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TURISMO E PATRIMÓNIO COLONIAL ENCONTRO DE CULTURAS

CONGRESSO INTERNACIONAL

<https://tourismheritage.wixsite.com/2026>

Keynotes

Mike Robinson
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ORGANIZAÇÃO

CHAM - Centro de Humanidades: Universidade NOVA Lisboa e Universidade dos Açores

ARTIS - Instituto de História de Arte, Universidade Lisboa

ISCE - Instituto Superior de Lisboa e Vale do Tejo



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FROM SYMBOL OF DOMINATION TO TOURIST ATTRACTION: THE REAPPROPRIATION OF COLONIAL HERITAGE IN HO CHI MINH CITY

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Abstract

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), formerly Saigon, boasts a rich colonial architectural heritage that has transitioned from symbols of French domination to key tourist attractions, driving economic growth. Amid a 15.7% surge in international visitors in early 2025, this heritage, encompassing buildings like the Notre-Dame Cathedral and Central Post Office, distinguishes HCMC from other Vietnamese sites focused on natural or ancient wonders. Colonial heritage is often labeled “dissonant”, evoking tensions between pride in architectural value and memories of exploitation, yet in HCMC, it faces little contestation. Rooted in French colonial urban planning from the late 19th century, these structures blend European and local elements, adapted to tropical conditions. Post-independence, Vietnam’s heritage policies, influenced by colonial-era frameworks like the 1900 decree, evolved through laws such as the 2001 Cultural Heritage Act, prioritizing preservation alongside development. In HCMC, urban plans since 1997 have inventoried and classified over 1,200 villas, enforcing protections against demolition. Adaptive reuse has been pivotal: public buildings retain functions or become museums, while private ones transform into cafés and shops, balancing sustainability with economic viability. Tourism amplifies this, integrating sites into circuits with modern amenities like illuminated facades and info plaques, appealing to global visitors without erasing historical complexities. Ultimately, this reappropriation reflects reconciliation, where aesthetic and functional values eclipse painful symbolism, fostering cultural dialogue and prosperity in a dynamic urban context.

Keywords

Colonial heritage, Tourism valorization, Adaptive reuse, Dissonant heritage

1. Introduction

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), formerly known as Saigon, stands out for its vibrant economic dynamism and its unique cultural heritage, notably marked by a well-preserved colonial architecture. In recent years, the city has experienced a significant revival of tourism, with a 15.7% increase in the number of international visitors during the first two months of 2025 compared to the same period in 2024, reaching a total of 1.044 million arrivals. Tourism revenue generated in HCMC now accounts for 24% of the national total, highlighting the city's pivotal role in Vietnam's tourism economy¹.

While other regions of the country, such as Hanoi with its centuries-old history and culture, Ha Long Bay with its UNESCO-listed natural heritage, Hue with its historical monuments, and Hoi An with its ancient houses, are primarily associated with spectacular landscapes or historical treasures, HCMC distinguishes itself through its vibrant energy and its diverse gastronomy. However, it is above all the colonial heritage of the city that commands attention. The colonial buildings of HCMC represent a complex form of heritage, reflecting not only the colonial legacy but also the profound cultural, social, and political transformations that have shaped the city. Far from being a dissonant element that would provoke contestation, this heritage has been integrated into the dynamics of economic development, notably through its valorization within the framework of tourism.

Colonial heritage refers to the collection of buildings and infrastructures constructed during the colonial era, a period characterized by the domination of European powers over various regions of the world up until the twentieth century. These structures - encompassing military facilities, residences, leisure spaces, as well as administrative, academic, and religious buildings - serve as material witnesses to the colonial period and embody significant architectural value (Boutabba et al., 2014; Ben Hamouche, 2020). This type of heritage is acknowledged as multifaceted and sensitive, often referred to by various terms such as “shared heritage”, “overseas heritage” or “nineteenth–twentieth century heritage” (Roosmalen, 2013, p.2). Its controversial nature stems from its association with a painful history of domination and exploitation. The term “colonial” itself often evokes a sense of shame, prompting calls for its erasure or re-signification to preserve the value of this architectural legacy (Roosmalen, 2003, p.123).

¹ <https://lecourrier.vn>

In heritage studies, colonial heritage is frequently described as “dissonant heritage” (Young, 2001; Adas, 2004; Linehan et al., 2020; Kisić, 2013; Roosmalen, 2013), raising persistent controversies regarding its recognition, management, and heritage-making processes. The concept of dissonant heritage, introduced by Tunbridge & Ashworth (1996), posits that all heritage inherently contains dissonance, arising from discordances among groups involved in its creation, interpretation, and use. The diversity of meanings attributed to heritage, varying across social groups, historical periods, and contexts, produces tensions that complicate both its management and its commercialization.

Particularly, colonial heritage, shaped by a legacy of domination and exploitation, generates contradictory narratives between the descendants of the colonized populations and the former colonizers (Quijano, 2007; Hitchcock et al., 2010; Mignolo, 2016). Colonial buildings elicit divergent perceptions: for some, they symbolize historical pride and contributions to urban development, whereas for others, they evoke memories of suffering and the suppression of indigenous cultures. This divergence exemplifies the inherently dissonant nature of heritage, where the same material reality is subject to opposing interpretations (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). The valorization of colonial structures can sometimes reinforce imperial nostalgia, diminishing the negative aspects of colonization in favor of celebrating architectural achievements.

Consequently, the valorization of colonial heritage emerges as a complex and ambivalent process. On the one hand, it acknowledges colonial buildings as witnesses to a complex historical trajectory; on the other, it tends to transform them into objects of tourist consumption. The promotion of colonial heritage thus raises several issues, including the emergence of local and global tensions related to social justice and decolonization (Gaussens, 2024).

Moreover, the significance and perspectives surrounding colonial heritage are highly context-dependent, influenced by climatic, economic, and social factors. In pluralistic societies, this heritage - laden with historical memories - often sparks conflicts of interpretation and use (Olsen & Timothy, 2002; Smith, 2006). These issues become particularly acute when heritage is transformed into tourist products, as the pursuit of authenticity and legitimacy can provoke passionate debates and contestations.

2. Colonial Buildings in HCMC: A Case Study

In order to better understand the particular dynamics surrounding colonial heritage in HCMC, it is necessary to examine the historical context of its formation and subsequent evolution. This approach allows us to situate the city's colonial buildings within broader processes of heritage construction, urban development, and tourism commodification.

Formerly known as Saigon, HCMC is distinguished by a rich colonial heritage that bears witness to its past under French rule. Motivated by the economic potential of the region, the French administration sought to transform Saigon into a Westernized metropolis, expanding its perimeter, annexing Cho Lon, and initiating the construction of numerous colonial buildings (Nguyễn Thị Hậu, 2012, p.72). A major policy of public works, extending into the 1930s, aimed to establish modern infrastructures and monumental buildings that served both the functional needs and the symbolic representation of colonial power. Iconic structures illustrate a fusion of European and Vietnamese architectural elements, adapted to tropical conditions (Lê et al., 2021; Truong & On, 2024). Residential and commercial districts, planned to accommodate diverse communities, reflected the colonial strategy of urban organization. Architectural styles, often characterized by neo-baroque features with ornate balustrades and friezes, exemplified the pedagogical and ideological intentions of the colonizers (Verney, 2017, p.159). The use of modern materials such as steel further underscored the narrative of French technological superiority and the aesthetic ambition of harmonizing Indochinese cultures.

Today, the colonial heritage of HCMC stands as a living testimony to the city's complex history, marked by colonial domination and profound urban and societal transformations. However, the touristic exploitation of this heritage raises significant questions regarding its dissonant or contested nature. Is colonial heritage in HCMC truly contested? How are such contestations manifested within local practices? These questions are particularly pertinent in light of the specific history and evolution of the concept of heritage in Vietnam, the policies of heritage management and urban planning, the functional uses assigned to colonial buildings, and the growing tourism sector that increasingly commodifies these historic structures. Through this structured approach, the article aims to shed light on the complex and ambivalent relationship between colonial heritage and economic development in HCMC.

3. Early Development of the Heritage Concept under French Colonial Rule

The concept of heritage in Vietnam, referred to as “*di sản*”, underwent a significant evolution under French colonial influence. Originally associated with the idea of “family inheritance”, “*di sản*” progressively expanded to embody the notion of “transmission between generations”, eventually acquiring a broader collective and national dimension (Nguyễn Tùng & Krowolski, 2015, p.142). The introduction of this concept by the French colonizers gradually familiarized a segment of the Vietnamese population with the principles of architectural preservation, although the selection of what was deemed worthy of conservation was primarily oriented toward French-built structures.

In constructing buildings that they considered to possess aesthetic, administrative, or symbolic value, the French effectively introduced the idea that certain structures merited preservation. This approach laid the foundation for heritage management practices in Vietnam and facilitated the conservation of numerous historical monuments. Early heritage policies, such as the decree of March 9, 1900, were implemented under colonial administration, drawing inspiration from metropolitan France’s conservation practices (Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient, 1907, p.463). The French School of the Far East² played a pivotal role in this process by establishing rigorous and well-documented restoration methods.

However, this patrimonial dynamic was also embedded within a broader logic of cultural domination. The monuments selected for preservation were those deemed remarkable according to Western aesthetic and historical standards, often at the expense of other forms of heritage deeply rooted in indigenous Vietnamese culture (Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient, 1908, pp.284-287). The patrimonialization undertaken by the French thus served to legitimize colonial rule and to reinterpret local history through a lens favorable to colonial administration.

Following independence, Vietnam’s heritage priorities shifted, but efforts to preserve historical monuments were renewed, notably with the 1984 decree and the adoption of the Law on Cultural Heritage in 2001 (Lask & Herold, 2004, p.402). These initiatives sought to balance the goals of conservation and economic development by integrating heritage protection into broader tourism and development strategies.

² École française d’Extrême-Orient.

Therefore, French colonial influence left a lasting imprint on Vietnam's heritage management framework, shaping how Vietnamese society perceives and values its cultural inheritance. This early consciousness and institutionalization of heritage, rooted in the colonial period, partially explain why colonial heritage in Vietnam is not broadly perceived as dissonant or contested by the local population.

4. Heritage Management and Urban Planning Policies in HCMC

Building on the early introduction of the heritage concept during the colonial period, the management of cultural heritage in contemporary Vietnam is now structured within a coherent legislative framework. The Cultural Heritage Law No. 28/2001/QH10, amended in 2009, defines the responsibilities of various stakeholders, ensuring a hierarchized and consistent management system. The central government holds a leading role, while the Ministry of Culture and Information is responsible for implementing heritage policies. At the local level, People's Committees are tasked with the concrete management of heritage assets (Article 55). Furthermore, the National Council for Cultural Heritage ensures an objective evaluation process and validates classification proposals for the most significant cultural properties (Article 56).

In HCMC, specific initiatives have been undertaken to safeguard colonial heritage. In 1997, the Master Plan for Districts 1 and 3 was revised, identifying 46 heritage sites to be studied for preservation purposes (Nguyễn Cẩm Dương Ly, 2013, pp.147-148). Although conservation and restoration works fall under the authority of the HCMC People's Committee, significant efforts have been made to renovate colonial villa neighborhoods while retaining their residential functions.

The Detailed Master Plan for the city center further reinforced this approach. It outlined three main axes of action for the redevelopment of Saigon's historic district: the preservation of typical buildings and ensembles, the renovation of social and technical infrastructures, and the development of high-rise buildings (Nguyễn Cẩm Dương Ly, 2013, p.157). Notably, the plan emphasized the protection of selected elements of the traditional Vietnamese built environment.

By 2015, responding to growing concerns about the demolition of colonial villas to make way for modern high-rise developments, the HCMC municipality implemented regulations requiring that any project involving the alteration or dismantling of historic

buildings undergo prior examination by the relevant department and approval by the city's People's Committee. An initiative titled "Inventory and Classification of Ancient Villas" was subsequently launched, focusing on structures primarily built during the French colonial era. This project, supervised by the Department of Planning and Architecture (DPA) in collaboration with French experts from PADDI, aimed to establish a comprehensive database of pre-1975 buildings and to develop appropriate protection measures.

The resulting inventory identified 1,227 villas, predominantly located in central districts. Among these, 446 villas retained their original conditions and were classified into three categories following Decree No. 99/2015/ND-CP. Villas classified as Category 1 (16 villas) are recognized as historical and cultural heritage assets and must be preserved in their original state. Category 2 villas (49 villas) possess significant architectural, historical, and cultural value and may undergo interior renovations and landscape improvements, provided their façades remain intact.

Overall, the heritage management and urban planning policies implemented in HCMC illustrate a clear intent to preserve colonial-era architecture, integrating these historical structures into the fabric of the modern city. Local and international initiatives reflect a growing awareness of the importance of safeguarding these architectural witnesses to the city's complex past.

5. The Uses of Colonial Buildings in HCMC

Beyond heritage management and urban planning policies, the absence of contestation regarding colonial heritage is also evident in the ways colonial buildings are currently reused and revalorized in HCMC.

Colonial buildings are frequently rehabilitated within urban development and tourism promotion projects, where their preservation is justified by their historical significance and their contribution to economic growth. The heritageization of these buildings involves a symbolic recontextualization. Initially subjected to a process of decontextualization, these structures are subsequently reinterpreted as shared memory sites and economic resources, rather than as enduring symbols of colonial domination (François et al., 2006; Frigolé, 2010). Their intrinsic value extends beyond their status as relics of cultural heritage; it lies

in their historical functions and the new roles attributed to them, thus avoiding their demolition (Da Costa, 2015, p.120).

A key approach in this transformation is adaptive reuse, which involves modifying existing structures for new purposes while preserving their historical authenticity and architectural value (Arfa et al., 2022). This strategy enhances the longevity of heritage buildings by revitalizing them for economically viable uses, while maintaining their original construction, façades, and ornamental features (Ardiyanto et al., 2019, p.192). Adaptive reuse is recognized as the only conservation strategy that simultaneously addresses the three main pillars of sustainable development: environmental, economic, and social concerns (Ardiyanto et al., 2019, p.192). International charters, such as the Burra Charter of ICOMOS, advocate adaptive reuse as a conservation strategy that balances heritage values with functional demands for the future (Arfa et al., 2022, p.149). In this sense, colonial buildings are adapted to meet contemporary needs, requiring changes in space use while balancing residential and commercial activities (Ardiyanto et al., 2019, p.193).

In HCMC, many colonial buildings have been reappropriated and valorized. Their undeniable architectural qualities - marked by appreciated styles and techniques - play a crucial role in their acceptance, independently of their colonial origin. Restoration efforts are central to the heritageization process. Landmark structures such as Bến Thành Market and the Notre-Dame Cathedral of Saigon have benefited from ambitious restoration plans aimed at preserving their structural and aesthetic integrity. Other important buildings, including the Central Post Office, Marie Curie High School, and the People's Court, have also undergone restoration projects to ensure their longevity (Nguyễn Cẩm Dương Ly, 2013, pp.147-148). These initiatives reflect a determined effort to preserve colonial heritage despite financial and management challenges.

The current uses of colonial buildings vary according to ownership type. Public buildings, such as the Notre-Dame Cathedral and the Central Post Office, generally retain their original functions after undergoing periodic repairs. Educational institutions like Marie Curie High School experience significant renovations while maintaining their educational purpose. Some public buildings, such as Nha Rong Wharf, have been repurposed into museums or cultural sites (Nguyễn Cẩm Dương Ly, 2013, pp.438-439). In contrast, privately owned colonial villas are often transformed into service or commercial

spaces, including cafés, restaurants, and shops. This adaptive reuse enables the preservation of their architectural heritage while aligning with contemporary economic needs.

The diversity of uses for colonial buildings illustrates a form of selective patrimonialization shaped by economic, political, and urban planning considerations. Tourism plays a vital role in this dynamic, promoting the conservation of certain structures due to their symbolic and economic value. For example, Chinese-style shop houses from the 1920s located at 29 Tôn Thất Thiệp Street have been transformed into commercial spaces while preserving their colonial architectural style. This rehabilitation combines respect for heritage with functional adaptation, allowing these buildings to become emblematic landmarks of the Old Market (Chợ Cũ) area (Nguyễn Cẩm Dương Ly, 2013, pp.438-439).

Colonial buildings in HCMC, though bearing the marks of a painful past, are now reappropriated and valorized without significant contestation. They are part of a broader dynamic of reconciliation with the past and contribute actively to the city's economic development. This acceptance reflects an evolving heritage consciousness and a commitment to preserving a rich architectural legacy, regardless of its colonial origins.

6. Colonial Heritage Tourism in HCMC

Beyond their adaptive reuse and restoration, the absence of contestation toward colonial buildings in HCMC is also evident through their increasing integration into the city's tourism strategies.

HCMC actively capitalizes on its colonial heritage to strengthen its touristic appeal. Compared to other Vietnamese cities such as Hanoi, Huế, or Hội An, HCMC does not possess an ancient historical legacy like Hanoi nor breathtaking natural landscapes like Ninh Bình. Instead, its urban history, more recent and deeply marked by 19th-century French colonization, has left a distinctive imprint on the city's architectural landscape. The European-style buildings, characterized by their unique visual and historical contrast with the local environment, have become major points of interest for tourists. For many visitors, particularly those from France, these remnants of a former colony offer a familiar entry point into the exploration of Vietnamese culture and history.

Emblematic colonial-era structures such as the Notre-Dame Cathedral, the Central Post Office, the City Hall, and the Municipal Opera House are now systematically incorporated

into tourist circuits, establishing themselves as key attractions. Tourism promotion materials frequently highlight both the city's modern dynamism and its colonial past. Tours typically include visits to colonial buildings, museums related to the Vietnam War, and historic districts that have preserved architectural elements from the colonial period. This strategic presentation of the colonial legacy caters not only to Western tourists' desire for historical authenticity but also to a broader international audience seeking to understand Vietnam's complex cultural evolution.

The integration of colonial heritage into the tourism economy reflects a broader patrimonialization process wherein these structures serve a dual function. On the one hand, they continue to fulfill their original roles - such as religious, postal, or administrative services - and, on the other hand, they act as powerful tourist attractions. Iconic sites like Bến Thành Market, the Central Post Office, and the Notre-Dame Cathedral of Saigon exemplify this duality, symbolizing both the architectural influence of French colonization and Vietnam's cultural resilience. Through tourism, colonial heritage not only generates significant economic benefits but also contributes to its own preservation and valorization, creating a virtuous circle where cultural conservation supports economic development.

The city's Department of Tourism actively enhances visitor access and engagement with colonial heritage through the use of information technologies and infrastructure improvements. Bus lines, including sightseeing double-decker buses, serve the main tourist sites, facilitating convenient movement for visitors. Inside colonial monuments, explanatory plaques provide historical and architectural information, and multilingual brochures are widely distributed. Furthermore, major colonial buildings, such as the HCMC People's Committee and the Municipal Opera House, are illuminated at night by a lighting system provided by a company from Lyon, enhancing their visual appeal and extending their touristic life into the evening hours.

This systematic promotion of colonial heritage suggests a process of cultural integration and reconciliation. Although these sites bear the memory of a painful colonial past, their current reappropriation and valorization occur without significant contestation. Rather than erasing or marginalizing this legacy, the city embraces it as an integral part of its historical narrative and economic future. Thus, the touristic development of colonial buildings in HCMC exemplifies a pragmatic and forward-looking approach to heritage, wherein dissonant historical memories are transformed into assets for cultural dialogue and economic prosperity.

7. Conclusion

The promotion of colonial buildings as tourist attractions in HCMC ultimately reflects a complex dynamic in which their current use value has come to outweigh their initial symbolic charge. Following independence, the culture of conservation - while potentially redirected - integrated colonial structures not as persistent symbols of oppression, but rather as historical witnesses to a bygone era. Over time, the aesthetic qualities and urban integration of these buildings have gradually eclipsed their negative connotations, allowing them to be admired for their beauty and contribution to the city's urban fabric.

Through this process, authorities in HCMC have effectively instrumentalized colonial heritage, transforming it into a consumable and accessible resource. The shift from intrinsic historical value to a primarily economic and touristic value highlights the pragmatism underpinning heritage management in the city. Formerly evocative of colonial domination and suffering, these buildings are now increasingly perceived as valuable assets that contribute to the city's cultural richness and economic growth.

Many colonial structures have been repurposed for functions beneficial to independent Vietnam - such as public administration, museums, universities, and hospitals - thus "neutralizing" their original symbolic load and embedding them into the daily lives and needs of the population. Their continued use and visibility have redefined their meaning within the collective memory, making them familiar components of the contemporary urban landscape and attenuating feelings of historical dissonance among newer generations.

Tourism has played a pivotal role in this revaluation. By integrating colonial heritage into broader narratives that encompass pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial histories, tourism in HCMC has reframed these structures as part of a complex and multifaceted historical continuum. Rather than remaining isolated as painful reminders of domination, colonial buildings are now understood as contributing to the shaping of modern-day Saigon, thus offering a more nuanced interpretation of the city's past.

Finally, the undeniable economic benefits derived from cultural tourism reinforce this shift. The valorization of colonial heritage - despite inevitable debates - appears to be a pragmatic strategy aimed at attracting visitors and stimulating local economic development. In this light, the absence of widespread contestation regarding colonial buildings in HCMC emerges as a sign of reconciliation with a difficult past, wherein the

functional and economic potential of these sites prevails over their once divisive symbolism. Hence, the touristic exploitation of colonial architecture illustrates a successful transformation where heritage is appropriated, repurposed, and recontextualized to serve contemporary cultural and economic objectives.

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