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Architects of the fine Art school of Indochina: the question of modernity in Vietnamese architecture

The Architecture section at the fine Art School of Indochina was created in 1926, two years after the Painting section, however, it was in heart of the project when the school was created. The section formed almost exclusively Vietnamese students, about 40-50 students between 1926 and 1945, among them about ten who became major figures in Vietnamese architecture in the 1950's such as Nguyen Cao Luyen, Ngo Huy Quynh or Ta My Duat.

The course programme is divided between the western "avant-garde" theories in architecture, the study of traditional architecture and the theories of Ernest Hebrard and the "Indochinese style" he had just developed. After graduating, architects work as mainly independent architects since the French colonial administration is reluctant to employ them. Some of them created their own companies or work in association with French architects. Two main ideas direct their work. The first one is the renewal of a modern national architecture. This gives birth to much literature on this subject, published after the independence. The social aspect of architecture is their second preoccupation. Some of them will work specially on cheap housing ("Habitations à bon marché"), and will be involved in the association Anh Sang against insalubrious accommodations. Their projects are ambitious: modern villas, a mixture of modern Western and Asiatic style, cheap apartment blocks and housing estates for middle and working class Vietnamese. Their work is appreciated, not only by French progressive architects but also by the Vietnamese bourgeoisie and high ranking French civil servants. Between 1947 and 1954, many of them join communist resistance. After the independence, many of them work for the government, even in the government as Huynh Than Phat or Nguyen Cao Luyen. Although their style is different then, influenced by the Russian constructivist style, their work is still driven by reflection on hybridization and modernity.

Colonial architecture in Indochina, is a subject that has often been written about either to illustrate the links between colonial power and construction, or to nourish a certain colonial nostalgia. In reality writers have been concerned with constructions dating from the beginning of colonization: mainly the transposition of French monuments such as municipal theatres or churches or localist Indochinese style buildings from the twenties on.

However, the thirties and the work of Vietnamese architects at that time, remains relatively obscure. And yet this first generation of young local architects is essential to the Vietnamese architectural landscape, even today. Politics is, as we have seen, important to these architects but it would be simplistic to reduce their work and their research to a mere question of colonial domination and national emancipation. Beyond that they question modernization through the concepts of influence (whether it be influence from the past or from abroad) and of innovation.