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Ambiguous Modernism: Politics of the Municipal Council and the Urban Planning of Hanoi, 1935-43

This paper focuses on the activities of the municipal council of Hanoi in the 1935-43 period regarding the urban planning of Hanoi. This period saw the brief rise of the Popular Front in France, defeat of the French by the Germans and the Japanese and the establishment of a Vichy government in colonial Vietnam. In 1943 the Vichy colonial regime unveiled a grandiose urban planning project for developing Hanoi for the next thirty to a hundred years. While the project was one that had been evolving for some time by the architects Ernest Hébrard and Georges-Louis Pineau, under the Vichy regime new stringent sets of regulations were added. The plan by Henri Cérutti represented a Vichy version of an ideal colonial city, with European and Asian quarters neatly segregated by zoning and style, and all buildings strictly regulated in size. When the plan was presented, a turmoil ensued among the Vietnamese residents of Hanoi. This paper, in assessing the history of colonial urban planning and municipal politics, underlines the fragmentation of colonial politics on one hand; there were conflicting policies and a breakdown of communication among different levels of the colonial government especially under Vichy. At the same time, the modernizing tendency of the colonial government of the 1920s and 30s had resulted in a set of regulations for urban planning and also had enabled an increasing number of Vietnamese residents to indirectly participate in the urban planning and regulating of the city through the Vietnamese portion of the municipal council. Vietnamese councilors had grown in number over the years albeit always outnumbered by French councilors.

The paper will also touch on the cosmopolitan dimensions of monumental urban planning, and where colonial urban planning, and the Vichy version of urban planning fit. The Vichy plan sought to amalgamate rationalist modernism, including the principles of zoning, with regional traditionalism that emphasized traditional or artisanal-inspired architecture and aesthetics that would induce moral regeneration. The logical extension of Pineau's reasoning was that in Hanoi eastern and western architectural styles would be separated rather than be experimented with into the kind of hybrid style Hébrard had preferred. The Vichy regime was doing an awkward balancing act of encouraging modernism and tradition simultaneously, by extolling virtues of modern urban planning and at the same time heralding the regeneration of Annamese architecture.

This paper engages the themes of the conference by highlighting the views of the Vietnamese municipal councilors and Vietnamese residents who commented on the 1942 plan, which do not neatly fit into the teleological

nationalist narrative or the colonial narrative of cultural imposition. It also assesses both the modernizing tendencies of the French colonial government and the policies of the Vichy regime which was a mixture of modernist and reactionary tendencies.