CONSERVATION OF FRENCH COLONIAL STREET ROW-HOUSES WITH EXCEPTIONAL OR REMARKABLE VALUES IN HANOI

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Summary: Colonial street row-houses form part of the French architecture in Hanoi during the French domination (1873 - 1954). Some of these houses are really valuable. They can be found in many streets throughout the two French quarters. Nguyen Thai Hoc street (Ba Dinh district) and Hue street (Hai Ba Trung district) are selected as two case studies. In order to assess the values of French colonial street row-houses accurately and completely, apart from the consideration of the outstanding architectural characteristics of these buildings, there should be a comprehensive range of rating criteria and it is possible to make a reference to the relevant rating system previously applied to French villas in Hanoi with a certain number of modifications in the marking scale. The heritage conservation will then be carried out based on storey-by-storey and development-oriented conservation. The other factors, such as the size and colour of an adversiting board and where to put outdoor electronic equipment in the façade, will also be discussed because they have a certain influence on the result of heritage conservation work as far as urban aesthetics is concerned.

Keywords: French colonial street-row house; shop-house; heritage conservation; rating criteria and marking system.

1. Introduction

The first French colonial street row-houses were constructed in Hanoi nearly 100 years ago and they formed an integral part of the French colonial heritage assets in the capital city. Most of these houses were shop-houses, because they were built for Vietnamese traders and their families to live and run business activities at home. In the development history of shop-houses, the two main functions remain unchanged. However, in the open market economy and under the impact of rapid urbanisation over the last 20 years, French colonial shop-houses have negatively transformed. The harmony within each shop-house as well as between shop-houses in one street has been either partially spoilt or completely broken. As the front part of a house, the shop has undergone the greatest change. Among the French colonial street row-houses initially built for living purpose only and owned by Vietnamese officials working in the French administrative systems, many have been turned into commercial houses, either family shop-houses or houses for rent, such as shops, services or representative offices, etc. since the early 1990s.

This paper will focus on French colonial shop-houses only, because they are actually encountering more problems than the remaining part specified as "non-commercial houses" in the general term "French colonial street row-houses". Unlike French villas and public buildings, French colonial shop-houses have not been well documented or properly conserved so far. They have not yet been systematically evaluated or classified either as the first step towards heritage conservation.

The French colonial shop-houses in Hanoi that are still well kept are quite diverse in styles: neo-classical, regional French, Art-Deco and Art-Nouveau architecture, etc. Some of these houses are exceptionally or remarkably valuable, because they are either extremely rare or really impressive in terms of built form and decoration. Most of them are two storeys in height and still remain original. They really need to be conserved under close supervision of heritage experts and strict management of competent authorities, so that they will not be deteriorated or rebuilt as the previous cases that always caused great concern of the heritage scholars and the public. The conservation work should be done with regard to cultural, historical and architectural values of a

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heritage building as well as other factors, for example location, structure and current state of that house in order to find out an appropriate conservation solution. All these factors should be put together in one table that may be used for assessment. Apart from the point of view in which conservation could be integrated with development, it is essential to pay due attention to the other aspects of the heritage conservation issue. In general, depopulation helps to enhance the quality and effectiveness of the conservation of heritage buildings in urban housing sector. The interior design of a valuable French colonial shop-house may be properly changed in order to meet the new demand of the house owner(s) in modern city life while the exterior parts, especially the façade, must be kept intact as best as possible.

2. Objective and methods of research

The first and foremost objective of research is not only to conserve heritage buildings but also to promote them based on their own values and in view of suitable (and sustainable) development. That means "residence" should not be separated from "commerce/business". In other words, a balance between "shop" and "house" must be secured, so that the new concept can work well in reality and be accepted by the residents.

The four research methods to be used in this paper are briefly described below:

- Survey: Using notes, drawings and pictures taken from the major two surveys in two conservation projects conducted with the National University of Civil Engineering's Institute of Urban Planning and Architecture in partnership with Hanoi City Department of Urban Planning and Architecture in 2010 - 2012, together with data from a self-study of the author in 2014 - 2015.

- Analysis: Highlighting the remarkable characteristics of French colonial shop-houses and various factors that should be considered for heritage conservation and development purpose.

- Reference: Making use of previous research outcomes, including a rating system applicable to French colonial villas, for French colonial shop-houses.

- Case study: Developing a practical conservation-in-development concept for a typical French colonial shop-house pattern with special values drawn from numerous case studies that have been selected for research.

3. French colonial shop-houses in Hue street and Nguyen Thai Hoc street

Nguyen Thai Hoc street (rue Duvilier before 1954) and Hue street (formerly rue de Hue) are selected for survey and research. They were two typical commercial streets in Hanoi from the colonial time, located in West French quarter and South French quarter (Ba Dinh district and Hai Ba Trung district today, respectively). In the open market economy, the business activities here continue to be flourishing. Both streets have a larger number of French colonial shop-houses and the shop-houses stand in longer rows than elsewhere. Furthermore, some of the colonial shop-houses here have beautiful and even rare façade decorations.

Nguyen Thai Hoc street is situated in the former West French quarter, where a combination of French colonial villas and shop-houses can still be found: 43 French colonial villas and 27 French colonial shop-houses (10 on even house number side and 17 on odd number side) as of July 2016. There are six rows of French colonial shop-houses with three to six consecutive units per row. Roughly by observation, the most outstanding among them are houses no. 50, 62, 95A, 95B, 97A, 97B, 99, 124, 126, 125, 127, 129, 142, 144, 146 and 148. The lower façades (shops or service rooms) have all been renovated to a certain degree whereas the upper façades remain original, although some small decorative details made of mortar that came off or cracked after a long time in use have been retouched and several front walls have been repainted. Actually, such modifications do not affect so much the originality of these houses [3].

Figure 1. The two French Quarters in Hanoi as of 1943 with two typical streets in terms of French colonial shop-houses [1]

a. Houses no. 125, 127, 129

b. House no. 62

c. Upper façade of house no. 95A

d. Upper façades of houses no. 97A, 97B

Figure 2. Typical French colonial shop-houses in Nguyen Thai Hoc street [3]

Hue street is located in the former South French quarter. As of July 2016, there are 84 colonial shop-houses remaining: 64 on the even house number side and 20 on the odd house number side. In total, 10 rows with at least three and at most nine consecutive units can be found. By observation, the most noticeable among them are houses no. 20, 56B, 58A, 58B, 240, 242, 244, 262, 276, 290, 292 and 294 [3].

a. Houses no. 60, 58, 56D

b. House no. 262

c. Upper façade of house no. 58

d. Upper façade of house no. 56D

Figure 3. Typical French colonial shop-houses in Hue street [3]

4. Problems to be solved

The biggest problem for many French colonial shop-houses in Hanoi to cope with is the deterioration or degradation as a consequence of poor conservation. Many houses have not been regularly maintained or properly restored. Some have even been destroyed or reconstructed in modern architectural styles. Obviously in most cases, the shops are spontaneously renovated without making reference to experts in French colonial architecture. These changes are regarded as inevitable in the booming market economy. All shop-houses, including the French colonial ones, continue to be extremely lucrative as family-owned shops or offices for rent. Most of the shops have been renovated with modern finishing materials and new structures (large glazed windows and aluminium rolling doors), and many houses are hidden in full or in part by oversized advertising boards. As a result, the lower and upper façades in numerous French colonial shop-houses are in sharp contrast.

Another challenge to face is the illegal or spontaneous expansion of many French colonial shop-houses in order to have a larger living area, because the number of residents keeps on increasing as time goes by, and many households refuse to move out for various reasons. Initially, an original French colonial shop-house was designed to accommodate one family with up to six members only. When the population continues to grow, larger houses have become urgent. However, it is not easy to find an equally good place in another part of the city for people to resettle. As long as no answer to this problem can be given out, that house must go through an unexpected transformation and this is just a question of time. Once that house is expanded, its values will be lost, first of all the originality.

There are three patterns of expansion often seen in French colonial shop-houses:

- The balcony has been used as an additional area of the front room on the second floor. Curtain walls are made of light-weight materials, such as aluminium frames and glazed walling panels.

- The house has become higher (from two storeys to three or four storeys).

- The courtyard has been partially or entirely turned into one more room on each floor. Normally, in this case, there is less or no daylight at all in the middle block of the house, and the house owners must accept that fact [4].

Obviously, the conservation of French colonial shop-houses cannot go without living comfort or sufficient floor area. In other words, it will be ideal if there is only one family living in an original French colonial shop-house. French colonial shop-houses continue to transform or disappear, unless this crucial point is thoroughly taken into consideration.

5. Proposal of a rating system

Nowadays, the number of French colonial shop-houses keeps on decreasing and the conservation has therefore become an important issue. First of all, these houses need to be exactly evaluated by means of an appropriate rating system. Based on a similar rating system applicable to French colonial villas from the two heritage conservation projects previously implemented by the Institute of Urban Planning and Architecture and widely recognised among scholars and experts in colonial heritage conservation, five criteria/categories can be proposed for the evaluation of French colonial shop-houses. Compared to the previous rating, there are some minor modifications on account of the differences in characteristics between these two building types. Because architecture is the most outstanding feature of French colonial shop-houses, it should be given more points (40 instead of 35), taking five points from planning and landscape values which are in fact not so special as those of French villas, as far as spatial planning is considered.

Table 1. Comparison between two rating systems [2], [5]

No	Criterion	Points	
		For French villas	For French shop - houses
1	Historical and cultural values	15	15
2	Planning and townscape values	20	15
3	Architectural values	35	40
4	Originality	20	20
5	Function and ownership	10	10
	Total	**100**	**100**

The mark given to each sub-criterion merely depends on the real value or the current state of each element/component. Then the maximum five-point or ten-point rating for each sub-category can be divided into a smaller grade of two-and-a-half points, and wherever possible, one point, in order to ensure the accuracy of the expert rating/evaluation.

Table 2. Proposal of a rating system for French colonial shop-houses [5]

No	Criterion	Sub - criteria / notes	Points
1	Historical and cultural values (15 points)	1a. Related to a historical event or a famous person	5
		1b. Lifestyle from the past can still be well kept	5
		1c. Related to a certain kind of traditional handicraft	5
2	Planning and townscape values (15 points)	2a. Location of a house	5
		2b. Continuity (standing in a row)	5
		2c. Harmony with neighbouring houses	5
3	Architectural values (40 points)	3a. Built form	10
		3b. Harmonious proportion of façade elements	10
		3c. Decorations	10
		3d. Special details	5
		3e. Rare or exceptional architectural style	5
4	Originality (20 points)	4a. Original lower façade (first floor)	10
		4b. Original upper façade (second floor)	10
5	Function and ownership (10 points)	5a. Function	5
		5b. Ownership	5
		Total	**100**

Table 3. Proposal of a marking scale for French colonial shop-houses [5]

No	Sub - criterion	Mark scale
1a	Related to a historical event or a famous person	5
	A historical event	*2.5*
	A famous person (a political figure, a great artist, etc)	*2.5*
	Both historically and culturally related	*5*
	Neither historical event nor famous person	*0*
1b	Lifestyle from the past can still be well kept	5
	Very well kept	*5*
	Fairly well kept	*2.5*
	Not well kept	*0*
1c	Related to a certain kind of traditional handicraft	5
	Very well known	*5*
	Fairly well known	*2.5*
	No (or no more) traditional handicraft is kept	*0*
2a	Location of a house	5
	In a main street - at a corner/intersection with another main street	*5*
	In a main street - at a corner/intersection with a back street	*4*
	In a main street - in the middle of a row	*3*
	In a back street - at a corner/intersection with another back street	*2*
	In a back street - in the middle of a row	*1*
2b	Continuity (standing in a row)	5
	More than 6 consecutive units	*5*
	4 - 5 consecutive units	*4*
	3 consecutive units	*3*
	2 units	*2*
	1 unit	*1*
2c	Harmony with neighbouring houses	5
	The same as or similar to other houses in the row (form, style)	*5*
	Different form and style	*2.5*

3a	Built form (façade, roof, width/height ratio, symmetry/asymmetry)	10
	Highly aesthetic and harmonious	*10*
	Aesthetic and harmonious	7.5
	Fairly aesthetic and harmonious	5
	Normal, nothing special	2.5
3b	Harmonious proportion of façade elements: doors, windows, balcony	10
	Very well - proportioned	*10*
	Well - proportioned	7.5
	Fairly well - proportioned	5
	Normal, nothing special	2.5
3c	Decorations: cornice, motifs and vignettes, balcony cantilevers, etc.	10
	Very beautiful	*10*
	Beautiful	7.5
	Fairly beautiful	5
	Normal, nothing special	2.5
3d	Special details	5
	With year of construction / renovation	*2.5*
	With name or branding of the shop	2.5
	Without any special details	0
3e	Architectural style	5
	Unique or rare or impressive, flowery	*5*
	Popular or simple	2.5
4a	Original lower façade (first floor)	10
	Original and intact without damage	*10*
	Original and intact with some damage	7.5
	Properly renovated	5
	Not so properly renovated	2.5
	Entirely and inappropriately renovated	0
4b	Original upper façade (second floor)	10
	Original and intact without damage	*10*
	Original and intact with some damage	7.5
	Properly renovated	5
	Partially or not so properly renovated	2.5
	Entirely and inappropriately renovated	0
5a	Function	5
	Merely used for living	*5*
	Used for business (more or less leading to unexpected transformation)	2.5
5b	Ownership	5
	One household only	*5*
	Multiple households	2.5

The classification of French colonial shop-houses in Hanoi will be conducted based on the cumulative overall score. There are three classification bands: Band 1 (over 75 points): with exceptional value; Band 2 (60 to 74 points): with remarkable value; Band 3 (less than 60 points): with ordinary value (not considered as heritage or for conservation in this paper).

Leading experts will be invited to evaluate and classify French colonial shop-houses. They will be provided with all the relevant data and pictures of such a house (both inside and outside). If necessary, they can come to visit that house and verify whatever they feel uncertain. A heritage building should be rated by at least three experts. In the end, it is possible to receive three different results of the same house. In case of a minor difference (less than five points), an average mark can be used as the final result and after that recorded in an official building profile for conservation purpose. In a controversial situation (the difference in evaluation is more than five points), that house should be re-evaluated by other three specialists to ensure the objectivity and accuracy of the rating.

6. Conservation solutions to French colonial shop-houses in the French quarters

French colonial shop-houses with 75 points or above should be conserved immediately in Phase One of the French heritage building programme in Hanoi together with outstanding French colonial villas, and those with 60 to 74 points may be considered for conservation in Phase Two.

As analysed, an original French colonial house with one shop, one living room, one adjacent small bedroom downstairs and two larger bedrooms upstairs, could accommodate one household only with up to six members: grandparents, parents and two children, or parents with two to four children for a certain period in the family development timeline. In case two or more families share one house, the living condition is neither comfortable nor convenient. It is apparent that when the demand for a larger living area is too high, the heritage shop-house can hardly be effectively conserved.

In order to secure a successful conservation for a French colonial house with significant values and multiple ownership, the city authority had better let the households negotiate with one another and must assure that those who agree to move out will be offered a better living quality somewhere else in the city. The family staying in that house is normally the one that runs the shop or owns the service room.

The experience in the conservation of colonial architecture from the other countries in Southeast Asia where the urban development and socio-cultural context are quite similar to those in Vietnam and the recommendations from many experts in building conservation already showed that conservation should be integrated with development as the best concept and solution, denoting that the interior design may be renovated for a more comfortable living standard in such an architecturally modernised and economically globalised city as Hanoi while the façade must be kept intact to ensure its originality as well as historical value(s). The household continues to run the family-owned business and live in that heritage shop-house. The maintenance work can be done regularly so that the heritage building will be able to last longer. The house owner is advised to make a commitment by signing a legally bound document with the authorities that the family will not change any details or any building components of the heritage shop-house without permission from the authorities or consultation from professional organisations. In return, the family will receive financial support and certain priorities for the business activities. In reality, this is a bilateral cooperation (win-win agreement) and a key factor to success of any conservation projects.

The dimensions of most of the French colonial shop-houses investigated are as follows: Length: 15 - 20 m; Width: 4 - 5 m; Height: 2 storeys [4].

When there is only one family living in one house, the common narrow path (about 1 m in width) on one side of the first floor will no longer be necessary. Then the shop can be made larger which will facilitate the commercial activities and social services. A toilet for private use should be added to each bedroom upstairs. A common toilet is required for the shop and another common toilet is still put at the back of the house.

For the façade, the upper part (on the second floor) should be kept intact. The damaged details, if any, need to be retouched or replaced on a basis of respecting the originality in conservation theory, with reference to and under close supervision of French heritage building experts.
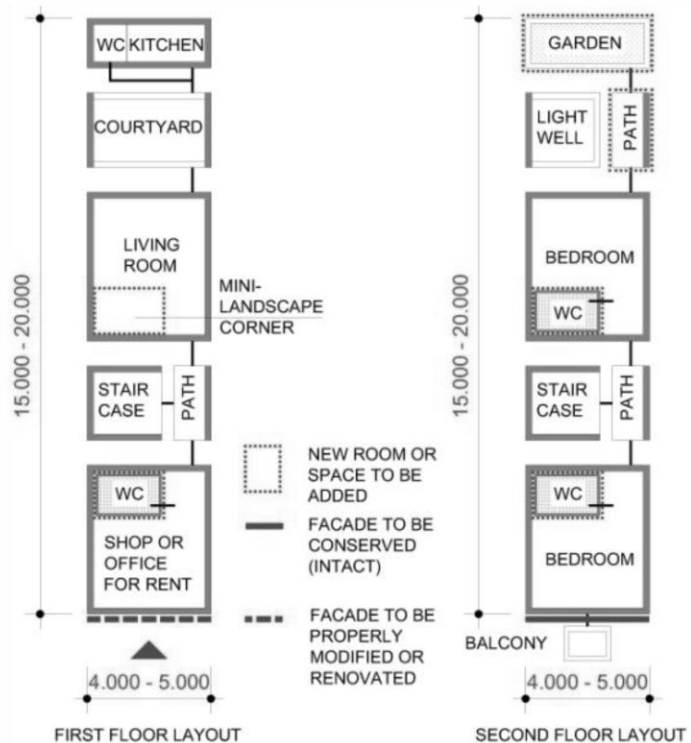

Figure 4. *Renovation of floor plans for a typical French colonial shop-house [5]*

Non-commercial French colonial shop-houses, for instance house no. 262 Hue street and house no. 127 Nguyen Thai Hoc street, are extremely rare. In these houses, the lower façade is not renovated for business purpose and therefore easier for conservation. Nevertheless, the conservation work should be done in compliance with the general guidelines. In most cases, the conservation work must deal with advertising boards. The size of an advertising board and the colours as well as design need to be calculated and well chosen. There are two cases for size to consider:

- Case 1: House with a balcony. The maximum length of an advertising board is 4 to 5 m (full width of the house). The allowable height of that advertising board is about 1.5 m, from the upper door frame of the first floor to the balcony concrete slab.

- Case 2: House without a balcony. An advertising board can be 4 to 5 m in length and up to 3 m in height (from the upper door frame of the first floor to the lower window frame of the second floor).

For aesthetic reason, the outdoor units of air-conditioners/radiators should be put behind the advertising board or the front rooftop wall, as illustrated in Figure 5 below.
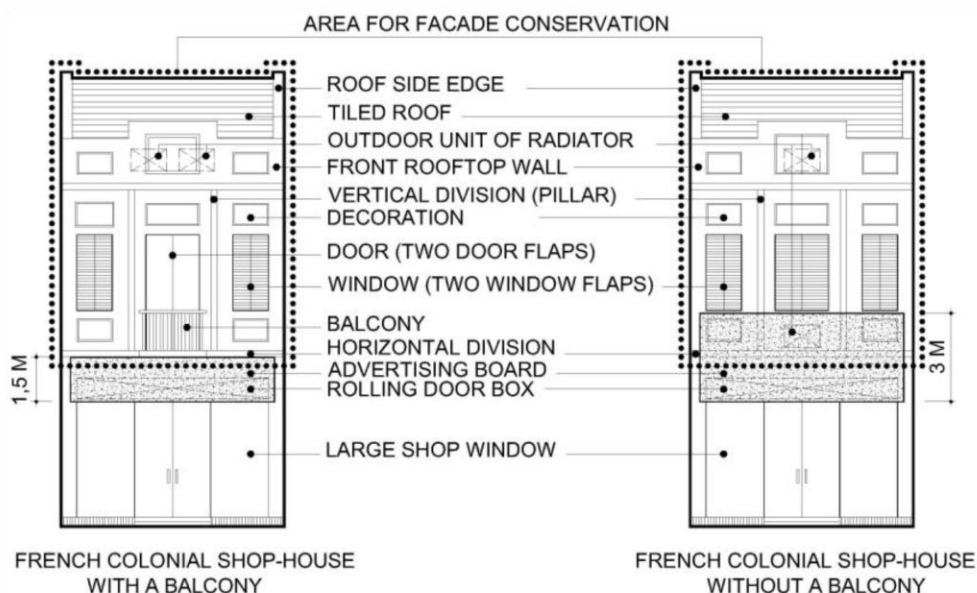

AREA FOR FACADE CONSERVATION

ROOF SIDE EDGE
TILED ROOF
OUTDOOR UNIT OF RADIATOR
FRONT ROOFTOP WALL
VERTICAL DIVISION (PILLAR) DECORATION
DOOR (TWO DOOR FLAPS)
WINDOW (TWO WINDOW FLAPS)
BALCONY
HORIZONTAL DIVISION
ADVERTISING BOARD
ROLLING DOOR BOX
LARGE SHOP WINDOW

1,5 M

3 M

FRENCH COLONIAL SHOP-HOUSE WITH A BALCONY

FRENCH COLONIAL SHOP-HOUSE WITHOUT A BALCONY

Figure 5. Solution for the façade of a typical French colonial shop-house [5]

7. Conclusions

The most valuable French colonial shop-houses in Hanoi need to be evaluated, classified and then conserved. The implementation of conservation will be based on the general principle: originality-oriented conservation for the second storey and adaptive conservation (with certain modifications) for the first storey. The crucial point is how to balance living quality and business activities, so that sustainability could be achieved. Another important aspect of the issue is how to keep the façade as original as possible. These shop-houses will be used as they were in the past and may not change their forms or morphology so much.

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