Changes and Factors Influencing the Transformation of French Colonial Building in Vientiane

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the factors of French Colonial building transformation and adaptation to suit with globalization trend in Vientiane nowadays. This study addresses out the significance of historic buildings and French Colonial during 30 years under the rule of France from observation of a colonial architecture in Laos. The study took place in Vientiane which was the most notable to its French architecture from 19th – 20th century. More than 200 colonial buildings registered to be a heritage site for conservation. Restoration have become increasingly common as the authorities have realized the historical value of this unique architectural legacy. According to the growth of socio-economic in this area, many colonial buildings have been changed their original building functions for several purposes. Meanwhile, to find appropriate new functions, various factors need to be considered which would affect the long term change.

Factors influencing the transformation of French Colonial Building were studied with focuses on office buildings as well as residential buildings in Vientiane to identify each type of the buildings from the previous and current purposes. Furthermore, this study focused on the investigation of the influential factors by gathering information and reviewing literatures on the conservation theory as well as by analyzing the process of changes, the basic spatial formations, elements and components, especially to find out the factors of such transformation. The study reveals that the transformation of the French Colonial building is subject to not just one single factors but to a numbers of factors such as the development pressure, land use, law and regulation, economy and spatial aspect factors all of which play important roles on these changes.

Key Words: colonial architecture, influence, heritage values, transformation, conservation

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INTRODUCTION

During the French Colonial era, Laos was colonized by France since 1893. French architecture elements were integrated into Lao architecture and modified to suit with the climate (hot and humid). The French Colonial style has been affecting the architecture of several major towns and cities including Vientiane. During 30 years under French ruling, Vientiane’s most notable to its French influence is its architecture. A number of large-scale construction projects were implemented, including the Bureau de la Résidence (In 1915, now is the offices of the Ministry of Information and Culture), the Lycée Auguste Pavie (In 1920, now is part of the School of Medicine), the Hotel du Commissariat (In 1925, now is the Lao National Museum), etc. Many excellent French Colonial architecture examples can still be seen today in older parts of town, along the Mekong riverside.

By more than 200 colonial buildings registered to be heritage sites for conservation (In 2000 by Institute of Urban Planning, Ministry of Public works and Transportation), restoration has become increasingly common as the authorities have realized the historical value of this unique architectural legacy. There were only two types of French Colonial buildings constructed during the colonial era: office buildings and residences. The French Colonial architectural legacy consists of two-story brick and wood structure, which are the main components with tile roofs, wooden shuttered doors and windows, and some Art Deco decorations with mortar materials, high ceilings, thick-walled bearing structures.

Figure 1 Example of French Colonial building in Vientiane capital city.
In discussing historical buildings or French Colonial buildings in Laos, a number of local and foreign researchers have pointed out different issues, these studies mostly focus on the influences and factors causing transformation of French Colonial architecture not only on the office building but also on the residential building. Some studies had mentioned about the approaches to conserve the French Colonial buildings (In Vanmany’s master thesis, the preservation of French Colonial building in old wall area Vientiane capital city, 2011). Meanwhile, there are limited numbers of studies which directly address the issue on the criteria for determining appropriate concepts, functions and requirements to conserve historic buildings.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Conducted by observation on French Colonial architecture in Laos especially in Vientiane Capital city from 19-20th century, this research’s literature would span from the background of the French Colonial period, the impacts and its influences to the buildings in Vientiane. Therefore, this study would help to illustrate the relationship between the architectural development and the significance of colonial buildings. This study reviewed the design of the French Colonial architecture buildings through the spatial design and architectural elements. The study was conducted by identifying not only the literature reviews, but also data collections, case studies analysis, land use, as well as law and regulations of historical buildings and related charters

HISTORY OF FRENCH COLONIAL BUILDING IN LAOS

In studies about the French Colonial architecture in Vientiane, there were only two types of French Colonial buildings which are office buildings and residential buildings. The French Colonial architectural legacy consists of two-story brick and stucco, the thick walled structures were modified with balconies and verandahs. The style was modified according to the traditional art, culture, and tropical climate of Laos. Under the rule of French colonization, France introduced many kinds of building innovations to Lao architecture, especially to the traditional Lao house. The evolution was made in terms of factors such as materials, structural systems, some western decoration styles, utilized modern materials mixed with local materials and integrated traditional form with western style.

From 1893 - 1953 Laos was colonized by France. At the same period, modern architecture in Europe was growing rapidly and also spreading its influences throughout the world. During the French ruling, French architecture elements have infiltrated Laotian traditional architecture in Vientiane and Luang Prabang provinces and were adapted for use with the climate in tropical countries, which was a combination between Lao Architecture and French Colonial Architecture. This architectural combination had become features of the architecture unique and valuable to Laos cities which continues to be protected until nowadays.
France made modest impacts on the architecture of several cities and towns including Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Thakhek, Savannakhet, Salavan and Champasak provinces. In Vientiane, many excellent French Colonial architecture examples can still be seen today mostly in historic part of towns. Vientiane city has been developing along Mekong River since 1917 as a result of the fact that the socio-economic situation was rapidly growth. The city has been expanded and developed parallel with Mekong River (Figure 2). Nowadays, more than 200 colonial buildings in the historic part of Vientiane, which has been built during 1960 - 1983 have been registered to be heritage sites for conservation and restoration. The task is responsible under the Laos government bodies such as the Urban Research Institute, Ministry of Public Works and Transport (Figure 3).

In 2000, the importance of the cultural values still continues. Department of Museums and Ancients has assigned the responsibility in surveying and registration of the historic buildings which still preserve their both historical and architectural values in historic part of Vientiane for example: Laos traditional residential, French Colonial residential and office buildings, religious buildings, towns, to the Urban Research Institute, Ministry of Public Works and Transport. The survey were conducted by identifying the age of the buildings, cultures, and memories. In 2001 Laos government announced the historic part of Vientiane to become the national heritage preservation area. Thus, restoration has become increasingly common in Vientiane. Concepts of preservation is becoming the norm and regulations rather than demolition.
FRENCH COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE CHARACTERISTICS

Through observation of pictures, plans and many documents, most of the French Colonial buildings were often built in the large land, surrounded by many huge trees, has a spacious yard around the building encircled by the brick blowhole walls. It has been found that two-story buildings with rectangular shape, normally have downstairs and upstairs shaped differently. In some buildings, the patterns of the main entrances of the building were often constructed with the stucco work above the entrances with large splendid scale. The upstairs often provide long enclosed corridors.

TRANSFORMATION ANALYSIS

The factors affecting the transformation of French Colonial buildings in Vientiane city could be determined to included not just one single factors, but a number of factors. All of these factors can be divided into 3 categories which are development pressure (globalization), economic aspects, and social aspects, which play important roles of all the changes.

1. Development pressure (globalization)

The development pressure or globalization played more important role than other factors. Most French Colonial buildings, which are mostly used as government office buildings, are located in Vientiane conservation area today. Laos’s government plans to relocate these government office buildings to the city’s outer zone (Land use plan 2010-2030). In accordance with the city’s plan, the French Colonial office building tend to be converted to other functions and purposes such as restaurants, and boutique hotels. Those historical colonial buildings might be uninhabited and unused. Therefore, there would be a room for the domestic and foreign investors to develop further. Many
measures including the relaxation of visa, infrastructure improvement have been applied to boost the tourism sector. But one of the most important measures is the foreign investment. Laos allows foreign investors in constructing tourism facilities such as hotels, guesthouses, resorts, restaurants, in order to improve quality and standard of service particularly in Vientiane capital. According to above reasons, the colonial buildings in this area would be possible to transform into several functions and purposes, On the other hand, for the purpose of developing Laos tourism sector, Laos government allows investors to renovate the lands and buildings in Laos especially in Vientiane capital to construct tourism facilities but it must be performed under the local regulations. Particularly, historical and colonial buildings are not allowed to be demolished. Only renovation activities are allowed in order to conserve historical values and heritage of Laos.

![Figure 4 French Colonial office building and shophouses transformation](image)

2. Economy

The second factor is economy, many colonial buildings in the conservation area of Vientiane had been converted mostly for commercial purposes such as restaurants, shops, guesthouses, hotels, and coffee shops. The Laos People's Democratic Republic (Laos PDR) opened the country to international tourist in 1989. Since then, the tourism industry has developed rapidly in order to cope with number of tourists which significantly growing annually. In the traditional period, Laotian in Mekong river area used to live in the traditional society. According to the demand of tourism in this conservation area, local residents can have benefits from their residences by converting them into commercial spaces such as souvenir shops, tailoring shops, art galleries. Incoming of these commercial spaces could have many negative impacts certainly, likewise, conversion of their old colonial houses into commercial purposes has become a cost of degrading the integrity of heritage asset as well, as family residency has been decreased. People’s way of life in these building was radically changed from living space to tourist facilities as the service sectors that lack in life and interest. The historical houses owners have to move to peripheral area to live because of the high living cost in this high commercial area, now it is at risk of descending their Vientiane lifestyle. Because of the tourism industry is growing and highly affecting to the transformation, the transformation from residential or office to commercial activities would be possible depending on the physical layout of the plans, in fact, because of a lack of
most suitable space for such activities such as roof top, veranda or courtyard. Nevertheless, semi-private spaces such as corridors and bedrooms are comprehensively used instead.

3. Social aspect

Social aspect is the last factor of the transformation. This factor does not play a significant role according to the changing from the traditional to the contemporary lifestyle. Religion is one of the major factors which guides the formation of house, a house is more than a structure surrounded by things. The form and functions are truly influenced by the relationship of the culture and its environment according to the resident backgrounds in terms of housing experiences and religion. Most people who lives in Vientiane are Buddhist, therefore, social aspects are derived from the contexts of Buddhism, which influenced the formation of the colonial houses.

CONCLUSION

The French Colonial building transformation in Vientiane capital city has been operated to facilitate new functions, space uses, commercial and various purposes. In the traditional period, building’s forms were suitable with the needs of people. However, in this contemporary period, building’s form and space were not designed in concordance with people’s current lifestyle. Most owners of French Colonial houses in Vientiane have converted their houses to serve the tourism business according to economic growth, government development plan and the subsequent increase in the cost of living nowadays.

This research suggests the transformation factors of the French Colonial buildings which are development pressure, economy aspect factors, and social aspect factors. The transformation is based on the change of building function, building form and facade, and building structure. The transformation influences of functions converted from the office to commercial purposes using the ground floors and the upper floors as semi-private spaces, providing specific spatial types of functioning. The transformation of building form and facade is a combination of the old colonial buildings and modern construction in accordance with the new lifestyle, new materials, climate conditions, political conditions and the owner’s needs. The transformation of building structure was converting from the old building...
material wood and brick with the traditional construction style to the static and permanent construction: "brick, cement and steel", which is more durable and could be easily fits the needs of the occupants.

Among those changes, to protect against the loss of this unique colonial style characteristic, the owners could not transform their colonial building to suit all their needs without following the urban heritage conservation regulations in order to preserve the historical, cultural and heritage values. In addition, in the historic part of Vientiane, more than 200 colonial buildings were registered to heritage list for conservation and restoration. Laos government also regulates several protections and management requirements such as: the protection of the monuments and religious buildings, law on urban heritage protection, law on national heritage enacted in 2005, the articles, provisions, which play important roles to ensure the proper conservation of the heritage. The regulations on the registered colonial buildings should consider several issues on conservation in terms of historical and cultural values, an appropriate use of new function or adaptation, the use of appropriate materials, the complexity, sensitivity and technical consistency of the preservation methodology, as well as the land use, policy, and building control. The conservation should prevent changes that might occur to their original conditions, the original character of the items of heritage shall be maintained (ICOMOS Burra Charter, 2013). On the other hand, non-registered colonial buildings can be not only modified in relation to the needs of residents but also based on the law and regulation of particular land area.

REFERENCES

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