

The Influence of Neoclassicism on Ho Chi Minh Architecture in the Twentieth-First Century

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Abstract

The influence of Neoclassicism in Vietnam in general and Ho Chi Minh, in particular, is attributed to the influence of local culture and perception. This trend creates buildings that diverge from the standards of Neoclassical architecture in both positive and negative senses. This paper aims to demonstrate the influence of Neoclassicism in Ho Chi Minh Architecture, its progress in the modern era, and its potential adoption in Ho Chi Minh City through the evaluations of specific city construction projects in the twentieth-first century.

Keywords— Neoclassicism; Neoclassical architecture; influence, classical style; Ho Chi Minh City; Colonial style; French style.

INTRODUCTION

Neoclassicism is an art and architecture movement that emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Neoclassicism experienced a successful development because it accentuated the revival of traditional architectural values. The prime example was the revival of Greco-Roman taste, deemed the ideal beauty to humankind.

Even though neoclassical architecture has been intensively researched worldwide, there is a lack of research on the theoretical evaluation criteria of Neoclassicism, whereas other aspects of the art movement are significantly focused. For example, in "Neoclassical Revival of the eighteenth century" (2007) [1], Robyn Hawke studied the revival of Neoclassicism in the eighteenth century, or Dan Valenzuela discussed the historical context of Neoclassical architectural constructions in Louisiana in his study "Historic Context for the Neo-classical Architectural style in Louisiana" (2012) [2]. Regarding the architectural identity of Ho Chi Minh City, there are many papers on the evaluation of Classical architecture, such as:

"Architecture and Urban of Southern Saigon - Ho Chi Minh City in the interaction with the Western culture" of Phan Huu Toan [3], "Architecture and Urban of Saigon in the French colony" by Francois Tainturier [4] and "The need to appreciate the identity of Saigon – Ho Chi Minh City Urban Architecture" by Tran Xuan Phuc [5]. These articles are a valuable source for the orientation and assessment of the true nature of Saigon urban architecture when changing from the French colonial period to the open-door period. In this context, the paper focuses on the core issues of neoclassical architecture and assesses the facade of neoclassical buildings in Ho Chi Minh City from 2000 to the present to contribute to the approach neoclassical trends in the new era.

2. Forms of Neoclassical architecture in Ho Chi Minh City in the twenty-first century

In European countries, the successful restoration of neoclassical architecture is attributed to the architects' in-depth research, which helps them understand the rules of Classical architecture and find a proper application of the rules to the

architectural projects. They fully grasp the Greco-Roman standards of layout, roof, pillar... and know how to select the elements that complement the local architecture and give a creative spin to the design. Germany, England, and France are often cited as prime examples. However, not all Neoclassical architectural constructions have accomplished this in other countries. Many variations are often deemed aesthetically unattractive and are often criticized because they are combinations of too many different styles. Thus, they are inconsistent in style and represent the inappropriate applications of mainstream Classical architectural rules, which may give spectators the feeling that the architect has lost his personality.

In Vietnam, from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, neoclassical architectural works designed by French architects in Saigon were combined with other styles, such as Renaissance, Baroque or French Classicism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This architecture style was once termed Neo-eclecticism. However, thanks to the architects' comprehensive grasp of knowledge about the standards of Classicism and Neoclassicism, the neo-eclectic works, albeit mixed with other styles, remain aesthetically harmonious and valuable until today, such as: Chemin de fer de l'Indochina (La gare de Hanoi), Hotel Metropole, Van Nam Railway

Transportation Company, Bureaux de la Residence Supérieure du Tonkin, Palais des Justices, Department of Commerce and Indochina monopoly, Immeuble de l'état-major, Théâtre municipal...

Vietnamese architects have experimented with almost every trend and architectural style globally in the age of integration, especially in such dynamic areas as Ho Chi Minh City. This experimentation has led to an inconsistent mixture in the Neoclassical architectural style here.

2.1. The diversity in Neoclassical architecture style in Ho Chi Minh City

It remains a challenge to draw a clear distinction between the characteristics of neoclassical architecture works in Ho Chi Minh City, as they are designed to each architect's personality and ability. Therefore, our evaluation criteria during field research were based on fundamental characteristics such as layout, roof, pillar, railings, et cetera., which are primarily facades. Specifically, in the neoclassical construction projects, mainly residential buildings, there is a mixture of other architectural styles such as Renaissance, Baroque, classical French, et cetera. Nevertheless, these styles are also derived from Greek-Roman architecture, so those projects almost have many similarities in general and are, therefore, hard to differentiate (see *Fig. 1*).



Fig. 1. The mixed style of Neoclassical construction projects in Ho Chi Minh City (Source: Author).

In addition, there is sometimes a mixture of Art Nouveau or Art Deco style in these architectural constructions. This mixture can be explained by history when Art Nouveau first emerged and thrived in Europe in the nineteenth century, and France was no exception. In line with the cultural integration when the French came to Vietnam, Art Nouveau was also introduced. Not only in the past, but Art Nouveau is nowadays also very popular in Ho Chi Minh City because it meets the taste of the urban citizens. Inspired by nature, delicate details can ease the harshness of

symmetry and Classical-style buildings' "rigid" principles.

On the other hand, with its extravagance, this style has become quite suitable for the need to brag among the well-off. However, nowadays, Art Nouveau is sometimes overused and creates some works that are seen as complicated and unpleasant. To make up for this exaggeration, some architects have added the edginess of Art Deco to the design in an attempt to tone down the formality of Art Nouveau. However, this only results in aesthetically confusing Neoclassical-style buildings in the city (See Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. The combination of Art Nouveau and Art Deco styles (Source: Author).

Later on, in the buildings of the neoclassical style in Ho Chi Minh City, it is possible to identify no less than three styles that coexist in it. This identity is often found in classic mansions and commercial buildings in the city. It is easy to notice the classical orders from Greece, the extravagance in Roman style, the

meticulously decorated reliefs from Romanticism, Art Nouveau's floral details, and Art Deco's edginess. All of these can coexist in the same Neoclassical building. This existence makes the form of residential buildings and commercial services in the city inconsistent (See Fig. 3).

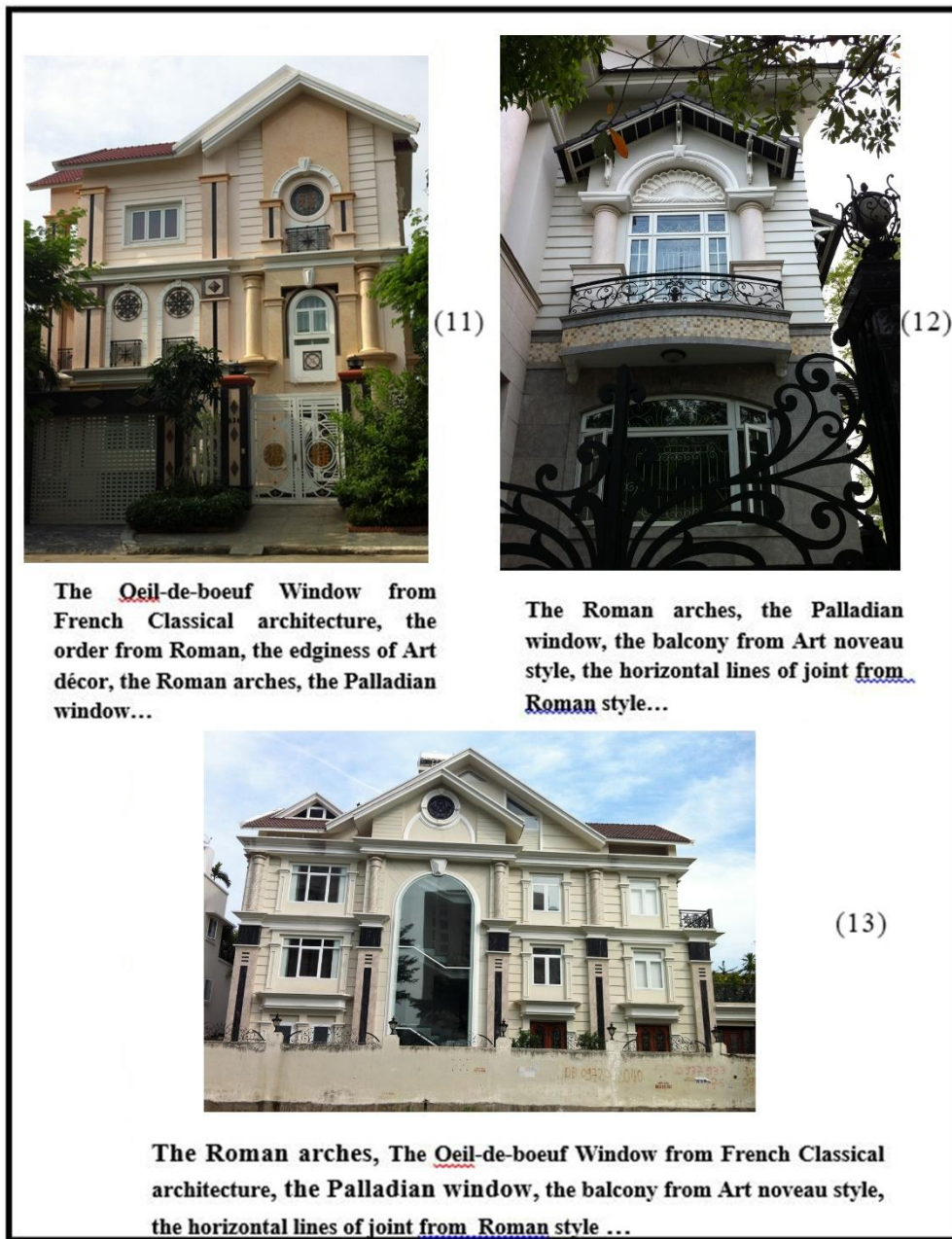


Fig. 3. Many different styles in one Neoclassical building (Source: Author).

Furthermore, as mentioned above, with the constant development of society, some individuals feel the need to flaunt their wealth through their residence. This trend leads to the

construction of some Neoclassical projects and sometimes even with traces of Queen Anne¹ style, some of which resemble a miniature castle (See Fig. 4)

¹Queen Anne is an elegant, luxurious royal style, which is extremely costly to construct and maintain.



(14)



(15)



(16)

Fig. 4. Buildings resembling miniature castles (Source: Author).

2.2. Reasons for the diversity in Neoclassical architecture style in Ho Chi Minh City

There is no denying that several architects who designed Neoclassical projects in Ho Chi Minh City back in 2000 did not have a thorough understanding of the rules of Neoclassicism. Neoclassicism emphasizes the renaissance of Greco-Roman architecture, whereas a

combination of Neoclassicism and other architectural styles in one construction project is

referred to as Neo-eclecticism². In order to avoid leading to Formalism, these styles must be harmoniously and meticulously amalgamated. Whereas Western architects of Neoclassicism have accomplished this, some architects in Vietnam are overly ambitious in using details, which ultimately leads to Formalism as well as confusion in mixing styles.

From the perspective of Jean Francois Gabriel³ [6], the existence of Neoclassicism in the modern era is entirely justifiable. On the other hand, the traces of various styles in an architectural construction according to Robert Ventury's⁴ [7] theory of "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture" should also be tolerated. However, even if it is theoretically acceptable, the architects should at least thoroughly comprehend the features and the rules of Classicism to combine it with Modernist architecture or with other styles to create works of proper Neo-eclectic style. Only then should ambiguity be tolerated. "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture" should not be used to excuse the arbitrary and imprudent design that defies all rules.

As mentioned above, the successful adoption of Neoclassicism in Western countries was thanks

to the architects' comprehensive understanding of the rules to apply them harmoniously and adequately in such a social context. In contrast, there is a lack of thoroughness in architecture in Vietnam and particularly in Ho Chi Minh City. For instance, when compared to the design standards of mainstream Classical architecture, the actual orders of these Neoclassical construction projects deviate from the Classical orders, while decoration patterns on the capitals of columns are overly perplexing. The design of embossed details or window ledges, for example, fails to follow specific rules. The pediments, Mansard roofs, or the domes are not adequately designed. The combination of inappropriate material and ostentatious color depreciates the value and the beauty of the building from the façade. Even the most fundamental principle – symmetry in the façade is also violated. From a broader point of view, the Neoclassical style in Ho Chi Minh City from 2000 to the present day tends to overestimate Formalism and is a mixture of many different styles; this is evidence that the architects in Ho Chi Minh City do not abide by the rules of mainstream Classical architecture (See Fig. 5).

² Neo-eclecticism: or Neo-eclectic architecture is a movement that combines a wide array of decorative techniques taken from an assortment of different house styles.

³ Jean Francois Gabriel (?-1724): An architectural theorist specializing in French Classical style.

⁴ R.Ventury (1925-): Post-modern Architect, one of the most influential architectural theorists in the second half of the twentieth century.

a

The orders with wrong ratios:

(17)



(18)



(19)



(20)



b

The columns attached to the railing affects the standard principles of the orders:

(21)



(22)



c

The strangeness in the combination of mansard roof and curved pediment.



(23)

d

The metal truss is over the orders.



(24)

e

The combination of classical pediment and glass wall.



(25)

f

A strange pediment, unknown style.



(26)

g

The combination of classical pediment and tole roofs.



(27)



Fig. 5. *Inappropriate applications of Classicism* (Source: Author).

2.3. The continuation of Neoclassicism in Ho Chi Minh City architecture from 2000 to the present day

Concerning the harmonious Neoclassical architecture constructions in Europe, these works tend to be overwhelming and overshadow nature. The French introduce these influences into Vietnam to serve the ruling regime and spread the oppression. The city's Neoclassical construction works, if properly designed based on Classicism and Modernist architecture standards, are totally acceptable, as long as they are following the contextual situations and surroundings. However, a problem may occur if the Neoclassical style is distorted because the architects do not clearly understand the design principles of this construction work.

Many people believe that the Neoclassical style is no longer appropriate for public construction projects because it is the tradition and the lifestyle of our people to live close to Mother Nature instead of isolation in the lifestyle of Westerners. As a result, constructing an administrative building in the Neoclassical style in the current social context may cause a disturbance and waste the design workforce and money. However, Thomas L.Doremus [8] argued that classical administrative blocks are still likely to exist because they have become a part of the architecture history of Ho Chi Minh City. However, architects need to respect the rules of Classicism so that such construction projects of mixed styles, such as Neoelecticism, will be harmonious with the

surroundings and suitable for contemporary architecture.

Due to the characteristics of Ho Chi Minh City with two distinct rainy and dry seasons, residential buildings and hotels often bear the features of microclimate architecture – with many large windows or balconies expansive to catch the wind and sometimes with an additional patio to avoid heat; this is different from Western neoclassical architecture, where it is usually cold. Neoclassical buildings of this genre, despite fulfilling the standards of classical architecture and trying to incorporate local architectural elements, still have to be considered appropriate or not based on the surroundings.

Ho Chi Minh City has witnessed the appearance of more and more modern constructions. However, many Neoclassical works are considered "obsolete". Aside from multi-style issues, many also overuse details, as the designers try to recreate the classic western features by using overly complex decorations, which leads to redundancy of embossed details, arches, vaults, columns, horizontal joints, et cetera; this indicates the heavy influence of the

investors' personal preferences on the architectural rules. They may resemble the Greco-Roman architecture, but as they reflect the showing-off culture, these details are only inaccurate imitations of the style. Moreover, limited expertise and inadequate professional skills also add to the problem.

Apart from "age-old" architectural constructions, many construction projects in Ho Chi Minh City were later inspired by Classicism, which is not strictly constrained by the principles of Classicism, not too flamboyant, but just enough to reminisce beholders of the golden past of Classicism. These works blend in harmoniously with the surroundings and the city atmosphere – neither too outlandish nor outstanding, but familiar. There might be just the arches above the windows, soft joint, keystones, pillars, or a bas-relief; those are enough to give the spectators a sense of the classic. Their visually subtle appearance also gives viewers a sense of harmony between Classicism and the traits of Ho Chi Minh City without going overboard, which is something to be praised for (See Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Works inspired by architectural details of Classicism (Source: Author).

3. Conclusion

The demonstrated analysis concludes that the Neoclassical architecture in Ho Chi Minh City in the twentieth-first century remained unstable. Shortcomings in investors' perception, architects, and management have created Neoclassical architecture with many variations diverging from the standard Neoclassical architecture.

These Neoclassical architectural constructions, which are mainly based on the feelings of the designer or the investor, have created a chaotic scene in the city's architecture. Only by thoroughly contemplating the rules in Classical design can we apply them and give more

objective judgments to the Neoclassical architectural constructions, which have shown unstable signs since 2000 and require a more explicit general orientation.

Hence, to create great works, the problems must be tackled at the root. To conclude, we would like to quote Architect Peter Zumthor, the prize winner of Pritzker 2009: "First and foremost, architecture must express respect for the primacy of the site, the legacy of local culture and the invaluable lessons of architectural history." [9]

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This list contains the address of buildings noted by the numbers in parentheses.

No.	Address	The year of construction
1	Lam Giang Tower, 167-173, Tran Hung Dao Street, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City	2001
2	A&Em Corner Hotel, 150, Le Thanh Ton Street, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City	2006
3	Hotel Opere, R2-27-28, Nguyen Binh, District 7, Ho Chi Minh City	2011
4	Spring Hotel, 53, Phan Kiem Ich, District 7, Ho Chi Minh City	2013
5	Lucky Hotel, 446-448, Pham Thai Buong Street, Ward Tan Phong, District 7, Ho Chi Minh City	2013
6	Ha My Hotel, 120, Ly Tu Trong Street, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City	2001
7	24, 17 street, Ward An Phu, District 2, Ho Chi Minh City	2012
8	R0/16, Nguyen Binh, District 7, Ho Chi Minh City	2014
9	87, Duong Van An Street, District 2, Ho Chi Minh City	2012
10	Instore store, 49, Quoc Hung Street, Ward Thao Dien, District 2, Ho Chi Minh City	2010
11	A34, Nam Thong Area, District 7, Ho Chi Minh City	2014
12	63, Ly Long Tuong Street, District 7, Ho Chi Minh City	2009
13	61, Ly Long Tuong Street, District 7, Ho Chi Minh City	2007
14	Sushi Tei, 206, Ly Tu Trong Street, Ward Ben Thanh, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City	2001

15	232, Ban Van Don Street, District 4, Ho Chi Minh City	under construction
16	24, Le Van Mien Street, Ward Thao Dien, District 2, Ho Chi Minh City	2008
17	31C, Le Quy Don Street, District 3, Ho Chi Minh City	2005
18	448, Pham Thai Buong Street, My Toan 1 Area, Ward Phu My Hung, District 7, Ho Chi Minh City	2011
19	257, Ly Tu Trong Street, Ward Ben Thanh, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City	2005
20	33, 17 Street, Ward An Phu, District 2, Ho Chi Minh City	2003
21	20, 17 Street, Ward An Phu, District 2, Ho Chi Minh City	2012
22	88, Quoc Hung Street, Ward Thao Dien, District 2, Ho Chi Minh City	2001
23	14 Luong Huu Khanh, Ward Pham Ngu Lao, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City	2000
24	478, Phan Khiem Ich, District 7, Ho Chi Minh City	2002
25	201, Ly Tu Trong Street, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City	2000
26	165, Pham Thai Buong Street, Ward Tan Phong, District 7, Ho Chi Minh City	2013
27	200-202, Pham Thai Buong Street, Ward Tan Phong, District 7, Ho Chi Minh City	2010
28	R10/60, Ly Long Tuong Street, Ward Tan Phong, District 7, Ho Chi Minh City	2005
29	89, Duong Van An Street, District 2, Ho Chi Minh City	2000
30	205, 19 Street, District 2, Ho Chi Minh City	2001
31	15, Nguyen Quy Canh Street, District 2, Ho Chi Minh City	2012
32	18, 18 Street, District 2, Ho Chi Minh City	2013
33	28, 20, 17 Street, Ward An Phu, District 2, Ho Chi Minh City	2015
34	Golden Central Hotel, 140, Ly Tu Trong Street, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City	2000
35	Vinaconex Building, 47, Dien Bien Phu Street, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City	2006
36	Hoang Hai Long hotel, 66-68, Pham Hong Thai Street, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City	2002
37	Cathay, 78, Pham Hong Thai Street, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City	2007
38	VIB bank building, 50, Khanh Hoi Street, District 4, Ho Chi Minh City	2013
39	Tran Huu Trang Theatre, 515 - 517, Tran Hung Dao Street, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City	2011
40	19, 20 Street, B05 Nam Thong Area, District 7, Ho Chi Minh City	2014
41	A38, Nam Thong Area, District 7, Ho Chi Minh City	2013