

Cultural sustainability in the architectural development of Viet Nam

Dr. Architect. Hoang Manh Nguyen

Architectural Faculty of Hanoi Architectural University, Vietnam

ABSTRACT: The dialectic relation between “modernity” and “local identity” is of special concern, not only to architecture but also to the survival of each nation. If one needs to become modern, he has no way except developing. Developing without keeping his identity, he will lose himself and developmental factors also. The existence and development of human kind rest upon the accompany and competition of national identities.

In recent years, the issue of realizing culture in contemporary architecture has played a crucial role in creating the identity and local features in a worldwide harsh competition. Many nations have started to review their own cultural features by carrying out studies in their “own” traditional values and principles [3]. This process has exerted influence on the production of contemporary architecture and ignited heated debates about the possible “individuality” of different local architectures rather than the “imitation” from the past.

Architecture is a synthetic of material, spiritual and behavioural culture. Having a further understanding of typical cultural factors is a vital ground to promote the traditional values in the modern architecture with the means and ways of current times. Cultural sustainability will bring about the noticeable values of a nation’s architecture against that of other nations in the region and all over the world. However, in many developing countries, the cultural sustainability is hardly preserved and in many cases, it seems like a reflection of a “melting pot” rather than one identity.

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In a study tour to some new residential areas in Ha Noi for Spanish and Italian students, a question was posed to me: Which factor in the new architecture in these newly-built living compounds characterizes the cultural identity of Viet Nam? The question is not difficult to answer; however, it raises a host of thinking amid the divergent demonstration of current architectural works in Viet Nam. I would like, in this paper, to find a solution to such a reality by illustrating a link between architecture and cultural sustainability.

1. Sustainable development:

Stemming from the common concern of the world community about a sustainable future, 1992 Summit Meeting in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil issued a joint declaration on the need of sustainable development, linking development with the sustainability in environmental and socio-economic areas.

In terms of architectural field, there arise two different ways of approaching the issue of sustainable development. The first approach is to stress emphasis on material factor, including the matter of energy, renewable resources as well as the life circle of construction works, productivity and end-consumers’ health.

The second approach is the consideration to non-material factors, to phrase in another way, the spiritual and cultural ones [1]. In the early years of the 21st century, the issue of sustainable development has been approached from cultural perspective amid the strong development of many Asian nations. A number of works and studies have stated that the architecture in different regions and provinces constitutes valuable lessons in terms of notion, behaviour and concrete solutions to the distinct natural and cultural environment in different regions.

2. Cultural sustainability in the development of architecture:

In a developed science and technology, coupled with the vigorous potentiality of industrial area, the tendency of architecture in the last 20th century is to focus on the issues of expressive language, cubes, structure and technology. In this trend, there has emerged a host of construction works in steel and glass and high technology under “internationalization” style [2].

In comparison with the past, the human need does not only lie in the matter of accommodation or utility comfort, but an appropriate cultural environment has become an indispensable requirement in today’s “flat world”.

A number of architects, therefore, have their hard say against the "internationalized style" in architecture, seeking for a proper way to illustrate the local culture and combine the functions of architecture with the natural needs of users.

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3. The issue of Viet Nam:

Entering the early years of the 21st century, Viet Nam has undergone a sudden development time with the features of contemporary era. The period of integration has an overwhelming effect on the society's development, leaving profound imprints on the general picture of national construction cause in general and architecture in particular.

Over two decades of reforms, the society has developed in almost every aspect, the needs increase and the capacity to meet the demand enhances also. Still, Vietnamese architecture, at times, is unable to get out of its previous motto "rapidity, heap, goodness, cheap". Many architectural structures are still finished with exotic details, which is not appropriate for the national natural conditions as the using quality and infrastructure are weakness, etc.

Current Vietnamese architecture, just over two decades of development and reforms, is drawn into the cyclone of meeting the urgent demands of current era and offering the quick adjustment to the needs of new type of customers. Demanding customers with the tastes of "big bosses", inappropriate management methods in construction, the lack of information technology and shallow vision are the hard barriers to the creation, inheritance and promotion of the sustainability of traditional culture in architecture.

The contemporary architecture of Viet Nam is making contributions to the development and enhancement of cultural identity. If one has no deep understanding of the national culture and the times he lives in, he cannot identify the path of finding and creating qualified works.

In order to attain cultural sustainability in Vietnamese architecture, some following recommendations should be paid attention:

a) Have an in-depth look into the root of Vietnamese architectural culture, arts and the traditional architectures of different ethnic groups in each locality in a systematic manner, by so doing to affirm the elementary characteristics for inheritance and creation.

b) In the training and designing of architecture, more attention should be paid to the history of architecture, cultural basics and meteorological geography than ever.... Objectively and synchronously analyzing the development process of metropolises and the essence of Vietnamese contemporary architecture for soon realizing the weaknesses to draw valuable lessons.

c) Emphasize the role and responsibilities of parties concerned in the formation of a construction works, including architects, investors, management authorities, project supervisors... In addition, it is necessary to promote cooperation, absorb construction knowledge and to develop a style of vivid and noticeable architecture in the world.

Viet Nam is in the integration process, heading for a prosperous future. The people, soul and style of Viet Nam have so far gained a sound ground in the eyes of worldwide friends. Hopefully, Vietnamese architecture will affirm its stand in the great flow of human kind's architecture in the foreseeable future.

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