumed identity was reflected in the way I named my company using three letters, and the way I designed my first office to be very efficient and corporate client-friendly. This assumed identity was also reflected in my mission to import professionalism and competent architecture into Vietnam.

My concurrent role as a preservationist was not so clear because my uncertainties about traditional preservation practice had already started before my return to Vietnam. As a result, Bun Ta restaurant and a few early villa renovations already utilised new design interventions.

Three years later, in 2007, we had the opportunity to reconfigure our space in the same building, and this also offered us the chance to define our design identity. By that time, I had finished Bun Ta, Galerie Quynh 1, Lost in Saigon, Avalon, and a few other projects, and Archie had been working with me for two years. To find and express our design identity, I somehow had to merge architectural design and preservation while also incorporating Archie’s design motivations.

Our identity emerged through the design of our Le Loi atelier, which was intended to be used as more of a studio than an office. The atelier’s design and realisation reinforced our shifting design identity and our developing agendas. The corporate-oriented identity diminished as well as the orthodox preservationist identity.

The design of Le Loi atelier also revealed our fascination with this city through its incorporation of found architectural relics originating in the demolished buildings of Ho Chi Minh City.
Ideas-Based Practice

The recession that started around 2010 offered us the advantage of time to reflect upon what we were designing. Not having to cater to clients full-time, Archie and I decided to work on a book about our practice. We reviewed all of our past projects and selected twenty projects for the book. This exercise gave us the opportunity to reflect on what we had done and who we were as architects. After the text was written and the images selected, our graphics friends at Rice Creative designed the book for us. In 2012, we met Sand Helsel and Graham Crist of RMIT and showed them the working copy of the book. Based on what it expressed, we were invited to participate in the RMIT Ph.D. program. The book and the ensuing research have put me in a position where I can critically review and reflect upon the work we produce and to be more conscious of how I operate when I design.

During the period we occupied the Hoa Hung studio, it was clear that we were drifting even further away from a commercial architecture practice. It was convenient that the recession only afforded us work on smaller projects, within which we were able to steer and to focus on design and ideas.

Embedment and Exclusion of Clients

Immediately before the move to the Hoa Hung studio, I had started to lose faith in commercial development projects. A few developers’ projects that we had put a lot of effort into went unappreciated and were left unpaid when the projects were postponed indefinitely during the 2010 recession. It was precisely because of the recession and our financial limitations that we had to move the studio into my home on an alley off Hoa Hung Street.

Moving into a residential hem was our first act of embedment, a gesture that was to be repeated in our next location. Positioning ourselves in a hem reinforced our identification with the city.

At our current Ly Tu Trong studio, we are deeply embedded in Ho Chi Minh City. Our decision to locate our practice in a colonial-era apartment building within a historic and dense neighbourhood shapes our current identity as place-specific architects in this city.

Our occupation of this site has had professional consequences. The location in an old apartment building and the unpolished aesthetics exclude many corporate clients, even more than had been the case in our Le Loi studio. Even back then, perplexed clients thought that we had eccentric aesthetics. Now there is often a complete loss of common ground. Some clients choose not to come back. The clients who do return, as Quynh did, are more compatible with our agendas.
Practitioners who Meld and Reconcile new Design with Historic Architecture

Working from Mumbai, Rahul Mehrotra designs projects within the historic fabric utilising a contemporary architectural sensibility. His designs often demarcate themselves from the historic setting while also allowing the historic context to be accentuated. Similarly, Penang-based Ng Sek San often designs within historic setting using a contemporary design language. His projects do not glorify any particular historic style, but instead recognise the layers of history that contribute to the identity of the place. These architects employ their own contemporary designs to complement the existing context.

In Vietnam, however, most preservation efforts are restoration efforts. The main intention is to reinstate the original design of the historic building through new construction. For the Hanoi Opera House, architect Ho Thieu Tri went so far as to demolish parts of the original building and then replicate them with new construction. For the Saigon Opera House, a similar method was applied. When new design is needed within a historic context, many projects here impose the original historic style on the new additions. For L’usine restaurant in Ho Chi Minh City, District Eight Design designed the entry to the restaurant in a historic idiom approximating the era of the building’s construction.

For our concluding project for the Ph.D., Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi, we designed the gallery space in a contemporary architectural language and inserted it into an existing historic building to emphasise the existing surroundings.
Architects Designing Western-Influenced Design but Adapting to Vietnam’s Local Conditions

As was discussed in chapter 3, the Saigon modernist architects of the 1960s set good examples as designers who imported a foreign architectural method and adapted it well to the local setting of Vietnam. Among them, Nguyen Quang Nhac, the architect of IDECAF (Institute of Exchanging Culture with France) and Nguyen Huu Thien and Bui Quang Hanh, architects of the Library of General Sciences, stood out as designers that paid much attention to the local climate and the local resources. Their typical design features were deep canopies, cross ventilation and lush landscaping.
Local Practitioners Who Work within Context

A group of local practitioners who utilise local materials and construction methods has recently emerged in Vietnam. Vo Trong Nghia Architects uses traditional bamboo construction detailing. Nguyen Hoa Hiep of A21 Studio expands beyond bamboo to include other local materials and construction methods. Both architects position their projects in the local setting as form-conscious focal points. Our projects, on the other hand, utilise more contemporary materials and our detailing is often of Western origin. Since most of our projects are inner-city projects, they employ a modern sensibility while negotiating themselves into the dense urban setting. Within the context, our design is an insertion that requires demarcation from the surroundings.

Another Ho Chi Minh City architect who positions his projects in Vietnam is Tran Binh, who often infuses his projects with found architectural discards, a technique that has become popular among young local interior designers. Unfortunately, the style, which is a Vietnamese version of the rough Brooklyn style, can be applied superficially as a way to decorate the interiors of many local cafés and clubs. What we did for our Le Loi atelier studio seven years ago had different intentions. In our case, the architectural relics we used originating from demolition sites demonstrated a socially conscious fear that our city was being taken apart. Our project also utilised the ingenuity of designs seen on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City. It preserved the local way of making and the local crafts.
Individuals Who Raise Awareness about the Qualities of Ho Chi Minh City:

Tim Dolin, an English historian who has lived in Vietnam off and on for two decades, is an outspoken supporter for the preservation cause for Ho Chi Minh City’s built environment. He recently published *Exploring Ho Chi Minh City*, a travel guidebook with extensive information about the city’s existing architecture. He also hosts the website *Historic Vietnam* and is active online through *Saigon Cho lon Then and Now*. These channels are responsible for raising awareness about the existing architecture of the city and rallying against the current obliteration across the city. Dolin also leads walking tours for those who want to see the buildings.

Dolin’s effort has helped triggering a wave of concern among the public who realise the identity of the city is at risk. Various voices, online and in the local media, confront the reckless demolition of the physical and social fabric of the city. Many realise that Ho Chi Minh City is desperate for an approach that would accommodate both development and preservation.

Viet kieu Practitioners who Connect Vietnam to the Global World

Outside of the architectural community, there are committed Viet kieu artists and gallerists whose work engages Vietnam.

Our Viet kieu client, Quynh Pham of Galerie Quynh, represents many artists who are based in Vietnam and reflect Vietnamese conditions in their work. A recent show at the Gallery Quynh Dong Khoi featured Tiffany Chung’s (also a Viet kieu) work focussing on issues of social displacement and gentrification in Ho Chi Minh City. Tuan Pham and Phu Nam Thuc Ha are Viet kieu artists who, together with their American partner Matt Lucero, formed the Propeller Group. Their art often uses Vietnam-related content. A recent show centred on urban street vendors and motorbikes.

Viet kieu artist Dinh Q Le, who shows extensively in the US, weaves found photographs of Vietnam into an installation addressing his childhood memories of the war. Richard Streitmatter Tran, both a practising artist and a teacher, has developed resources including a blog and a library that contribute greatly to the education of the younger Vietnamese artists.

Graphic artist Chi-An De Leo, a Viet kieu from Italy, and his American partner, Joshua Breidenbach, formed Rice Creative which designs graphics and packaging for products manufactured in Vietnam. Many of their designs show their fascination with the products’ place of origin.

Together, we Viet kieus position ourselves as the bridge between here, where we were born, and the West, where we were raised and educated. We act as connectors exchanging ideas between Vietnam and the outside cultural world.

In Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi, the project that will be discussed in the following chapter, Archie and I designed the exhibition space as a connector between Vietnam and the global world.
CHAPTER 5:
EMBEDMENT AND RECONCILIATION

Project:
Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi

The back portal at Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi
Photograph courtesy of Archie Pizzini.
5.1 GALERIE QUYNH DONG KHOI

We designed Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi during our Ph.D. research, around our PRS3 and PRS4. The design process for this project was more explicitly ideas-conscious.

Preserving the Accumulating Nature of the City

For Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi, we wanted to accentuate the idea that our new design is a new layer inserted on to what was already there. In this particular building, the cast iron building is the original structure. The current staircase and the back balconies are later additions. Walking from the street through the arcade and up the stairs to the second-floor gallery feels like walking through different time periods. We wanted our design to partake in a similar fashion, participating in the evolution of the building.

Maintaining the layering of the existing context for this project was different from removing the layers of Bun Ta’s later additions. As stated previously, our level of design intervention varies from one project to another depending on the physical condition of the buildings. While much of the original Bun Ta villa seemed salvageable, Quynh’s building had already been changed so much. Accentuating these changes was part of our design decision.

1. Practice Research Symposium, or PRS, is a bi-annual event organised by RMIT for the Ph.D. candidates to present their researches in progress. My third and fourth PRSs occurred in May and December 2013, respectively, in Ho Chi Minh City.

The building where the gallery is located can be seen in these five photographs (pointing arrow) that span almost a century. The building has witnessed different periods of the history of the city, from the early days when Rue Catinat was Saigon’s most glamorous street, through the US-Vietnam war when Tu Do Street was the symbol of (borrowed) prosperity, and now under the communist rule.

Top photograph by the author.


Designing within Vulnerable Contexts

Similar to the way graffiti artists sometimes make art in urban ruins with full knowledge that everything will soon be torn down, we often design for situations that are vulnerable. Our architectural designs in these old buildings, including our studios and the two galleries for Quynh, are opportunistic work. We utilise the remaining time and sometimes utilise the temporary nature of their remaining existence.

In Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi, we emphasised that vulnerability by designing the gallery as an insertion, implying that it will someday be taken away and moved to a different place.

Occupying Vulnerable Contexts such as Older Buildings

Recognising that the urban fabric is disappearing at an alarming rate, we focus on what still remains and make the best of it. Compared to the destruction of Singapore and the will to revitalise what remains by its architects and artists, there is still much left in Ho Chi Minh City that can be identified with. Instead of being defeated, we can make the best of what still remains.

One way to do this is by utilising and inhabiting the buildings in Ho Chi Minh City that may soon vanish. We demonstrated our identification with the city by situating our studios in a hẻm and in a colonial-era apartment building. The occupation of these vulnerable spaces is an act of embedment.

Neither the building that Galerie Quynh occupies nor our studio building in Ly Tu Trong is by any means an architectural landmark. However, these buildings make up a physical layer that was built during the French colonial period.

The existing dilapidated timber windows overlooking Dong Khoi were removed to make place for a contemporary rust steel portal with glass infill. The timber windows were not restored and duplicated. Photographs courtesy of Archie Pizzini.

2. William S. W. Lim, Asian Ethical Urbanism: A Radical Postmodern Perspective, 133.
Negotiating New Architectural Design in Historic Context

For the Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi project, new architectural design was negotiated into the existing building. Our place-specific design regards existing context, whether it is part of the natural landscape or a historic building, valid enough to be considered as the given setting of our design. We treat the existing context as an opportunity that allows our design to have a reference point. For this project, we consciously did not demolish everything. We kept enough of the setting to create a dialogue between our new design and the existing surrounding.

Though we respect the existing context, we did not treat the existing building as something sacred and untouchable, and we had no intention of restoring it to any of its earlier versions. We designed more instead. We allowed ourselves to intervene sensibly utilising contemporary design. The relatively high level of design intervention for this project was supported by our assessment that the building is not a landmark and has been altered many times before. Once that assessment was made, deciding what was to be kept and what can be replaced was straightforward. The timber cabinetry was replaced by a steel and glass portal, and the existing kitchen was demolished to open up the courtyard towards the back corridor. This assessment also allowed us to carve away part of the existing structure to insert our new contemporary design within. Had the building been a landmark, our new design interventions would have been subtler.
Design Intervention by Insertion

For Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi, the new design is inserted into the existing building. Insertion as a design technique works well when one is sympathetic to the existing context. Instead of clearing out the site to park the new design, we carefully inserted it into the site, removing and replacing piece by piece of the context, at the same time consolidating and preserving the immediate surroundings.

At the time we were designing the gallery, Archie and I were also co-leading a design studio for RMIT. The site for the studio project was a section of District 1 with super-dense city blocks. Through this studio project, I discovered that insertion worked effectively at an urban scale. Parts of the city blocks were selectively replaced with new designs that were inserted and woven into the existing fabric. The technique helped the students to start a dialogue with the existing context, instead of erasing the existing blocks to park new designs.

Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi is an insertion. Insertion implies that it can be removed and taken away. It is merely temporary. Image by HTA+pizzini.
The Local Builders

Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi was built by Minh Chuong Construction Company. As with many things in Vietnam, personal relationships and professional relationships overlap in the story of our long and ongoing association with this company. I was introduced to Mr. Chuong, one of the two partners, the first time that I worked with the company in 1997. I was designing a water park that needed carpentry work for traditional structures, and the landscape manager there had an uncle named Tuan who worked for Minh Chuong. Tuan still works there.

Mr. Chuong was an architect by training during the previous regime. When we met, he was in his late 50s. He would always reminisce about his days as a young architect working for Ngô Viet Thu, the master architect of Vietnam, who is the designer of the Presidential Palace, now called the Reunification Palace. Mr. Chuong never kept secret his disdain for the current system, where as a builder, he had to pay corruption money if he wanted to do a project for a state-owned company. We immediately felt close to each other, even before I mentioned that I did not expect a kickback. Perhaps he felt a connection with me because he was happy that I was still practising architecture while he had already left the profession, and because I came from the US, which was related to a personal history that he remembered fondly.

Our personal/professional relationship expanded over the years through annual Tet parties, their children's wedding ceremonies, birthdays and, more recently, funerals.

Mr. Chuong passed away in 2014. Before he died, he apparently asked his son Bang, who now manages the company, whether they still collaborated much with me, and it seems he was happy that I am still around. At the wake, I saw many of Mr. Chuong's crew. They are much older now, but it felt like the water park project was only yesterday. In the sixteen years since that project, Minh Chuong renovated four houses for me, built three houses for our clients, four workspaces for HTA+Pizzini, Lost in Saigon bar, Galerie Quynh 1, Bun Ta, and most recently, Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi. Minh Chuong also fabricated the light fixture for Avalon. Many of these projects, particularly the ones for myself or for our studios, never had official contracts. Much was based on trust, as is the typical old-school Vietnamese style.

I was informed by Bang that the company did not sign a contract with Quynh for the construction of the gallery. Minh Chuong had prepared a contract, but Quynh never signed it. They trusted her enough to proceed, based on a track record that started when I introduced the two parties for Galerie Quynh 1. Since then, Minh Chuong has done four galleries for Quynh, two houses, and the construction of several art installations as well.

Of course, I am not advocating for the elimination of contracts. I simply wish to demonstrate the value of the way things are done here based on a deep understanding of how the city operates socially.

To engage a company like Minh Chuong in building this project is to help the company stay in business. Many family-run construction companies cannot compete with the bigger construction corporations. As a result, they collapse or become sub-contractors to bigger corporations. After losing their autonomy, these sub-contractors cannot operate the way that family-run companies do. The more controlled and regulated system of corporations is characterised by less flexibility, less collaboration, less trust and less goodwill.
We are able to provide Western-standard design, as seen in the interior of the gallery. The challenge is how to adapt it to the local context, forming a thin threshold between the gallery space and the street. In Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi, the threshold thickened to contain the entire gallery project, which inhabits the space between the front and the back portals. The gallery functions as a device we created to allow people to look at the city from within.

Though we often design by taking clues from the surrounding context, Quynh requested early on that she wanted a Western space. She insisted on a pristine box for the exhibition space, together with a state-of-the-art lighting system. The final design complies with her brief.

Without Quynh’s explicit request, our design might have gone in a different direction. We might have melded our design with the existing setting more, utilising existing architectural elements, taking inspiration from the way we designed our Le Loi atelier, for example.

A sharp contrast emerged when we inserted the pristine box we had designed into the setting, which was considerably rougher. This contrast is a major strength of the design because it creates a dialogue between the new insertion and the existing context. We were able to achieve this because we have the capacity to design a high-end Western product while remaining sensitive to the local context.

**Between Vietnam and the Global World**

We see our practice as a bridge between Vietnam and the world outside. Similarly, Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi also acts as a bridge, a threshold, a connector, occupying the ‘in between’. It is a space in transit.
Physically, Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi lies in between the working-class community that lives in the rear of the building and the commercial Dong Khoi Street in the front - in between old Vietnam and the global world beyond. Inserted as a connector, the gallery was designed as a device with multiple lenses—one outer lens looking out onto Dong Khoi, one outer lens looking back to the neighbourhood.

With the perspective where the progressive Dong Khoi is always reaching towards the future and the back neighbourhood has been caught behind in the past, our design inhabits a place in between what has been and what is coming. Our response to the evolution of the city is to try to capture the current moment.

Behind Galerie Quynh’s building are the back sides of the buildings whose facades face four major streets of the city: Dong Khoi, Nguyen Thiep, Nguyen Hue, and Le Loi. Physically, the back sides of the buildings have not changed at the same speed as their facades. Front and back seem to occupy different times in history. Galerie Quynh occupies a place between these two conditions.
In the Vietnamese system, the to truong is an elected person within a neighbourhood or a building who is a representative that deals with issues related to common interests, such as garbage collection, fire safety, bike parking and so on. A to truong is a volunteer, without official pay, and is typically a retiree or an older person who does not work full-time. Every month he/she is compensated a small amount of money by the all families within the neighbourhood or the building.

During Tet, it is normal practice for the tenants to offer rice cakes to their neighbours, especially to the to truong. Before renovating one’s house or apartment, it is normal to report to the to truong, even before placing an official application at the authority level.

Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi neglected to do this. Quynh’s landlord was not from Ho Chi Minh City and had purchased the apartment recently. She did not know her neighbours or her to truong. Quynh was

In-Depth Knowledge of Social Systems

The location of the project inside an existing residential colonial-era building forced us to deal with social issues. We recognised the complications that can be created when an unfamiliar entity selling expensive artwork wants to occupy an apartment in a block mostly reserved for the working class. This building already housed a few commercial establishments, the most prominent being L’usine, a foreign-owned trendy cafe and shop on the floor below Quynh’s gallery.

As could be expected, the original tenants considered Quynh and L’usine as outsiders intruding on their territory and disrupting their lifestyle, and this created social tension. The grudge became apparent during the construction of the gallery, when the to truong (building superintendent) involved the local police to stop part of the construction.
not aware of the system. I assumed that Quynh and her Vietnamese assistant would know. By the time I was informed, it was too late to reconcile.

The three times I renovated my houses, my wife visited the adjacent neighbours and the to truongs to offer small gifts and to apologise for all the inconvenience we were going to cause during renovation. Sometimes, the builders also do that before the start of construction.

Many of these practices are not written rules. They are simply part of the deep knowledge acquired by living in the social system.

Gentrification is another social issue we anticipated at Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi. Mixed-use buildings are common in Ho Chi Minh City, but usually only the ground floor is commercial while the upper floors are residential. In the past five years, upper-floor apartments have started to be converted into offices or work studios, as discussed in chapter 4-4. It is more common now to have one's fashion shop or studio sharing the same floor with the working class in their apartments. The mixing often forces an interesting interaction between very different classes of people. In Galerie Quynh's case, many within Quynh's circle of foreigners and higher income Vietnamese must interact with a class of people and a type of space that is totally foreign to them.

Unfortunately, the ‘interesting’ interaction only lasts until the new tenants displace the existing tenants in a typical gentrification process. In our building, residents are still the majority. In Quynh's building, there are only a few apartments left housing the original tenants.
Acceptance of Change

Another issue I recognised as a given when we started to design Galerie Quynh was that the lease would be a short one. Quynh signed a three-year lease contract with the owner. The building is situated in probably the most expensive block in Ho Chi Minh City. Immediately adjacent to the Louis Vuitton building, across the street from the Saigon Sheraton, this building is destined to be demolished and replaced by a similar development in the near future. The building, though one of the few remaining cast iron buildings in Ho Chi Minh City, is not protected as a designated landmark.

Both Quynh and I are familiar with this situation. This is Quynh’s fourth gallery in eight years, while we have moved our studio three times within the same period. My ten-year-old son has lived in five different houses.

When we started the design, we thought up practical solutions to cope with the temporary nature of the project. We proposed for the construction parts to be reusable whenever Quynh moves out—the timber floors and the stretched ceiling system were initiated under this assumption.

As the design developed, other aspects emerged. We wanted to frame the views looking out onto the street and the back neighbourhood, mimicking the way artists frame their artwork. For Archie and I, Ho Chi Minh City was the art that we, the architects, wanted to frame. The notion of framing the city becomes more complex when one realises that the life events outside the portals are changing constantly, leading one to reflect upon the city in flux and realise how temporary this gallery is and how uncertain all of our situations are.
Flux has become an inescapable reality. Because of rapid changes, the identity of the city has become uncertain. The identity of a place is acquired by its evolution from one version to another through time. It takes time for each version to become part of a collective memory that identifies a place. If the physicality of a place is constantly being replaced, the city risks eventually becoming an unidentifiable place. In other words, it becomes a placeless place.

These rapid changes make Ho Chi Minh City vulnerable. Unlike Hanoi and Hue, where traces of history can still be seen and their identity more easily defined, the identity of Ho Chi Minh City is under threat.

In Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi, we exhibit the change. Our design operates as an instrument displaying the inevitable reality.

The rapid, ongoing, physical changes occurring in Ho Chi Minh City force one to be conscious of the passage of time. As a response to that, we want to capture the current moment. In Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi, we tried to emphasise the time-specific aspect of the design. Contrary to the norm of designing for the future, we advocate time-specific architecture, focussing on the present.
CONCLUSION:

1. POSITIONING
   a. Between Vietnam and the global world
   b. Seeing validities and values in the existing context of Ho Chi Minh City
   c. Adapting Western-standard design to the local setting of Ho Chi Minh City

2. EXPANDING PRESERVATION
   a. Maintaining the physical architecture
   b. Preserving the accumulating nature of the city
   c. Preserving existing crafts, local knowledge, and an individual-based workforce
   d. Maintaining the urban and social fabrics by occupying and designing in vulnerable contexts such as hems and older buildings
   e. Preserving human interaction

3. PROFESSIONAL METHODOLOGIES
   a. Shifting role from commercially focussed office to design studio to ideas-based practice
   b. Loosening boundaries of preservation to allow new design intervention
   c. Design by insertion and intervention
   d. Design within vulnerable contexts
   e. Selection of clients

4. EMBEDMENT AND RECONCILIATION
   a. Embedment
   b. In-depth knowledge of social systems
   c. Gentrification
   d. Acceptance of change
1. POSITIONING

1a. Between Vietnam and the global world

I see myself as a bridge between Vietnam and the world outside. As a result, our projects are Western designs negotiated into the local setting. Our concluding project, Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi, also acts as a bridge, a threshold, a connector, occupying the in-between. It is a space in transit.

1b. Seeing validities and values in the existing context of Ho Chi Minh City

I see validities and values in the existing physical, social, and cultural context of Ho Chi Minh City. This positioning is a counter-balancing act to the rapid demolition of the existing built environment of Ho Chi Minh City, and consequently, the city’s attached societal systems and cultural values.

My position encourages adaptive reuse of the existing building stock to help maintain the existing urban fabric and its attached societal systems and cultural values. Many of our projects involve continuing the use of existing buildings such as Bun Ta, the two Galerie Quynh’s, and our workspaces.

The local context consists of more than the existing physical buildings. It consists of the availability of materials, method of construction and workmanship. Avalon was designed and built with local knowledge and resources. The design and fabrication of the Avalon lobby light fixture demonstrated that we could indeed utilise local resources to deliver an international standard product.

In our concluding project, Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi accentuates its setting by integrating the gallery design into the existing building and reaching out towards the city beyond its portals.

1c. Adapting Western-standard design to the local setting of Ho Chi Minh City

While being able to see validities and values in the existing local context, we do not abandon our Western knowledge and sensibility. Many of our projects are Western products with Western-standard design.

Galerie Quynh 1 was a contemporary Western space accommodating contemporary art. Avalon re-introduced Western modernist architecture back to Ho Chi Minh City and introduced a Western lifestyle with its space planning and amenities. Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi is also a Western space with a state-of-the-art ceiling system and lighting system from Europe.

The common thread that runs through our projects is their adaptation to Vietnam.
2. EXPANDING PRESERVATION

2a. Maintaining the physical architecture

I recognise the value of the existing buildings in Ho Chi Minh City. It is important for these buildings to be maintained and not demolished. But once they are maintained, they should be allowed to change and adapt to new usages. For us, the level of new design intervention varies depending on the condition of the existing buildings. For Bun Ta, I intervened less than Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi, because the Bun Ta building was more intact than the Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi building.

2b. Preserving the accumulating nature of the city

Cities, including Ho Chi Minh City, are made of physical and cultural layers stacked one on top of the other through time. The challenge is to preserve the accumulating nature of Ho Chi Minh City. New design can be inserted into the layering. The bias towards accumulation aligns with the conviction that cities benefit from accommodating their own complex formation through time. Ho Chi Minh City is already an agglomeration, and this has become part of Ho Chi Minh City’s identity. To preserve the agglomeration is to preserve Ho Chi Minh City’s identity. In the projects that involved existing buildings, we treated our design as an addition to the agglomeration.

2c. Preserving existing crafts, local knowledge and an individual-based workforce

Preserving existing crafts and local knowledge not only assists the projects to be fabricated according to design, it also helps the local workforce sustain itself in an environment hostile to its survival. While many construction projects utilise unskilled workers, we give work to already practising tradesmen and workforces to help them to stay in business.

2d. Maintaining the urban and social fabrics by occupying and designing in vulnerable contexts such as hems and older buildings

Our occupying vulnerable contexts such as hems and older buildings is an act of passive resistance that promotes the utilisation of parts of the city vulnerable to demolition and oblivion. In the design of some of Ho Chi Minh City’s newer districts and wards, hems are excluded altogether and older builders are eradicated. The new master plans dictate a different lifestyle, implying that the master plans anticipate the displacement of the current population.
2e. Preserving human interaction

Preserving human interaction is preserving one of Ho Chi Minh City’s great assets that is currently under threat by development that promotes a more private lifestyle and alienation as result of the applied hierarchy between the social classes. In Ho Chi Minh City’s built environment, such alienation can be reflected in the gated communities, exclusive private clubs and shopping malls that exclude people who cannot afford them.

Architectural design that can preserve more human interaction can play a role in counterbalancing such undesirable conditions. In a small way, Bun Ta and Galerie Quynh 1 attempted to mitigate the hierarchy.

3. PROFESSIONAL METHODOLOGIES

3a. Shifting roles from commercially focussed office to design studio to ideas-based practice

The designs of our four different workspaces demonstrate our shifting roles as architects. The design of the first office was a generic design without any personality. Its Spartan ambiance reflected our emphasis on professionalism and competence. During this time, we focussed on any kind of developer-driven project. The second workspace was Le Loi atelier. As an atelier, this was a place where architecture was designed and taught. Our staff members were learning as much as they were working. The design of this second workspace utilised recycled shutters and ingenious design from the street that we saw all around us in the city. By doing so, it positioned our practice in Vietnam. The design of our third workspace, Hoa Hung studio, reflected our comfort being embedded in an alley off a minor street in District 10. Inside an old French colonial villa, our operation was more like that of a studio than an office. The design of our current workspace, Ly Tu Trong studio, reflects our current commitment to this city. We moved back to the centre of town and now occupy a modest room within a modest apartment building that is also a colonial-era building.

The projects we designed in these workspaces did not correlate exactly with the various roles we assumed, because in reality, some projects lasted three to four years, spanning two or three versions of our workspaces. However, in general, the design of our projects has shifted from client-driven to design-driven to ideas-driven projects.
Shifting away from developers’ agendas while also shifting away from traditional preservation practice has allowed us to be more accommodating of our own agendas. Concurrently, the ongoing recession also allows us time to reflect on what we do. This started three years ago with a book about our projects and our thoughts about them. It has also allowed us time to participate in this rigorous Ph.D. research process. These endeavours have forced me to be more aware of the ideas behind our projects.

3b. Loosening boundaries of preservation to allow new design interventions

My questioning of traditional preservation practice began when I was working on the Victory Theater in New York.

When I founded the practice in Vietnam, my interpretation of preservation was already more loose. I had moved away from the traditional practice of preservation where historic architecture is considered sacred. That tradition tends to freeze historic architecture in time and place, which puts architecture at risk of becoming a museum piece or theme park item.

In my early project Bun Ta, I made a lot of new design interventions. I demolished the original front wall, designed the new canopy and the pergolas in a contemporary language with glass and steel, removed interior walls and ceilings, and transformed windows to doors. Bun Ta represented an early shift beyond traditional preservation towards renovation.

The design of Le Loi atelier brought historic elements into the project. As a reaction to my uneasiness about the stripping of the Victory Theater paint layers, I insisted that the found shutters not be stripped and painted to allow traces of history to be seen, and to allow the shutters to evolve further. This was another shift away from traditional preservation where historic items are re-finished to a chosen finish.

In the design of Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi, our concluding project for this research, we selectively replaced existing architectural elements. Our new design intervention was bolder. Instead of occupying ourselves with the effort to preserve everything, we focussed on inserting our new design into the existing building. If sensibly inserted, our new design intervention would participate in the evolution of the city and become part of the current layer of the city.

The difficulty in all of this is in assessing and selecting what is to be preserved and what is to be replaced. This is not a straightforward process. It requires negotiation between making new architecture and preservation.

Developing cities like Ho Chi Minh City can experience a tension between progress and preservation. Those for progress dismiss the existing built environment as obsolete and needing renewal. Those for preservation, though much smaller in number in Ho Chi Minh City now, insist that the architectural landmarks be salvaged. Cultivating an ability to operate in between traditional preservation practice and new architectural design practice allows me options anywhere along the line of possibilities - the right to choose to preserve, to design new, or to choose to do both. There are landmarks to be salvaged. There are dilapidated buildings to be replaced or repaired. There are projects where I can utilise preservation, restoration, renovation, and replacement.
3c. Design by insertion and intervention

When the design involves an existing building with an official landmark status, preserving it to its original design is the most straightforward and least controversial approach.

When the existing building is not officially a landmark, it can be renovated and its original design amended where necessary. Contemporary design can be inserted into the old structure in a clearly distinguishable way. This method aligns with the bias towards adding and contributing to the current layer, if layering is understood as the way in which our built environment is composed over time.

3d. Design within vulnerable contexts

Designing within vulnerable contexts such as the buildings that are soon to be demolished, is an opportunistic approach towards undesirable situations. This stance is the antithesis to the one of defeat and inaction, which is based on the reasoning that whatever one does will eventually be taken away.

The building on Dong Khoi where we designed Galerie Quynh was recently purchased by a group of developers. Quynh has recently been informed that she will have to move out in mid-2016. The design that we did for Quynh a year ago materialised because we were not defeated.

In a rapidly changing Ho Chi Minh City, not only is the physical environment in flux, but values can be quickly be reassessed. Neglected buildings of today can become valuable tomorrow. Operating as architects in this context, we continue to design and to participate.

3e. Selection of clients

Potential clients expect us to deliver Western-based design. Our intention to relate the design to Vietnam contradicts the assumption held by most clients, which is that Western design is universal and can be applied anywhere. In practice, we selectively choose the clients to whom we disclose our agenda. Those often are the same individuals who come to our studio, see our design there and understand our design intentions.

If we look to Singapore as an example, generally speaking, we can see that it took a generation for clients to begin to allow architecture to be place-specific. For decades after the founding of Singapore, many major projects were designed by foreign architects or Singaporean architects doing foreign architecture in Singapore. For the present in Vietnam, we anticipate similar expectation from clients.
4. EMBEDMENT AND RECONCILIATION

4a. Embedment

Embedding oneself into the local setting to design from within is an act of commitment. This positioning accepts that each region has its particular local knowledge. Embedding oneself within one’s context allows a designer to acquire the local knowledge most effectively by observing and reflecting the local conditions and qualities from the inside.

Embedment is a decision to become part of the social fabric. By participating and being inside the social systems, we can nurture them.

4b. In-depth knowledge of social systems

Recognising that physical, social and cultural contexts vary from one place to another, I can no longer assume that design is universal and the understanding and knowledge of one context can be imposed on another context, as in a form of architectural colonisation. Instead, I am more engaged with the local setting of our projects. Specifically, in-depth knowledge of the social systems that make up the foundation of the setting must be understood.

4c. Gentrification

Gentrification is an economic situation where the existing dwellers are driven away usually because they can no longer afford to remain. Gentrification is a problem for many cities around the world. In Ho Chi Minh City, it is most obvious in the city centre, where large apartment buildings are demolished to make way for newer developments whose agendas never include housing for those displaced.

Another cause of gentrification is when the original dwellers are displaced by new dwellers. In our case, when we moved our Ly Tu Trong studio into an old residential apartment building, we started the displacement process. Gentrification is undesirable because the end result is only one class of people living in a monotonous environment.

However, I can only hope that many of us occupying these old buildings can delay the demolition process.
4d. Acceptance of change

Nevertheless, change is inevitable, especially in developing cities like Ho Chi Minh City. To reconcile with this fact is to accept that all cities evolve. Changes sometime seem to happen too quickly, and those who identify with the earlier versions of the city often regret change.

In the early part of my career, preservation seemed to be the way to ignore the change happening around me.

My current viewpoint is to incorporate the changes into our design. If our projects can no longer be designed as permanent constructions, then the focus of the design is for the present. The design being vulnerable and uncertain emphasises the experience of the current moment.

An acceptance of change also aligns with my support for Ho Chi Minh City to continue accumulating and evolving.

The selected projects from our eleven years of practice make evident a position towards the maintaining of existing architecture in a rapidly changing city. This situation challenges many designers globally, but it is particularly severe in Ho Chi Minh City at present, due to the pressure of increasing development. Our projects present a particular mindset, operating in this environment to maintain the richness of the social and physical urban fabric without promoting nostalgia or stasis.

My design approach through these projects has shifted from both strict preservation practice and large-scale urban rebuilding to a reconciliation of these through careful design intervention. It blurs the distinction between adaptive reuse, preservation, restoration and replacement. It also involves an understanding of how Ho Chi Minh City operates socially, which can be incorporated into design strategies for its built environment.

These projects demonstrate how an urban environment like Ho Chi Minh City can evolve without repeating the problems of Western cities, and this represents a necessary contribution to our discipline.

This document presents Ho Chi Minh City as an on-going case study of an evolving city. My design approach now conforms with the notion that the city evolves, and together with it, we architects evolve.
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IN TRANSIT:
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2015

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