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The Battle for Hue

By JOHN KRICH

HUE, Vietnam--Nguyen Pham Thien Huy seems a most unlikely conservationist. A cocky 25-year-old who favors faded jeans and tight T-shirts, he spent six months in prison a few years back for admitted "bar brawling."



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Luke Duggleby

Nguyen Pham Thien Huy in one of his workshops

But looking for a vocation after his release, he was hired by some friends to relocate and restore a complex of traditional wooden ancestral halls, called nha ruang, that had belonged to a wife of a 19th-century emperor. It launched a lucrative contracting career.

Today Mr. Huy has four workshops and a staff of other ex-convicts—rehabilitation through renovation—mentored by a few elder craftsmen ("still easy to find," he says). He has become a local television personality pitching "a younger generation's appreciation for our city's beautiful legacy," though these days he does more business creating reproductions of the old-style buildings than in fixing up the real things.



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Tom That Loi in his nha ruang, built by his father

On numerous leafy side streets within sight of the Citadel—one of Vietnam's best-protected monuments, though still marked with bullet holes from the war with the U.S.—rusted gates and crumbling balustrades mask lesser-known architectural trademarks of this former royal capital: the handmade, nail-less one-room nha ruang and nha vuon, elegantly landscaped garden houses built for the elite of Vietnam's Nguyen Dynasty (1802-1945). They reflect what Nguyen Xuan Hoa, director of the biennial Hue Festival, calls "a refined style of life that is the essence of Hue."

But there's not even agreement on how many remain, though all counts point to the same trend: the rapid dwindling of a once-ample heritage. When World War II broke out, there may have been as many as 20,000 nha ruang in Hue, says Nguyen Huu Thong, author of a new study of the city's architecture. As few as several hundred survive.



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Most of the world remembers Hue, a city of 330,000 on the banks of the Perfume River, as site of the Vietnam War's fiercest battle, in which U.S. troops unleashed their firepower on the Vietcong who seized its ancient battlements during the 1968 Tet

Trip Planner

Getting There

There are frequent inexpensive flights of just over one hour from Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City on Vietnam Airlines. The only international connection is currently to Danang Airport, two hours away by bus, from Singapore (via Siem Reap) on Silkair. It is possible to travel overland through Laos to Hue from Bangkok, a journey of at least two full days. A tourist visa is required for most nationals going to Vietnam.

Where to stay

All of Hue's better hotels are on the southern side of the river, across from the Citadel.

La Residence

Once home to the French governor, beautifully restored in Art-Deco style, with outstanding pool, gardens and location (around \$200; www.la-residence-hue.com).

Celadon Palace

The latest provider of five-star service, but in a rather bleak commercial area (\$120, www.celadonpalacehue.com).

Hotel Saigon Morin

A renovated 1901 hotel with superb location along the river. (\$90; www.morinhotel.com.vn)

What to do

All visitors to Hue check out the Forbidden City and at least some of the seven royal tombs (which are outside town), but the city walls and canals are also worth exploring, and the crowded Old City showcases all the energy and contradictions of modernizing Vietnam in an exceedingly tranquil, innocent setting.

Kim Long, a neighborhood just west of the city walls, is the best place to find nha vuon. Across the river, a stroll along the tree-lined riverfront features French mansions and the former school of Ho Chi Minh.

What to eat

Hue is famed for the vestiges of imperial cuisine and pancakes like the stuffed banh xeo and steamed banh beo; another specialty is rice cooked with Perfume River mussels. Some genuine Hue restaurants, like the new **Hoang Vien** (22 Han Thuyen St., Tel. 84-54-359-9779) can be found in restored houses.

World Heritage site in 1993, international aid has financed the clearing of some illegal buildings and care (however uneven and seemingly haphazard) for the Forbidden City and outlying royal tombs, but Mr. Schuttenbelt says much remains undone: "Hue's 60 protected historic sites have yet to be centrally mapped, and the next 15-year plan for conserving the city, along with limits on demolition of heritage, has been delayed and remain unapproved."

While development here isn't yet the boom it is in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi or nearby Danang, Hue nonetheless shows the strains of unchecked urbanization. By some estimates, land prices have tripled in the past several years. Crowded with 100,000 people, the confines of the imperial city walls have sprouted an unsightly hodgepodge of construction.

Offensive. Now the remaining symbols of peaceful, contemplative life in the country's cultural capital face a fresh threat: development.

Today, a traditional Hue home is likely to turn up as a transplant in Ho Chi Minh City or Hanoi, serving as a restaurant or nightclub in front of a more modern structure, or as rooftop gazebo atop one. (The first ones that Mr. Huy restored were for gift shops, though they came from the outskirts of Hue into the city.) While this does keep the historical buildings intact, Hue officials don't consider it an ideal solution. Where other places in Asia worry about a "brain drain," they speak of a phenomenon that translates roughly as a "house drain."

Under sloping tile roofs (the tiles now often loose), the interiors of the nha ruong are divided by rows of sturdy jackfruit-wood columns and intricately carved braces that demarcate symmetrical vestibules crammed with ancestral photos and altars.

But a look inside one shows dilapidation, with bare light bulbs and linoleum replacing lanterns and terra-cotta floors. The main resident, Le Chi Nghe, is a street-food vendor who hardly has funds for restoration, hasn't been informed of numerous foreign preservation projects and is too suspicious of the government to apply for its loans. Besides, as is often the case, the other owners are spread around the globe, part of Vietnam's postwar diaspora.

"It would bring shame on us to sell this place of our ancestors, but to agree how to repair it is too big a headache," he says. Despite the common belief that selling is a betrayal of ancestral spirits, owners are more tempted to do so: The value of an intact nha ruong has increased 100-fold over the past decade, according to experts, and the cost of repair is likewise rising.

And for those who actually live in them, selling can be a chance to move out of homes that seem more suited to altars and offerings than air-conditioning, plumbing or privacy.

"Vietnam is moving from country to city at a quicker pace than any other place on earth," says Paul Schuttenbelt of Urban Solutions, a Dutch nongovernmental organization advising the government's undermanned Hue Monuments Conservation Centre. Since Unesco declared the city's imperial monuments a

Across the river, French colonial villas are being bulldozed and tree-cloaked streets are being widened for shopping malls and office blocks, while luxury hotels are flouting height limits recommended to maintain the royal palace's original sight lines.

But no element of Hue's heritage is more vulnerable than the scattered and unsupervised nha ruang—which Mr. Hoa, the cultural festival's director, declares "no less important than the Citadel and the tombs," explaining that the style dates to the 16th century.

As for the nha vuon, often similar but set on plots measuring up to 2,400 square yards and studded with lotus ponds, herbal plantings and decorative barriers, they "are organs in the cultural body of Hue," says the head of the province's Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Phan Tien Dzung. "They are like a small version of the royal palace for each family, and they display a model of harmony between humans and the natural environment."

Vietnam's law dividing inheritance equally among heirs—enacted to uphold the rights of women—generally works against the interests of preservation. Some garden houses' large lots have been subdivided into tiny areas, often leading to the construction of new concrete houses beside the nha vuon. But the divided ownership can also work to preservationists' advantage, Mr. Schuttenbelt says: "The lack of consensus among many relatives has also helped keep many of these houses standing."

An ambitious Ford Foundation program launched a decade ago in conjunction with Hue Heritage House, an organization founded under Unesco's auspices, aimed to encourage preservation by providing repair manuals and "raising awareness of the homes' values," recounts program director Michael DiGregorio. But it foundered in the face of inheritance and subdivision issues and ran out of funding with barely a single structure saved.

More successful was a smaller-scale program that Hue's sister city of Lille, France, began the same year. It returned some 15 old Hue houses to pristine condition, walls repainted in original ocean blue, termites checked and foundations raised to cope with frequent floods. Plaques on them attest to the support of the "Sénat du France."

In return, residents merely had to pledge to refrain from selling the homes for a profit. They weren't required to open them to visitors, though many do. The most often displayed is Ngoc Son, a former retreat of a princess now inhabited in messily archive-crammed fashion by Hue's leading historian, Phan Thuan An.



Luke Duggleby for The Wall Street Journal

Ngoc Son, formerly a retreat for a princess and now a home for a historian, was restored with funding from the French senate.



In Kim Long, a green area just beyond the city walls that was the favored neighborhood of scholars and senior government officials, some of the city's biggest and best-preserved garden houses are readily open for view—for a "donation" of 50,000 dong (\$2.60) to the aging residents. A quick survey reveals these were restored by owners themselves, too proud to relinquish the abodes of forebears and too wary of accepting public funds.

"We were afraid the government would take it away from us," admitted one proud garden-house resident, Pham Huu Dien, 83.

Dr. Dzung, the province's culture chief, dismisses the idea that people are suspicious of his department and says Vietnam now has enough public funds to carry out an effective loan program. "The law says these are historic relics, and the central government should provide a bonus to those who conserve," he declares. Asked to name any new initiatives for protecting Hue's most-historic houses, though, he cites only a proposed change in taxes on garden houses' unused land area.

Dr. Dzung readily says the fate of most old houses will be determined by "the individual economics of property owners"—an interesting perspective for a communist official—and heartily

[View Full Image](#) Luke Duggleby for The Wall Street Journal
The gateway to the traditional nha ruang An Hien, in the Kim Long district



[View Full Image](#) Luke Duggleby for The Wall Street Journal
Inside An Hien

endorses the growing use of refurbished nha ruang for restaurants, performance spaces, tea houses, souvenir shops and art galleries where "cultural life can be diversified while making money."

He boasts of policies to keep new construction inside the city walls "harmonious, in designated colors and under 8.5 meters in height," but the the most casual observation shows they're widely ignored. And when it comes to helping promote tourism by organizing more tours of Hue's remarkable residential architecture, he concedes, "We have failed so far to make this proper linkage."

That could be a crucial factor. Tourism is a big part of the region's economy, and Hue's visitor numbers have slipped as those for Central Vietnam's other World Heritage site, the port of Hoi An—now a boutique-laden tourist zoo—have risen. With

as many as 40 resorts planned along Danang's adjoining China Beach, Hue faces more challenges.

"World Heritage sites either adapt as living places or become tourist museums," says Urban Solutions head Mr. Schutzenbelt. His advice to Hue is to allow modern adaptations of its architecture while curbing overt commercialization, billboards and big hotels.

As for the Monuments Conservation Centre, its director, Phung Phu, has proposed expanding buffer zones meant to keep modern structures and signs from encroaching on monuments, tougher height limits and an effort to make Hue "a model eco city." He vows, "We must have new policies that meet the challenge of development." But no part of his next master plan has been approved.



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Ton That Sa, in his pajamas, bids welcome to his nha ruang.

More than any NGO or government initiative, the hope for Hue's old houses may lie with self-appointed saviors like the youthful Mr. Huy—who says he shares "a natural appreciation for gardens with all Hue people." (His mother fostered it by bringing him "architecture books for me to study while I was in prison.")

"The government talks a lot but it's ordinary people who are showing much greater care for these houses than five years ago," says the crusading ex-convict, adding, "there are not many left and we don't want the most precious part of our culture to vanish."

—John Krich is a writer based in Bangkok.

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