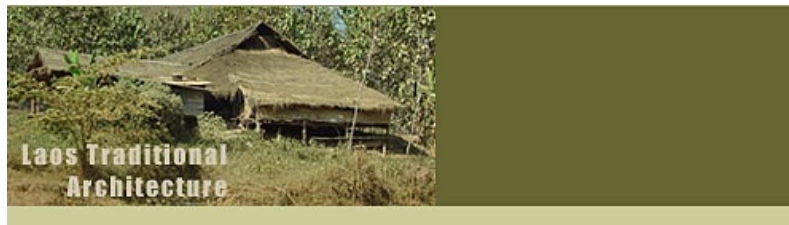


**Notes on the Anonymous Architecture of Laos In 2004:**  
 The Rural Architecture of Northwestern Laos,  
 The Architecture of the Temple  
 and that of the City of Vientiane



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Traditional building languages and materials are neglected in many rural areas due to economic pressures, yet, paradoxically, they are *iconized* in the city. The temple, for its part, obeys a totally different logic, externally appearing almost unalterable, even when new ones are built everyday. As for the city of Vientiane, it is today an appealing architectural collage that adds together tradition recalled by the French with Le Corbusier evoked by the Russian.

The different types in rural architecture in Northwestern Laos<sup>1</sup>, across the road between Vientiane and Luang Prabang can be explained as variations in the classic theme of the two-slope roof (figs. 1 to 11).<sup>2-3</sup> Those variations occur in three main ways: varying the length of the roof in one of its sides (2), closing one or two endings with differently shaped roofs (3 to 8) or adjoining a second two-slope roof structure (9 to 11).<sup>4</sup> What such modifications probably express is a typical concern shared by other wood-building rural communities in the world: how to make additions to the pre-existent structure to accommodate more people when the family grows?



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

Just as it happens in many other places, most of these types are undergoing today a process of neglect. Their progressive abandonment is connected to the fact that more and more rural settlers are moving into the city in the search of better opportunities (Vientiane's Institute of Urban Research estimates that the 500,000 people city will grow twice in ten years) or are affected by resettlement programs such as the ongoing Nam Theun 2 Hydroelectric Project, that is moving 1,030 families from the Nakai Plateau area to 14 new founded villages (Nam Theun 2004). Once in the urban setting, settlers seem to try to reproduce their type (probably since it is the one they know to build) using the materials they can find. That is how local types of distant areas can be seen for a while in the urban new settlements. After that first effort, the types start suffering modifications because of the use of other materials (fig. 15), simpler forms and less sophisticated structures, until they are finally unrecognizable.



Fig. 12. Double-roofed Lao Loum type.



Fig. 13. Lao Soung.



Fig. 14. Lao Theung.



Fig. 15. In the slums of Vientiane.

A curious paradox is that while in the route of progressive abandonment in the real world, at the same time the types appear often romanticized in the urban imaginary. In fact, they are so present in people's minds that it is not infrequent to hear the expressions "traditional" and "style" (saying "the traditional Vientiane style," for example) used by everyone from scholars to commoners when referring to housing.

If, when migrating to the city, the farmers do not keep for too long the types expressing their ethnic affiliation or origin, when it comes to urban wealthy individuals or institutions they do conserve them, although in a *recycled* fashion. Traditional volumes are evoked, yet in different, luxurious and durable materials (figs. 16, 17, 19). The carvings in the prolongation of the gable edgings or in the eaves<sup>5</sup> become plain ornaments and no longer declare the nobility rank of those living inside (fig 18). This sort of iconization

could be regarded as a genuine local phenomenon of *post-modernization* of the vernacular Southeast Asian architecture.



Fig. 16. Fashioning the type in urban architecture.



Fig. 17. Again.



Fig. 18. Detail.



Fig. 19. And again...

Not only in the urban building itself is the traditional type recalled. Surprisingly, it also appears re-presented in many other forms in the urban landscape in Vientiane, including small scale reproductions of the most representative rural types for sale as handicrafts (fig. 20), paintings of the archetypical Lao Soung house in hotels and reproductions of that house's paintings in restaurants (fig. 21), in the Tuk Tuks (motor-cabs) (fig. 22) and amazingly, in the architecture itself, in the form of murals that decorate concrete and brick modern hotels (fig. 23).



Fig. 20. Handicrafts depicting the Lao Loum type.



Fig. 21. Reproduction in a restaurant.



Fig. 22. The house in the Tuk-Tuks...



Fig. 23. ...And in a hotel.

Why is this? Laos is a country that carries with it a long history of occupations, having been invaded successively over the time span of two centuries by the Thai, the French and the Japanese, before finally becoming independent, yet not completely stable, in 1949. The rural architecture, no matters if existing or if only remaining as an ideal,

serves well the purpose of affirming a national identity.<sup>6</sup> It is fair to proudly use it as one of the icons in the constructing of the image of an autonomous, self-run nation. However, the idealization and further commodification of the rural types in the forms mentioned could miss the fact that their vanishing in real life is actually speaking for the crisis of the 40% poor in Laos.

### The Temple

Despite Westerner's proneness to imagine it as belonging to an unreal (and) inscrutable world, the Buddhist temple operates in the Laos architectural landscape just as the catholic church does in its venue. There are temples everywhere, in every neighborhood. The temple gives the name to the neighborhood (fig. 25), so in that way it operates as a key unit in the administrative organization. The temple differs from the church, however, in that it is an "urban" entity in itself, rather than an isolated building (fig. 26). It consists in actuality of several buildings, including the big temple, smaller shrines, houses for the monks, seats, functioning like a diminutive walled city, the size of a block.



Fig. 24. Building in a temple complex.



Fig. 25. Name of the neighborhood in temple gate.



Fig. 26. Temple as an urban center.

However, the temple seems to follow a totally different logic than the domestic architecture in the Laos vernacular context.<sup>7</sup> Temples are still built day after day (fig. 27), and they observe such formal continuity that the untrained eye could be fooled by finding the newest built ones to be virtually indistinguishable from the 16th century oldest ones (figs. 28, 29). In short, if the rural house type mutates and tends to be



Fig. 27. Temple in building process.



Fig. 28. Old temple...



Fig. 29. New temple...



Fig. 30. The temple in the currency.

scarce, the temple seems perpetual and is still frequently built.<sup>8</sup>

Something else makes the temple and the house opposite in their logic. It is the relationship they both maintain not only in terms of form but, most importantly,<sup>9</sup> in the quality of materials, the temple having much higher standards. The most common case in rural areas is that temples are in masonry, brick tiles and preciously painted, while houses around are in wood, palm thatch and not painted at all. Simplistically depicted, in general, if the temple looks rich, the village looks poor (figs. 31-33).

How is this striking contrast explained? There are at least two reasons. The first could be the importance that Buddhism poses in being humble, living a simple life and staying in contact with nature. Rural villages express that: houses never look more opulent than the temple. Their technology is simple and, in the most classic cases, they are made of natural materials such as palm, bamboo and woods while being located in environmentally suggestive settings.



Fig. 31. Roof in the temple...



Fig. 32. ...Roof in the house.



Fig. 33. Temple and village in context.

A second reason could be related to socio-historical causes. Although community and its temple are inextricably linked at a social level (community constantly visits the temple, they donate money for its maintenance, they feed the monks...) such an evident formal contrast between temple and houses must also refer to old dated connections between Buddhist architecture and the architecture of the nobility.<sup>10</sup>

Contrasting this fact with the idea that the temple form must have been taken from farmers' bamboo houses, they match under the defensible argument that, historically speaking, in the temple the form comes from the poor, whereas the put in scene of that form (the materials and the fact of being separated from its context) comes from the rich.<sup>11</sup>

## A note about the urban landscape of Vientiane

We could venture to say Vientiane is a vernacular city per se, a city of mostly houses that reflect the different historical stages the country of Laos has went through, with the tallest buildings having no more than seven stories.

### - Temples.

As it was said, temples are independent characters on their own.

### - "Traditional Vientiane style."

A few beautiful examples of another time rural-base Vientiane still remain.

### - French Colonial Vernacular.

French made many interesting adaptations of the local types in the times of the colony.

### - Le Corbusian Modern.

Built customarily during the times of the USSR's backing of the communist Laos regime (Nadya Nilina, personal communication, January 2004).

### - National Postmodern.

A *sort-of* local version of critical regionalism.

### - Basic dwelling.

Houses in slums are made by reusing whatever material and using whichever technology is available. They differ little from essential emergency dwellings anywhere else.

### - Modern (unmarked) houses.

As they are in many places in the third world, built between the 1960s and the 1970s, and formally not so distinctive of a place or cultural affiliation.

### - Other.

Old urban architecture in Vientiane made in wood.

Shop houses.

Unidentified types with features that remind Japanese or Chinese decorations.



Fig. 34. Religious building.



Fig. 35. Traditional Vientiane type.



Fig. 36. French Colonial.



Fig. 37. Le Corbusian.



Fig. 38. National postmodern.



Fig. 39. Slum.



Fig. 40. Modern unmarked.



Fig. 41. Old urban.



Fig. 42. Shop house.



Fig. 43. Japanese features?



Fig. 44. Chinese features?

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The types, however, are not strictly confined to Laos. For instance, the Lao Loum double-roofed house (fig. 12 and documented by Clément-Charpentier in Oliver 1997, 2:1045) is typical of the Lao ethnic group, who extends to, and is even more numerous in, Northeastern Thailand, where they receive the name *Lao Isan*. The Lao Soung house, on the other hand, is characteristic of a group whose settlements spread around Northern Laos and also Vietnam, Thailand and China. Finally, although the Lao Theung are probably the original inhabitants of Laos, they have also expanded to neighboring countries.

<sup>2</sup> Roonrakwit, Patama, in Oliver (1997, 2:1060-61): “[Before 1257 t]he A-frame shape of the roof was the normal style of Southeast Asian houses.”

<sup>3</sup> Note that this is a generalization since these types are the product of different ethnic groups and hence obey independent historic events. However, it still makes sense, since they all are the result of the adaptation of these populations as a whole to the particular environmental conditions of the area.

<sup>4</sup> Sophie Clément-Charpentier (Oliver 1997, 2:1046) proposes a different way to classify Southeastern Asian types. She divides them in three groups that are: houses supported by piles (which would include Lao Loum), those that have the floor on the soil level (including Lao Soung) and, much more scarce and not studied in this paper (nor in Oliver’s encyclopedia), those that float on water (i.e. floating houses near Bangkok).

<sup>5</sup> These are characteristic of some house types not featured here, and that are, very likely, mostly urban.

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly enough, the Buddhist temple appears featured in Laos’ highest and newest bank note, the 20,000 Kips bill released on May 2002 (see fig. 30).

<sup>7</sup> This is still particularly noticeable in small villages.

<sup>8</sup> However, the temple itself must also have been the result of a mutation. Its external contour, especially considering its distinctive roof in a double concavity, very likely follows vernacular forms originating from bamboo centuries ago not necessarily in Laos. In fact, a house made in bamboo and straw is cited as the origin of several outstanding Buddhist buildings as the Shinto and the Izumo shrines in Japan (Soper 1942, 7,8 and illustration following page 330).

<sup>9</sup> It has been a historical convention in most religious beliefs that the form of the temple has to be different than that of the plain house. In consequence, it will not detail this obvious aspect.

<sup>10</sup> The layout of the Chinese Buddhist temple follows the “plans characteristic of large private homes and the imperial capital cities.” (Jeffrey F. Meyer in Lyle 1992, 71-73). In India, the stupa form was borrowed from a pre-Buddhist object to be dedicated to great rulers. Buddha himself is mentioned to have said that a monument of that type had to be erected at the crossroads “to the king of kings” (Govinda 1976, 3). In Japan, Buddhism was introduced in 552 A.D. as a diplomatic present from the King of Korean Pekkche to the Emperor (Soper 1942, 1), the offering including a sculpture, some books and a memorial promoting the advantages of diffusing the religion. In a second present, a temple architect was also added (p. 2).

<sup>11</sup> The walls that separate the temple from the neighborhood, however, are explained in the Buddhist tradition in mere symbolic terms as obeying to the separation between sacred and profane (Govinda 1976, 7). Their function, indeed, is that of “protecting and excluding evil spirits and the unworthy... [O]utside the walls are the profane realms of the dead, ghosts, *preṭas*, hell beings, animals and worldly humans.” (Jeffrey F. Meyer in Lyle 1992, 78). Placing them along with ghosts and animals, symbolism, as it can be noticed, does not leave the commoners in a good position either.

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