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A Modern Threat to Hue's Heritage

Hue's World Heritage Sites have endured time, weather, modern armies and neglect, but the biggest threat they now face is development, reports *Edward Wong*.

Straddling the Perfume River in central Vietnam, Hue was the seat of the last imperial dynasty, and it has long been known for what the Nguyen emperors left behind: the imposing walled Citadel with its former palaces and pleasure gardens; the ornate royal tombs scattered across the verdant hills; and the wooden villas of their mandarins.

These buildings have endured the infamous Hue weather – dank and misty and grey much of the year – and the brutality of modern armies. Some of the bloodiest urban combat the US Marines have ever faced took place in the Citadel during the 1968 Tet Offensive, a battle depicted in Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*.

The monuments have also withstood decades of rule by the Communist Party, despite being symbols of the feudal traditions the party was trying to exorcise from Vietnam.

But what weather, war and ideology had not yet undone, a newer threat may: the economic boom that has been transforming the character of this central Vietnamese city of 340,000 people in recent years. Preservationists are struggling to ensure that officials, businesspeople and residents here properly protect Hue's heritage.

A freeway now runs through hills facing the baroque tomb of Khai Dinh, a Nguyen emperor, compromising the tomb's feng shui, or geomantic qualities. A tourist resort has been built along the Perfume, a languid, tree-lined waterway, and there is talk of apartment towers being erected within sight of the Citadel's ramparts.

All the while, the city's climate remains as persistent a threat as time.

"The humidity makes it hard to restore," said Truong Dinh Luat, 47, a Hue native, as he guided visitors around the Citadel on a recent morning. Bullet holes from 1968 still scarred some walls, and the rubble of fallen stonework lay in small piles in a few areas. "The workers have a tough job," he said.

WILLIAM LOGAN, a scholar of heritage and conservation at Deakin University in Australia, sounded an alarm over the challenges to preservation last October at a conference on wooden architecture here. He said that Hue's monuments were at risk of losing the World Heritage Site status bestowed by UNESCO, the United Nations cultural agency.

"If the province fails to monitor and better manage its preservation of the monuments, the entire complex's overall value will certainly be hugely undermined," Logan said, according to a report by *Tuoi Tre News*, a Vietnamese state-run newspaper.

Logan expanded on his remarks in a telephone interview. "If the problems aren't addressed, the World Heritage Committee can consider putting the property on the World Heritage Endangered List," he said. "No country likes that. It's a loss of face. It can impact negatively on tourism."

"Heritage is fairly low down on the list for governments – they all want development," he added. "It's hard to convince governments they can have heritage and development at the same time."





Tourism in Hue got a boost in 1993 when the city's major sites were given World Heritage status. No other city in Vietnam is as boastful of this honour as Hue is. Signs outside the Citadel and the Nguyen royal tombs declare that last December, officials recognised the 30 millionth person to visit the city since the designation.

The Nguyen dynasty made Hue its capital from 1802 to 1945. The Citadel was begun by one emperor, Gia Long, and completed 29 years later by his successor, Minh Mang, who was known in part for having had 142 children with scores of women. (Numbers vary, but some accounts say he had a total of 500 wives and concubines, kept in the Purple Forbidden City deep inside the Citadel.)

In lanes near the Citadel are *nha ruong* – wooden garden homes that once housed mandarins and other personalities of note

– and more modern villas built late in the imperial period. Though not recognised as World Heritage Sites, those houses have their proud residents.

“I still believe in the heritage of Hue,” said Hoang Xuan Bat, 83, as he sat in the dark living room of a European-style manor dating to 1910. “I respect its history, and want to tell foreigners about it when they visit, but I can’t speak English.”

WHEN IT RAINS in Hue, which is often, some of the challenges to conservation become obvious. One wet morning in a throne room of the Citadel, pools of water collected on the floor in front of the gold-painted throne. More pools could be seen along a wood-planked hallway.

“Every time it rains, water comes down from the roof,” said Truong, the tour guide, whose father was a soldier for South

Above: Red lacquer doors at Hung Mieu Temple inside the Citadel, built by Nguyen Dynasty emperors.

Vietnam and was on home leave in Hue when the Tet offensive began. Truong said his father threw his uniform into the Perfume River to avoid repercussions as the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces advanced, and then attached himself to the US Marines as an interpreter when they arrived to retake the city.

Much of the Citadel was destroyed in the fighting, he said, but the former imperial library was not, so it was possible to restore it. Its interior has been given new wooden beams and doors, and construction workers were there during a recent visit, wearing masks and walking on a layer of sawdust.

Logan said he was concerned that



Top to bottom: Colourful gate at the Citadel; Sunset over the Imperial City in Hue; La Residence, once part of the former colonial governor's residence and reborn as a luxury hotel in 2005; Carpenters work on support beams for the main entrance of the Citadel.



property developers might gain permission to build high-rise towers around the Citadel and other sensitive sites. He said nothing should be built there that extends above the treetop canopy.

At the request of the World Heritage Committee, the Hue Monuments Conservation Centre, a government organisation, is drafting a plan to improve conservation of the sites. Phan Thanh Hai, director of the conservation centre, said that "Hue history may be the most impressive" in all of Vietnam because Hue was once the home of "many skilful craftsmen, famous poets and intellectuals."

But he acknowledged that Hue's monuments had suffered from "inappropriate management" around the historic sites, as well as "impacts from natural disaster, and from harmful insects, microorganisms as well as fungi on wooden components."

LOGAN HAS SUGGESTED that Vietnam try to nominate Hue for UNESCO designation as a Cultural Landscape that would make a whole stretch of the city a protected site. Ideally, he said, the area would include a green wedge of land running southwest from the Citadel as well as the Perfume and the mausoleums in the south.

"It's the river that binds all the serial sites together," he said. "Bodies were taken up and down the river to be buried."

Traditionally, an emperor who died would lie in state at the Citadel, and then would be carried by boat to a tomb that he would have had built during his lifetime. Some emperors even spent leisure time at the tombs they built, drinking wine and composing poetry. That was the case with Tu Duc, the fourth Nguyen emperor, whose tomb has a small lake with a wooden pavilion.

Officials allowed a two-lane highway to be built toward Tu Duc's tomb years ago, but construction was halted before it reached the mausoleum. The tomb remains intact, with a symbol made of glazed blue tiles on one wall that means "long life." 