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Research Article

Localism in Modern Architecture: Public Buildings in Downtown Saigon, 1950–1975

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Abstract: The concept of "Adaptive Vernacular Architecture" builds on established theories of vernacular architecture worldwide and seeks to reframe Modern Architecture in Southern Vietnam not as a passive reception of international modernism, but as a distinctive form of adaptive vernacular expression. This architectural phenomenon demonstrates a strong capacity to harmonize with local natural, cultural, and social conditions while retaining a clear architectural identity in the context of modernization and globalization. The research also revisits the historical development of this period by examining the factors that contributed to the pronounced vernacular characteristics evident in public buildings of Modern Architecture in Southern Vietnam between 1950 and 1975. In doing so, it provides clearer evidence of the intentional integration of vernacular elements and contributes to a systematic knowledge base that can inform future strategies for the conservation and adaptive reuse of modern public architecture.

Keywords: Vernacular Architecture; Vernacular Adaptation; Cultural Adaptation; Modern Architecture in Southern Vietnam.

Highlights:

- Adaptive vernacular architecture is a response to continuous cultural and social changes.
- Modern Architecture in Southern Vietnam (1950–1975) integrated international modernism with the local climate, culture, and social conditions.
- It highlights the significant influence of natural, cultural, and social factors on the development of modern architecture in the region.
- It analyzes how vernacular and traditional elements were embedded in public modern buildings, reflecting local identity and heritage.

1. Introduction

Urban architecture is not merely a functional response to material needs but a cultural construct through which societies articulate memory, identity, and values over time. As Aldo Rossi has argued, the city functions as a form of collective memory, materialized through enduring urban artifacts and places that anchor historical experience within everyday life. Architectural form is therefore inseparable from the cultural and temporal contexts in which it emerges, simultaneously reflecting social practices and shaping modes of inhabitation (Schenck, 2020). The global diffusion of modern architecture during the twentieth century represents a critical moment in this relationship between architecture, memory, and place. Often framed as a universal and rational

architectural language grounded in functionalism, industrial materials, and standardized construction techniques, modernism was promoted as a progressive alternative to vernacular and historicist forms. However, as modern architecture circulated across regions and political systems, it was not adopted uniformly but was selectively interpreted, negotiated, and reconfigured in response to local climates, cultural traditions, and institutional conditions (Chikerema, 2025; Chang, 2016).

Southern Vietnam between 1950 and 1975 offers a particularly revealing context for examining these processes. During this period, the region experienced profound political upheaval, rapid urbanization, demographic transformation, and intense exposure to international architectural ideas shaped by both colonial legacies and American influence. Modern architecture emerged as a dominant mode for public buildings and urban infrastructure, symbolizing modernization, governance, and international alignment. Yet, rather than reproducing the formal and ideological purity associated with the "International Style," architects in Southern Vietnam actively adapted modernist principles to local environmental and cultural conditions through climate-responsive design strategies such as sun-shading devices, transitional spaces, courtyards, and water elements (Tran et al., 2024; Ly et al., 2010). Despite the increasing recognition of twentieth-century modern architecture as a form of heritage, the architectural production of Southern Vietnam during this period remains under-theorized in international scholarship. Existing studies often interpret colonial and post-colonial modern buildings either as derivative imitations of Western models or as instruments of political power, a binary perspective that obscures the agency of local architects and the nuanced processes of hybridization through which modernism was localized (Tran et al, 2024; Schenck, 2020).

In response to this gap, this study aims to conceptualize and examine Adaptive Vernacular Architecture as an analytical lens for interpreting public modern architecture in Southern Vietnam between 1950 and 1975. Specifically, the study seeks to identify how modern architectural principles were articulated in public buildings during this period, to analyze the ways in which these principles were systematically adapted to local climatic, cultural, and construction conditions, and to demonstrate that such adaptations constitute a form of vernacular continuity embedded within modern architectural practice rather than a deviation from modernist ideals.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Vernacular Architecture as Environmental and Cultural Adaptation

Scholarly literature broadly conceptualizes vernacular architecture as a form of built environment generated through localized knowledge systems shaped by climate, material availability, social organization, and cultural practice. Rather than being primarily aesthetic expressions, vernacular forms such as thick walls, elevated floors, courtyards, and transitional spaces are widely understood as functional responses to environmental conditions, particularly climate and resource constraints (Nguyen et al., 2022). These architectural strategies are the result of long-term empirical adaptation, refined through collective experience rather than formalized design doctrines.

Beyond environmental performance, vernacular architecture has been interpreted as a spatial manifestation of social structures and cultural values. Studies emphasize how kinship relations, belief systems, and social hierarchies are embedded in spatial configurations, circulation patterns, and thresholds between private and communal domains (Brown & Maudlin, 2012). In this sense, vernacular architecture operates simultaneously as environmental technology and cultural expression, linking everyday practices with collective identity.

Importantly, recent scholarship challenges earlier portrayals of vernacular architecture as isolated, static, or purely traditional. Instead, vernacular forms are increasingly understood as dynamic and historically contingent, continuously absorbing and reworking external influences introduced through trade, migration, and colonial encounters (Widodo, 2016). This perspective reframes vernacular architecture as inherently hybrid and resilient, capable of selective adaptation rather than passive preservation. Such interpretations provide a conceptual foundation for examining how vernacular principles persist, transform, or re-emerge within later architectural systems, including modern architecture.

2.2. Modern Architecture as Ideology and Global Language

Modern architecture emerged in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries alongside industrialization, new construction technologies, and reformist ambitions addressing housing, hygiene, and social order. Canonical modernist discourse emphasized functionalism, material honesty, standardization, and the rejection of historical ornament, framing these principles as universally applicable solutions to modern societal challenges. Through institutions and networks such as the Bauhaus, CIAM, and international exhibitions, modernism was articulated as a coherent global movement with a shared architectural language.

However, critical architectural scholarship has increasingly problematized this claim of universality. Rather than viewing modernism as a neutral or purely technical system, scholars have highlighted its ideological dimensions and its entanglement with colonialism, state power, and processes of spatial reorganization (Chang, 2012; Schenck, 2020). In many colonial and post-colonial contexts, modern architecture functioned as an instrument of delocalization, displacing vernacular building practices and reconfiguring urban environments according to externally imposed norms. From this perspective, modern architecture cannot be separated from the political and cultural frameworks through which it circulated and was implemented.

This critical re-evaluation has shifted attention from formal characteristics alone to the broader socio-political conditions under which modern architecture was produced, received, and contested. It also opens analytical space for examining how modernist principles were modified, resisted, or reinterpreted outside their original European contexts.

2.3. Localization, Hybridity, and Negotiated Modernisms

Responding to the limitations of diffusionist and center–periphery models, a growing body of literature emphasizes localization and negotiation as key processes shaping modern architecture in non-Western contexts. Rather than understanding modern architecture as a linear Western imposition, scholars argue that local architects actively interpreted and transformed modernist principles to address climatic realities, cultural expectations, and institutional constraints (Ju, 2017; Akshar & Solissa, 2025). As a result, modern architecture materialized in multiple, context-specific forms often described as "negotiated" or "hybrid" modernisms.

In these contexts, modern buildings frequently incorporated climate-adaptive strategies such as natural ventilation, shaded corridors, brise-soleil, and layered thresholds, alongside symbolic or ornamental elements drawn from local cultural traditions. Such adaptations did not necessarily undermine modernist rationality; rather, they reoriented it toward environmental performance and cultural legibility. Studies of Southeast Asian architecture, in particular, demonstrate how hybrid modern forms preserved local meanings while fulfilling the technological, representational, and political demands associated with modernization (Shannon, 2016; Beynon, 2010).

This body of work challenges binary oppositions between modern and vernacular architecture and suggests that hybridity is not an exception but a defining condition of modernism's global realization. It further underscores the importance of examining architectural production as a negotiated process shaped by local agency rather than as a unidirectional transfer of ideas.

2.4. Toward Adaptive Vernacular Architecture as an Analytical Lens

Building on these strands of scholarship, several studies have proposed conceptual frameworks that move beyond stylistic classification to focus on processes of adaptation and negotiation in architectural production. Within this line of inquiry, Adaptive Vernacular Architecture has been articulated as a process-oriented concept describing how vernacular principles of climate responsiveness, symbolic expression, and material economy are systematically embedded within modern architectural systems (Geertman, 2007; Tran et al., 2024). Rather than defining a distinct architectural style, this concept emphasizes the mechanisms through which local knowledge and practices are reconfigured within modern construction technologies and institutional programs.

In this sense, adaptive vernacular architecture occupies a conceptual position between vernacular continuity and modern transformation. It highlights the role of local architects as active agents who mediate between global architectural paradigms and situated environmental and cultural conditions. By foregrounding adaptation as an analytical category, this framework provides a useful lens for examining modern public buildings in contexts where architectural production is shaped by both global modernist discourse and deeply rooted vernacular logics.

2.5. Research Gaps

Although a growing body of scholarship has examined vernacular architecture, modernism, and processes of architectural localization in non-Western contexts, several critical gaps remain. First, existing studies on vernacular architecture have largely focused on pre-modern or rural building traditions, emphasizing environmental adaptation and cultural continuity while paying limited attention to how vernacular principles persist within formally modern architectural systems. As a result, the relationship between vernacular logic and modern public architecture remains insufficiently theorized, particularly in contexts where modernism became a dominant mode of institutional and civic construction.

Second, research on modern architecture in colonial and post-colonial settings has often been framed through binary interpretations that emphasize either stylistic imitation of Western models or the role of architecture as an instrument of political and ideological power. While such perspectives have been instrumental in revealing the structural conditions of architectural production, they tend to underplay the agency of local architects and overlook the nuanced processes of negotiation through which modernist principles were selectively adapted to local climatic, cultural, and material conditions. This has resulted in limited analytical attention to hybrid architectural forms that do not conform neatly to canonical modernist classifications.

Third, despite increasing recognition of twentieth-century modern architecture as a form of heritage, empirical studies that systematically analyze the architectural mechanisms of adaptation within modern public buildings remain scarce. Much of the existing literature documents individual buildings or stylistic features without developing an integrated analytical framework capable of explaining how environmental performance, spatial mediation, cultural legibility, and material adaptation operate together within modern architectural systems. This gap is particularly evident in studies of Southeast Asia, where modern architecture is often discussed descriptively rather than analytically.

Finally, in the specific case of Southern Vietnam between 1950 and 1975, scholarly attention has been fragmented and uneven. While historical and political narratives of the period are relatively well documented, architectural research has yet to fully examine modern public buildings as products of localized design agency embedded within global modernist discourse. The lack of a coherent conceptual lens has contributed to the marginalization of this architectural production within both international modernist historiography and contemporary heritage debates.

Addressing these gaps, this study advances the concept of Adaptive Vernacular Architecture as an analytical framework to examine how modern public architecture in Southern Vietnam was shaped through the systematic integration of vernacular environmental strategies, cultural references, and material practices. By bridging theoretical debates on vernacularity and modernism with detailed architectural analysis, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of modern architecture as a negotiated and contextually embedded practice.

3. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative case-study methodology to examine how modern architectural principles were localized through adaptive vernacular strategies in Southern Vietnam between 1950 and 1975. The methodological design integrates historical contextual analysis, a structured literature review, and formal architectural analysis. This multi-method approach enables both contextual depth and analytical rigor, allowing architectural form to be interpreted as a product of negotiated interactions among global modernist discourse, local environmental conditions, and cultural practices.

3.1. Historical and Contextual Analysis

Historical research is employed to reconstruct the political, institutional, and urban conditions that shaped architectural production in Southern Vietnam during the study period. This component draws on archival materials, historical planning documents, governmental reports, demographic statistics, and existing historical scholarship to situate modern public buildings within broader processes of colonial legacy, Cold War geopolitics, and rapid urbanization.

Rather than treating architecture as an autonomous formal practice, this analysis foregrounds the institutional mechanisms through which buildings were commissioned, the professional roles of architects, and the socio-political meanings attached to modern architecture as a symbol of modernization, governance, and international alignment. Establishing this historical context is essential for interpreting architectural adaptations not as isolated design choices, but as responses to specific structural and environmental conditions.

3.2. Structured Literature Review and Analytical Framework

A structured literature review is conducted to synthesize key debates on vernacular architecture, modernism, architectural globalization, and localization. The review focuses on three interconnected bodies of scholarship: (1) vernacular architecture as an adaptive environmental and cultural system; (2) modern architecture as a global, ideological, and institutional project; and (3) hybrid and negotiated modernisms in non-Western contexts.

Rather than functioning as a descriptive survey, the literature review informs the development of the analytical framework of Adaptive Vernacular Architecture. From this synthesis, four analytical dimensions are derived to guide the empirical analysis: environmental responsiveness, spatial mediation between public and private realms, cultural legibility, and material and construction adaptation. These dimensions provide conceptual consistency across case studies and ensure that architectural analysis remains theoretically grounded.

3.3. Case Selection and Scope

The study focuses on a purposive selection of public buildings constructed in Southern Vietnam between 1950 and 1975. Public buildings are chosen because they most clearly articulate the interaction between architectural form, institutional representation, and socio-political objectives, and because they were primary vehicles for the dissemination of modern architectural ideals during this period.

Case selection follows three criteria. First, buildings must employ modern construction systems and spatial programs associated with twentieth-century modern architecture, particularly reinforced concrete structures and institutional functions such as education, administration, culture, or infrastructure. Second, cases must demonstrate clear evidence of adaptation to local climatic, cultural, or material conditions, such as the use of sun-shading devices, transitional spaces, courtyards, water elements, or localized material treatments. Third, cases are selected to represent a range of architectural typologies and urban contexts in order to identify recurring adaptive patterns rather than isolated design solutions.

The study does not aim to provide an exhaustive inventory of modern buildings in Southern Vietnam. Instead, it prioritizes analytical depth and comparative insight, using representative cases to illuminate broader architectural mechanisms of adaptation.

3.4. Formal and Visual Architectural Analysis

Formal and visual analysis constitutes the core empirical method of the study. This analysis examines façade articulation, spatial organization, plan configuration, structural systems, material use, and climatic adaptation strategies through architectural drawings, photographs, site plans, and, where possible, on-site observation. Attention is given to how architectural elements function both technically and symbolically, particularly in mediating environmental performance and cultural meaning.

Comparative analysis across cases is employed to identify recurring design strategies and adaptive mechanisms, such as layered façade systems, brise-soleil integration, veranda and corridor typologies, and the treatment of concrete and local aggregates. The emphasis is placed on patterns of adaptation rather than stylistic categorization, allowing the study to move beyond individual buildings toward a more systematic understanding of adaptive vernacular processes within modern architecture.

By integrating historical inquiry, theoretical synthesis, and detailed architectural analysis, the methodological framework supports a coherent and systematic examination of how modern architecture in Southern Vietnam was localized through adaptive vernacular strategies. This approach enables both context-sensitive interpretation and analytical generalization, contributing to broader debates on global modernism, architectural hybridity, and twentieth-century architectural heritage.

4. Research Results and Discussions

4.1. Factors Influencing the Development of Modern Architecture in Southern Vietnam

4.1.1. Political Context

When implementing their initial colonial program aimed at transforming the Vietnamese into what was described as "yellow-skinned French," the French administration prioritized a comprehensive re-planning of the Saigon–Cholon urban area. This planning followed Gwendolyn Wright's "checkerboard model," characterized by straight, perpendicular streets and clearly delineated land plots designed to facilitate administrative control and urban infrastructure development. As Wright (1991) argues, the grid form not only reproduced a familiar spatial order for the colonizers but also systematically excluded vernacular architecture, erasing Vietnamese cultural memory and urban customs in pursuit of ethnic assimilation (Wright, 1991) .

Similarly, Findley identifies "spatial transformation" as one of the four primary strategies employed by ruling political institutions to assert and consolidate power through the reshaping of urban form by erasure and reconstruction according to metropolitan models (Nguyen, 2020) . Although a classical colonial strategy, this approach proved highly effective in demonstrating imperial authority and reflected the competitive political logic of global colonial expansion (Romero, 2023) .

The political context between 1950 and 1975 was decisive in shaping modern architecture in Southern Vietnam. Rather than introducing extensive new planning frameworks, the United States largely exploited and optimized the existing urban structure inherited from the colonial period. This approach aligned with the policy of "using Vietnamese to govern Vietnamese," through which Washington supported the Republic of Vietnam by establishing special economic and military zones as a counterforce to the socialist government in the North (Cordulack, 2013) .

Saigon–Gia Định, as the political and administrative center, experienced relatively little direct warfare because it was designated as an American-backed special zone. Nevertheless, large-scale forced migration and rapid demographic growth fundamentally transformed the city. Saigon's population increased from approximately 1.285 million in 1954 to nearly three million by early 1970 (Desbarats, 1987). Within this context, international modern architecture emerged as a rapid and effective instrument for constructing new urban models, surpassing the earlier Indochinese architectural style and propelling modern architecture in Southern Vietnam to its historical peak.

4.1.2. Natural Conditions - Local Culture

The tropical monsoon climate near the equator, characterized by year-round intense heat, heavy rainfall, and high humidity, is a defining feature of Southern Vietnam. Modern architectural works incorporated elements such as brise-soleil, extended roofs, canopies, and natural ventilation openings, gradually forming adaptive vernacular characteristics in the architecture of the period (Schenck, 2020).

Taking advantage of abundant raw materials such as stone, gravel, and clay found in the Southeast region, the Republic of Vietnam government developed a series of quarries in Bien Hoa (Dong Nai Province), Thu Duc, and Hoa An, while continuously extracting sand and stone from the Dong Nai and Saigon rivers. According to Robert R. Ploger (1974), Southern Vietnam had more than 150 large and small facilities for the production of building materials, with the highest concentration in the Southeast. This created a significantly more favorable supply of construction materials for modern architecture in Southern Vietnam compared to other regions (Ploger, 1974).

According to Ly Hieu Tung (2015), the two most distinctive features of the Southern region are its diverse natural geography and vibrant patterns of cultural exchange. Southern Vietnam has long been a locus of cultural convergence, where successive civilizations and migrant communities collectively shaped its social, spatial, and architectural identity. The Oc Eo culture (1st to 17th centuries), associated with the ancient Funan Kingdom, bears strong Indian influences, evident in its temple typologies, sculptural forms, and hydraulic canal systems. The subsequent Angkor (Khmer) civilization further shaped the southern landscape through its religious architecture, iconography, and migration patterns. During the 17th and 18th centuries, waves of Vietnamese (Kinh) migration expanded southward, reclaiming land and laying the socio-cultural foundations of the region. The Minh Huong and Chinese immigrant communities contributed to trade, urban morphology,

and culinary culture. Later, French colonial rule and American presence introduced new layers of urban planning, infrastructure, and architectural expression, leaving lasting imprints on the built environment (Schenck, 2020).

This cultural and historical diversity fostered an openness among Southern people to transformation, selective absorption, and adaptation, enriching their cultural identity. Trained architects were particularly receptive to international ideas and actively contributed to the global Modernist movement (Schenck, 2020).

In her dissertation "Architecture et urbanisme en situation coloniale: le cas du Vietnam," Caroline Herbelin proposed a framework that moves beyond binary colonial interpretations. Rather than viewing colonial architecture as a unilateral tool of domination, she contended that it involved mutual adaptation between colonizers and the colonized. The architectural encounter was marked by conflict, resistance, negotiation, and cultural adaptation. Colonial architecture not only replicated metropolitan values but also gave rise to new communities for indigenous populations while compelling colonizers to engage with local environments (Herbelin, 2016; Schenck, 2020).

4.1.3. Education and Professional Practice

The Indochina Fine Arts College, established during French colonial rule, marked the introduction of the modern university model in Vietnam and throughout Indochina (Taylor, 1997). Its curriculum was equally divided between "Western fine arts" such as painting, sculpture, and decorative arts, and "Eastern applied arts," focusing on traditional materials like ceramics, lacquer, silk, wood, and interior design. This blending of Western academic norms with Eastern craftsmanship fostered a cultural dialogue that allowed Vietnamese artists and architects to move beyond traditional conservatism while preserving regional adaptability and refinement (Taylor, 1997; Herbelin, 2016). Following the 1954 Geneva Agreement, the college was shut down, and many of its faculty and students relocated to the South. In the ensuing decades, Saigon emerged as a vibrant cultural and architectural center, supported by provisional government policies that provided fertile ground for modern architectural practice.

The professional status and agency of Vietnamese architects changed significantly under the American-supported Republic of Vietnam compared to the colonial period. Caroline Herbelin (2016) argues that during French rule, urban planning was imposed top-down, with French architects controlling design and Vietnamese professionals relegated to support roles. In contrast, the American influence emphasized projecting a modern national image and integrated Vietnamese architects more fully into public projects (Schenck, 2020). The International Style—characterized by concrete, steel, and glass—became the dominant architectural language promoted by American advisors. However, Southern architects negotiated these modernist forms by localizing spatial elements such as courtyards, verandas, sunshades, and Eastern motifs, integrating them with climatic and cultural considerations (Schenck, 2020; Ly, 2015). As a result, modern architecture in the South became a tool of soft power: both rejecting the colonial legacy and reinterpreting global modernism into what may be described as Adaptive Vernacular Architecture (Schenck, 2020).

The map in Figure 1 shows that public buildings are highly concentrated in the central area of District 1. This pattern results from the French colonial approach to urban planning, which introduced a structured transportation grid and reorganized large land parcels into geometric layouts. Major road systems were designed to facilitate efficient movement to other districts, contributing to the rise of District 1 as the administrative and commercial hub of Southern Vietnam. This transformation laid the foundation for numerous modern architectural projects to emerge as “new landmarks,” representing the region’s shift toward modernization and internationalization (Schenck, 2020).

Between 1950 and 1975, the facade design of public buildings continuously evolved, reshaping the city’s visual and spatial identity. In response to Vietnam’s tropical monsoon climate, architectural solutions prioritized ventilation, shading, insulation, and natural lighting. This led to the development of layered spatial configurations such as front yards, verandas, open corridors, and courtyards (Schenck, 2020). A central element in this climatic adaptation was the brise-soleil, or “sun-breaker,” a sun-shading device introduced from French modernism and adapted by Southern architects.

When buffer corridors were present, as in many school and office buildings, brise-soleil forms were minimal since the corridor already served climatic purposes. However, when these were absent, the brise-soleil became a dominant feature of the façade, forming what was often called a “double-skin” envelope. A notable

example is the facade of the Independence Palace, shown in Figure 3, designed by architect Ngo Viet Thu. The building integrates wide interior glass windows with a reinforced concrete outer shell made of "stone flower screens." These function both as shading devices and cultural symbols, referencing the traditional "Buc ban doors" from Hue's imperial architecture, thereby embedding local identity within a modernist design language (Schenck, 2020).

4.2. Vernacular Elements in Public Modern Architecture in Southern Vietnam

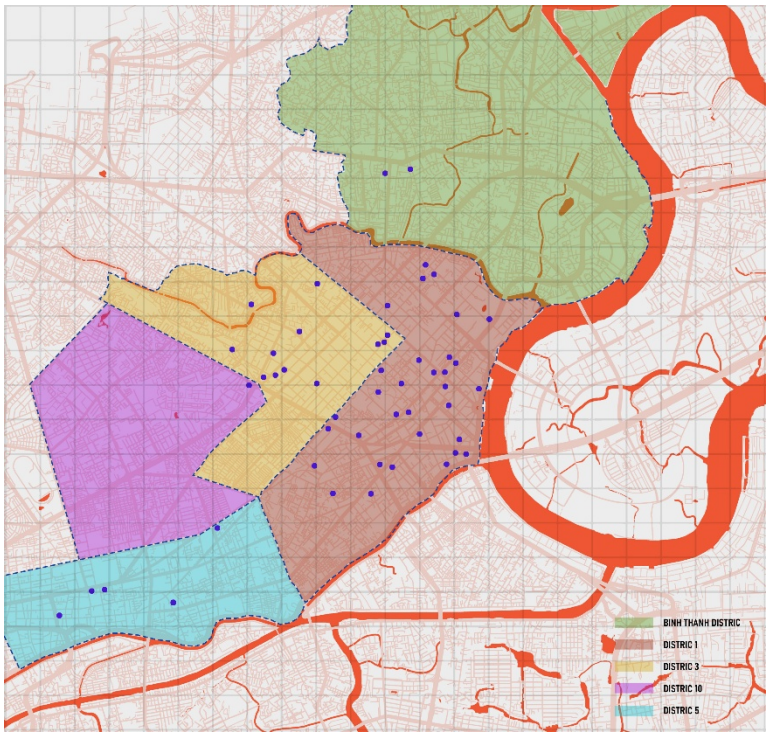

Figure 1. The type of housing and the living space of the residents

The map in Figure 1 shows that public buildings are highly concentrated in the central area of District 1. This spatial distribution comes from the French colonial method of urban planning, which introduced a well-structured transportation network and divided large land plots into a grid layout. Major road systems were strategically designed to connect District 1 with surrounding areas, supporting efficient movement across the city. As a result, District 1 developed into the administrative and commercial center of Southern Vietnam. This transformation supported the construction of modern architectural works that became visual symbols of economic growth and international influence (Schenck, 2020).

Between 1950 and 1975, the design of public building facades experienced ongoing innovation and played a key role in reshaping the city's identity. In Vietnam's tropical monsoon climate, buildings had to meet environmental needs such as ventilation, insulation, and maximizing natural light. These goals led to the inclusion of transitional spaces such as front yards, verandas, open corridors, and courtyards (Schenck, 2020). One of the main design strategies during this period was the use of the brise-soleil, a French architectural element that blocks sunlight.

In buildings that included buffer corridors, as shown in Figure 2, the brise-soleil was often minimized because the corridor already provided protection from heat and light. In buildings without buffer spaces, the brise-soleil was expanded into what is known as a double-skin facade. This created an outer screen system for the building that improved climate control and added depth to the visual structure (Schenck, 2020; Schenck, 2020).

A well-known example is the facade of the Independence Palace shown in Figure 3. Architect Ngo Viet Thu combined large interior glass panels to allow light and views with exterior concrete screens shaped like stone flowers. These screens filtered sunlight and also referred to the traditional Buc ban wooden doors found

in royal architecture from Hue. In this way, modern building design included both climate performance and cultural symbolism (Logan, 2000; Schenck, 2020).

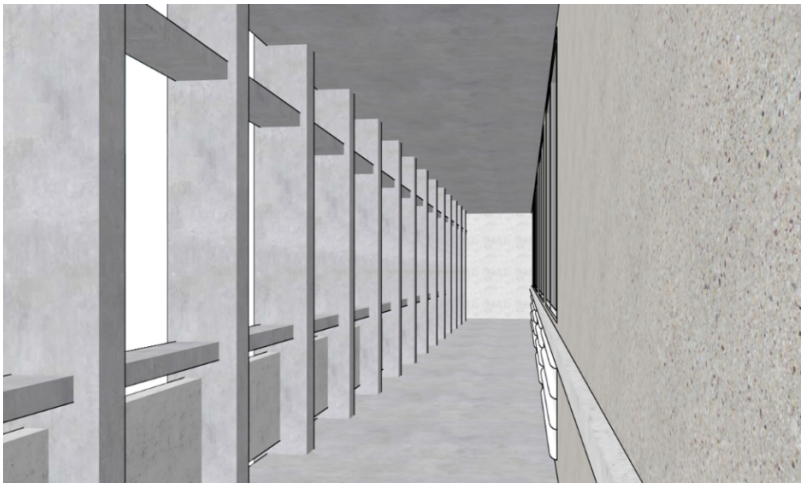

Figure 2. The brise-soleil, composed of combined vertical and horizontal louvers, at Ho Chi Minh City University of Architecture, 1976.

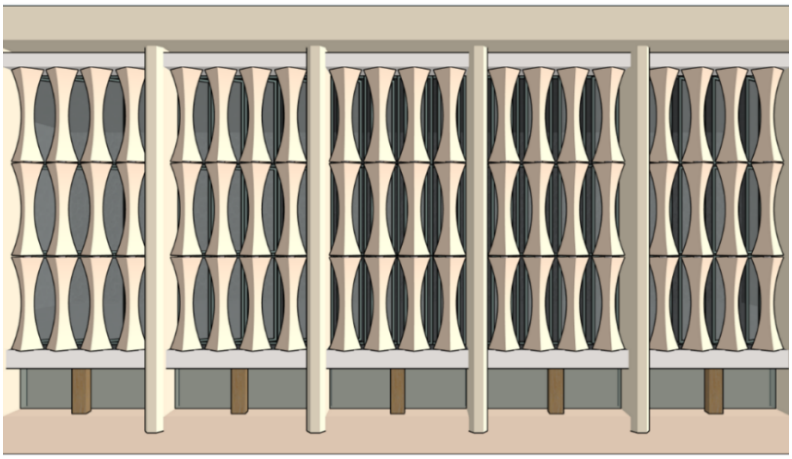

Figure 3. *The facade of the Independence Palace, 1966, with a glass curtain wall behind the brise-soleil.*

4.2.1. Facade with Vertical and Horizontal Modules

The organization of facade divisions in Southern Vietnamese modern architecture was strongly influenced by the De Stijl movement. Originating from the Netherlands, De Stijl emphasized the use of simple geometric forms, clean lines, and the dynamic interplay between vertical and horizontal planes. This principle was translated into architectural practice in the South of Vietnam, where vertical and horizontal divisions were both clearly articulated in building elevations (Schenck, 2020). Vertical elements are often represented as detached columns placed in front of the main walls. These columns not only define the structure but also create buffer zones such as corridors or balconies, which support passive ventilation and shading in the tropical climate (Schenck, 2020). In contrast, horizontal features are more expressive and resonate with traditional Vietnamese wooden architecture.

The expression of horizontal elements often evokes cultural memory. For instance, the prominent horizontal beam in the elevation of the Ho Chi Minh City University of Architecture reflects the design of the purlin found in traditional wooden houses (Figure 4 & 5). This not only reinforces the formal logic of modernist architecture but also embeds a symbolic reference to local craftsmanship and construction techniques (Nguyen

and Vu, 2017). This blending of structural function with cultural reference represents a key characteristic of Southern Vietnam's modernism.

In some cases, horizontal design emphasis is further developed through the use of ventilation brick panels. These panels, attached directly to floor beams, generate decorative patterns between beams and rafters. Although these elements contribute to air circulation, their placement sometimes prioritizes visual rhythm over technical optimization for solar shading. This shows that architects balanced environmental performance with aesthetic values, carefully negotiating the technical and artistic dimensions of facade design (Schenck, 2020).

The adoption of De Stijl principles and international modernist forms in Southern Vietnam did not result in blind imitation. Instead, architects creatively adapted global ideas by incorporating vernacular construction logic, spatial traditions, and symbolic motifs. This produced a hybrid architectural language that respected local identity while contributing to a broader modernist movement. Rather than being passive recipients, Vietnamese architects were active agents of cultural synthesis in the postcolonial era (Herbelin, 2016).

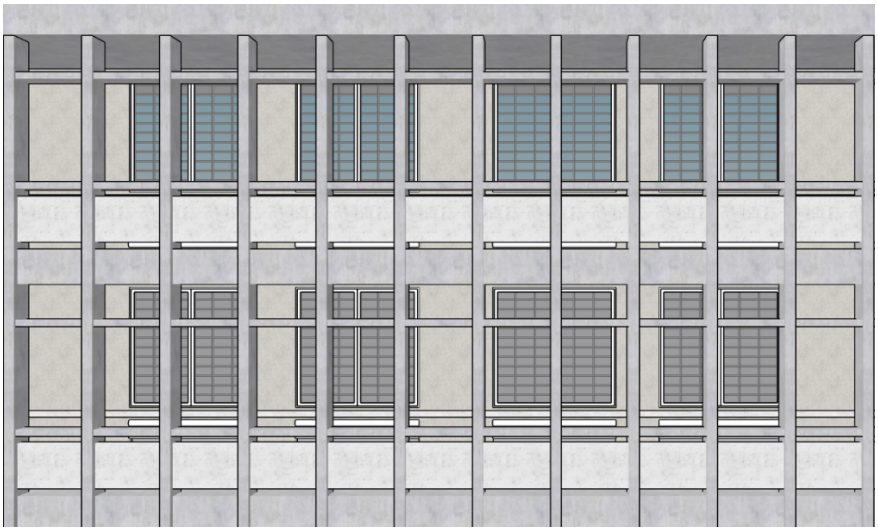

Figure 4. The suspended horizontal beam suggests a purlin within the facade divisions at Ho Chi Minh City University of Architecture, 1976.

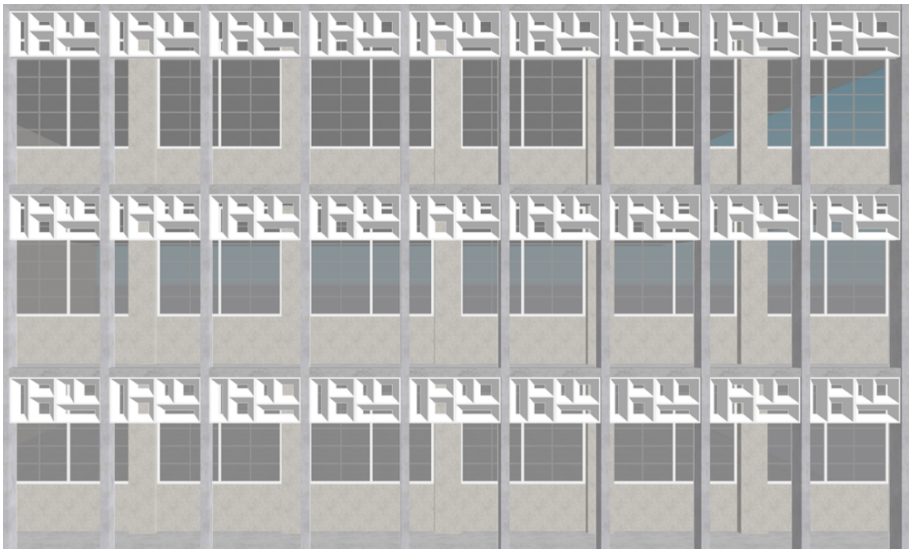

Figure 5. The horizontal division is made of ventilated brick panels attached to the floor beams, forming a decorative feature at Ho Chi Minh City University of Medicine and Pharmacy, 1947.

4.2.2. Facade with Repetitive Patterns

The expressiveness of the building's façade is accentuated through the combination of decorative motifs and structural divisions, which function as key elements in organizing the overall layout. At the General Science Library, as shown in Figure 6, the façade is composed of evenly distributed rectangular sections. Within these panels, motifs such as dragons, phoenixes, and stylized Sino-Vietnamese characters like "Cong," "Tho," and "Van" are placed in symmetrical arrangements. This organization evokes the visual composition of a traditional East Asian folding screen, reinforcing the cultural continuity embedded in modern architecture (Nguyen et al, 2021).

Figure 6. The facade of the General Science Library, 1971.

These decorative surfaces are not strictly tied to traditional motifs. As illustrated in Figure 7, similar effects can be produced using modern geometric forms or abstract patterns. This substitution represents a flexible design strategy, where decorative panels serve dual roles: contributing to environmental comfort through shading and ventilation, and simultaneously enhancing the visual identity of the building. This adaptability reflects how modernist architects in Southern Vietnam localized international trends without abandoning indigenous expression (Schenck, 2020).

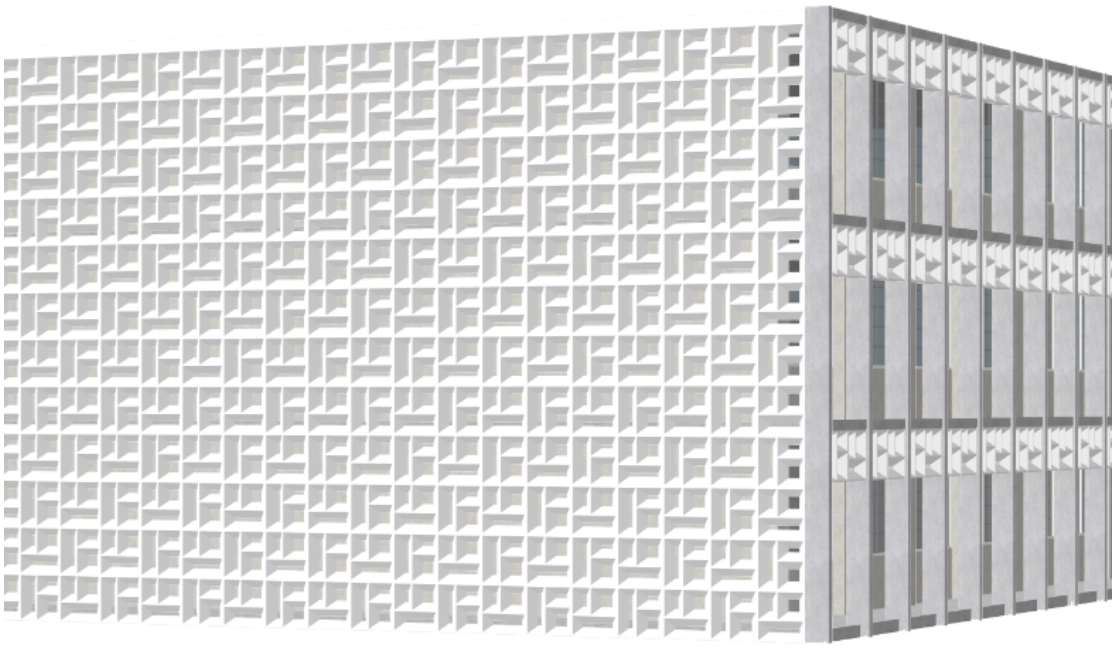

Figure 7. The arrangement of rectangles on the facade of Ho Chi Minh City University of Medicine and Pharmacy, 1947.

At the VOH Radio Station, shown in Figure 8, curved-cast concrete screens fully wrap the façade, creating the appearance of a lightweight and ornamental net covering the structure. This delicate visual texture contrasts with the solid materiality of reinforced concrete, displaying how surface treatments can humanize modernist forms and enrich their symbolic resonance. The patterns simultaneously provide passive shading and introduce a sense of visual motion (Huong, 2025).

Figure 8. The facade of VOH Radio Station, 1969 - after 1975.

Another striking example is the V.A.R. building, presented in Figure 9. Here, thin precast concrete panels are composed into continuous horizontal bands. These bands resemble a descending curtain, and the tension created between the static wall and the dynamic modular screen generates visual interest across the building's

surface. The panels are organized into large modular groups installed in parallel with the building walls, producing deep and shifting shadows throughout the day. This interaction between sunlight, depth, and surface highlights the technical and aesthetic sophistication of mid-century Vietnamese modernist design (Nguyen, 2021).

Together, these case studies reflect how postcolonial Vietnamese architects engaged in a process of synthesis. They blended global modernist forms with regional techniques, materials, and symbolic meanings. Facades were no longer simply functional enclosures but became complex cultural and climatic interfaces. These architectural screens served to filter light, air, and identity at the same time, making modernist buildings in Southern Vietnam deeply contextual and expressive.

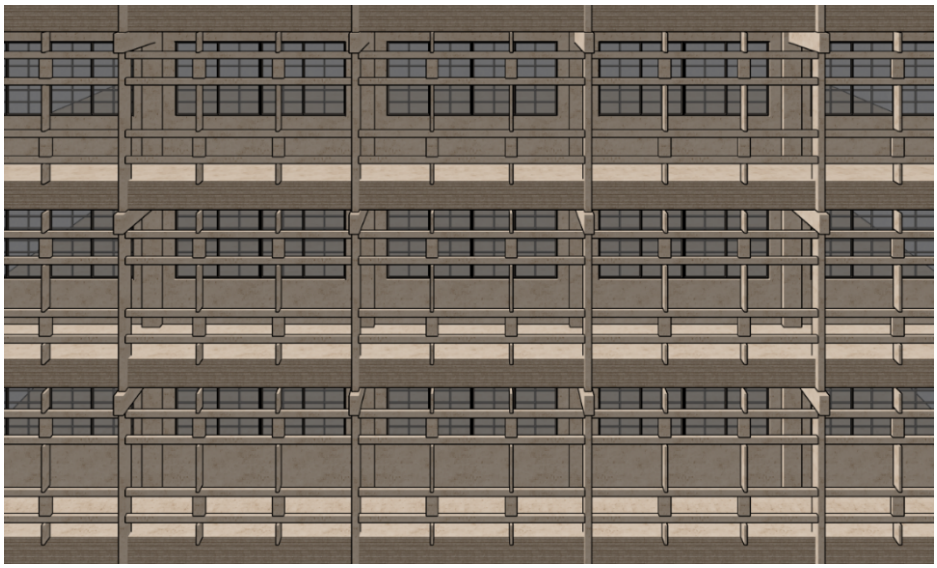

Figure 9. The facade of the V.A.R Building, 1973.

4.2.3. Expressive Facades

Modernist architects in Southern Vietnam advanced their abstract compositional thinking by incorporating sculptural and symbolic forms into civic and religious buildings. These elements were not simply decorative but deeply connected to national identity, political symbolism, and the reinterpretation of cultural heritage through modern materials and construction techniques.

One of the most representative examples is the "Flower of Freedom" tower located at Cong Truong Quoc Te (Figure 10). The structure consists of five slender reinforced concrete columns that rise 34 meters and gradually unfold into five large petals. Each petal is further subdivided into five smaller petals, symbolizing complexity and unity. Originally, the structure was topped with a copper floral element, which has since been lost. Despite this, the tower continues to represent freedom and resilience, invoking the imagery of the lotus flower, a powerful symbol in Vietnamese cultural and spiritual tradition. As Schenck (2020) notes, the tower illustrates how Vietnamese modernist architects infused abstract formalism with local symbolic meaning, creating monuments that conveyed political aspirations while maintaining compositional clarity. Hahn (2017) further explains that these projects often operated as urban emblems, combining national pride with sculptural invention.

Another important sculptural work is the building that once stood at 30 Phung Khac Khoan Street, illustrated in Figure 11. Originally designed as a foreign embassy in the diplomatic district, it was later occupied by the Military Commission of the Communist Party of Vietnam. The building, demolished in 2019, featured a system of diagonal support columns that anchored two horizontal slabs. These columns formed a triangular structural grid across the facade. The building demonstrated a unique synthesis of geometry and structural

innovation. According to Nguyen (2019), such forms reflected both the technical curiosity of the period and a desire to create buildings that conveyed motion and strength within a tropical context.

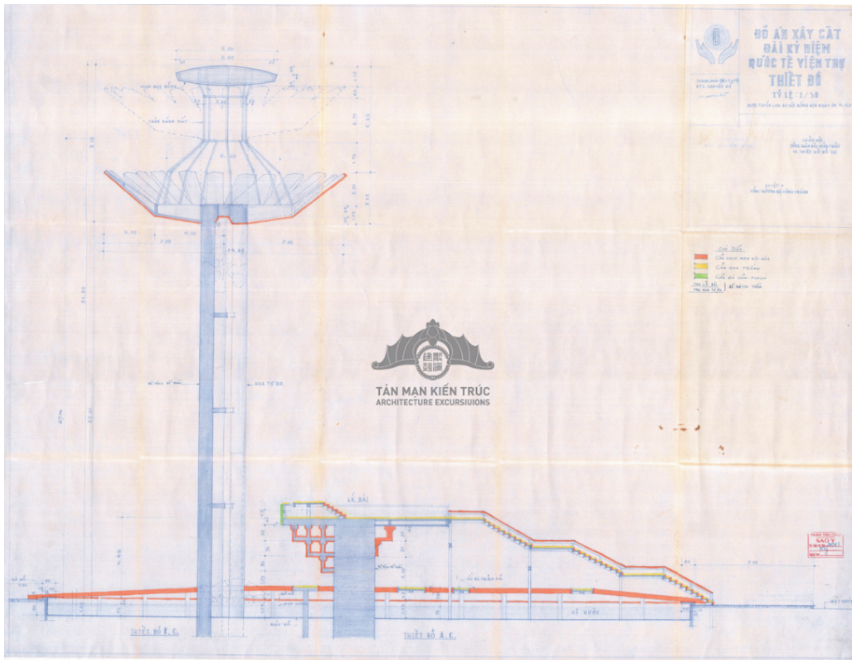

Figure 10. *The section of the "Flower of Freedom" Monument, Turtle Lake, 1965-1967.*

Figure 11. The corner facade of the building at 30 Phung Khac Khoan Street.

In religious architecture, the St. Vincent de Paul Church, as presented in Figure 12, showcases another approach to modernist facade expression. The building integrates thin shell structures and sharply defined vertical forms with a ventilated facade system. The juxtaposition of heavy concrete and light perforated surfaces produces a curtain-like effect across the exterior. This facade, composed of layered concrete modules and grid-

based openings, plays with sunlight and shadow to create a dynamic appearance. Vu and Nguyen (2021) describe this architectural technique as an attempt to reconcile international modernist aesthetics with traditional Vietnamese spatial sensitivity, particularly in sacred buildings.

These examples highlight the late phase of Vietnamese modernism, where architecture became a platform for both artistic experimentation and national storytelling. Sculptural facades, symbolic geometry, and material innovation allowed architects to articulate a new cultural identity. Rather than mimicking Western models, Southern Vietnamese architects transformed them into locally resonant forms, contributing to a uniquely Southeast Asian architectural legacy.

Figure 12. The facade of Saint Vincent de Paul Church, at 42 Tu Xuong Street, District 3, Ho Chi Minh City, 1950s.

4.2.4. Plan Layout

The architectural principle of the "free plan", first theorized by Le Corbusier, was instrumental in reshaping modern architecture in Vietnam. This concept enabled architects to organize internal spaces based on functional logic rather than strict structural constraints. In Vietnamese applications, architects adapted the free plan by merging modern flexibility with local spatial traditions. A notable example is the Independence Palace in Ho Chi Minh City, designed by Ngo Viet Thu, whose layout was both symbolically and functionally complex.

As illustrated in Figure 13, the Palace's floor plan adopts the shape of the Sino-Vietnamese character "Cat" (吉), traditionally associated with prosperity and good fortune. This symbolic layout is aligned with a north-south axis, resembling the "spirit path" found in the imperial city of Hue. While the axiality reflects Confucian spatial order, the interior spaces are arranged asymmetrically to accommodate different ceremonial and administrative functions. This design reflects Ngo Viet Thu's synthesis of modernist spatial logic and Vietnamese metaphysical symbolism (Schenck, 2020).

The front garden, shaped as a symmetrical oval, evokes French colonial-era landscape design, offering a transition from the street to the palace. This green space is connected to the palace by long shaded verandas, which play both climatic and social roles. According to Cruse (2021), in Vietnamese culture, verandas serve as semi-public zones where airflow is maximized and social interaction occurs. They act as transitional buffers between interior and exterior, regulating both climate and privacy.

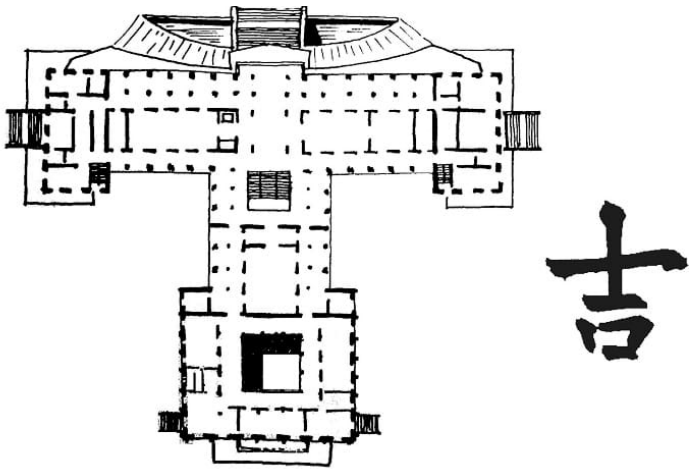

Figure 13. Floor Plan of is the Independence Palace, 1966.

Southern Vietnam's identity as a "city of rivers and canals" also influences modern architecture through the integration of water features in both landscape and building design. In traditional southern homes, ponds and lakes were functional and symbolic. They regulated temperature, enhanced the aesthetic appeal of gardens, and often held spiritual connotations related to balance and harmony (Đào et al, 2021).

This integration of water continues in modern civic projects. At Turtle Lake, shown in Figure 14, planners used an octagonal water surface design that combines functional urban space with Eastern cosmological symbolism. The form reflects the eight trigrams of I Ching, suggesting balance between the material and spiritual world. Schwenkel (2013) notes that this geometric water element draws from the legacy of Gia Dinh City's colonial-era planning while embodying Buddhist and Confucian values.

Modern buildings also utilize water elements for thermal and environmental purposes. At the General Science Library, a rectangular shallow pond runs parallel to the building footprint (Figure 15). This design minimizes visual separation between structure and ground, while increasing evaporation and cooling effect, particularly effective in the tropical monsoon climate. Similarly, in Figure 16, the "stomach-shaped" pond located within the Ho Chi Minh City University of Medicine and Pharmacy features curved edges and is surrounded by shaded courtyards and vegetation. The soft geometry improves airflow, maximizes microclimatic comfort, and introduces a sense of natural integration into the academic complex (Nguyen, 2020).

Collectively, these examples illustrate how Vietnamese architects localized modernist principles, especially the free plan, by integrating vernacular spatial practices, spiritual symbolism, and climatic adaptation. The result is a uniquely regional form of modernism that reflects both global architectural movements and indigenous cultural values.

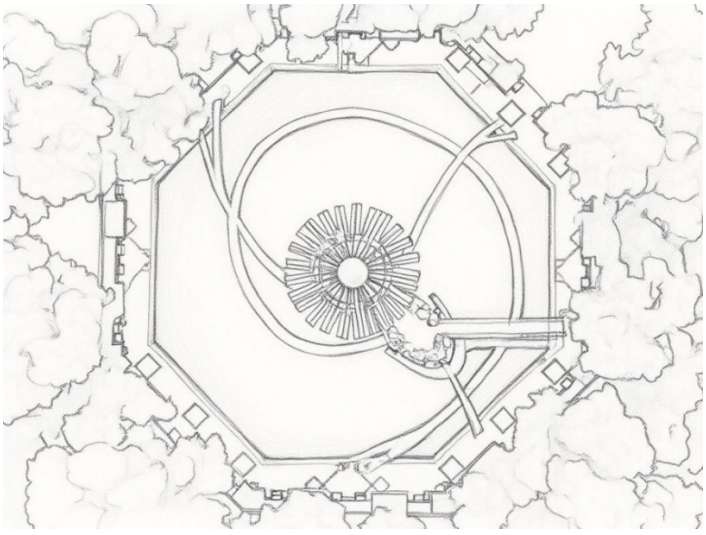

Figure 14. Site Plan of Turtle Lake, 1965-1967, in Ho Chi Minh City.

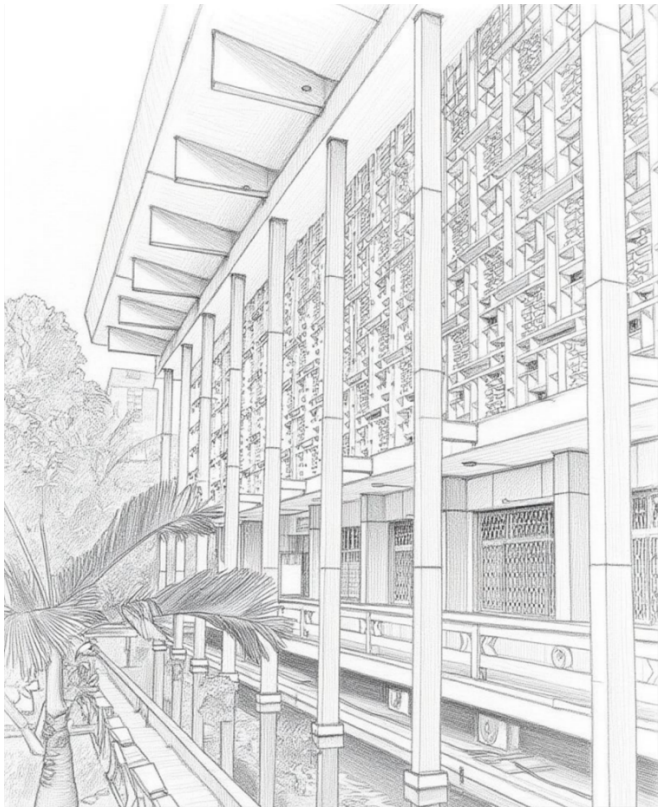

Figure 15. The water surface at the General Science Library, 1971, in Ho Chi Minh City.

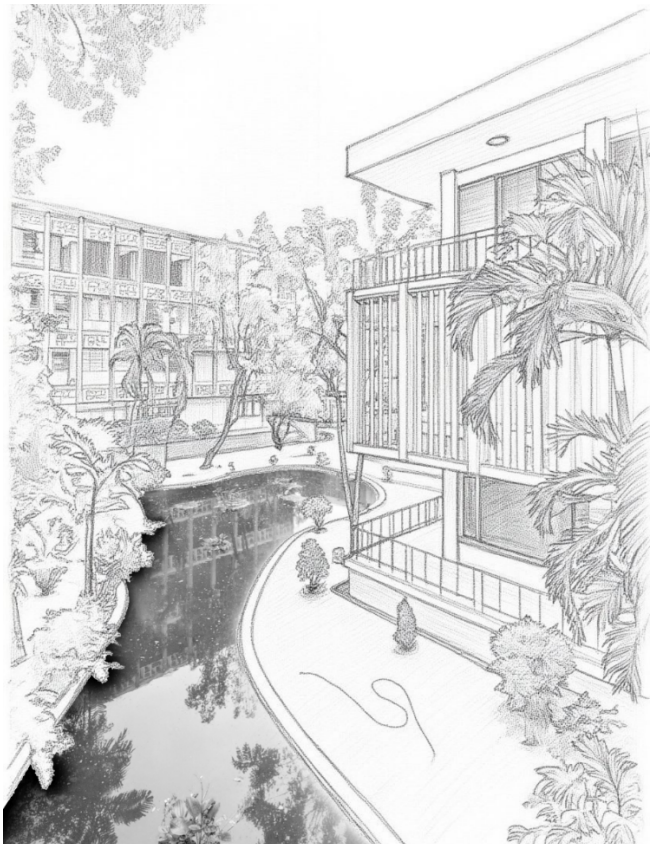

Figure 16. The "stomach" pond at Ho Chi Minh City University of Medicine and Pharmacy, 1947.

4.2.5. Structure and local construction materials

Brutalism emerged in post-war architecture as a response to the perceived detachment of modernism from structural honesty and material expression. In Southern Vietnam, Brutalism became a significant architectural language that shaped both public and infrastructural buildings, particularly between the 1960s and 1970s. Its adoption marked a shift in aesthetic values and construction methods, responding simultaneously to global influences and local environmental challenges.

Central to Brutalism are two formal principles: the clear articulation of volumes and the celebration of raw construction materials. These principles are reflected in many public buildings in Southern Vietnam, where flat roofs and structural blocks are separated through overhanging cantilever beams, creating distinct profiles between the roof and wall planes. As depicted in Figures 17 and 18, these cantilever beams, often with a 1:5 width-to-length ratio, appear slender and elegant while maintaining structural robustness. This gap between mass and roof forms a continuous ventilation strip, improving air circulation and reducing heat accumulation beneath the roof slab. Schenck (2020) notes that this use of separated massing and light cantilevers characterizes Vietnamese interpretations of Brutalist expression, creating both aesthetic balance and climate adaptability.

The Thu Duc Water Plant, shown in Figure 19, is a notable example of this architectural strategy. The building uses large-span cantilever beams that curve slightly with the roof form, conveying a visual unity between structure and shell. The plant's concrete frame structure contrasts sharply with the warm-toned red brick infill, referencing traditional Vietnamese construction techniques while using modern materials. This aesthetic and structural duality is a hallmark of what Nguyen (2019) refers to as “adaptive vernacular brutalism”, where materiality becomes both functional and symbolic.

While Brutalism in Western contexts often favored exposed concrete (béton brut) for its raw texture and “truthfulness” to construction, this approach encountered limitations in Southern Vietnam. The region’s tropical climate, characterized by heavy rainfall and high humidity, accelerates water absorption, surface cracking, and discoloration of unprotected concrete surfaces. As a result, architects and builders in Vietnam adopted more weather-resistant finishing techniques. One such approach was the application of washed concrete, composed of stone chips and gravel, which allowed buildings to retain a raw aesthetic while improving surface durability and drainage. Huong (2025) explain that washed concrete provided a textured finish that resisted weathering and evoked a natural, rugged aesthetic aligned with Brutalist philosophy (Huong, 2025).

These practices exemplify a broader trend of East–West synthesis in Vietnamese modern architecture. While the principles of structural clarity and material honesty remained intact, architects adapted Brutalist language to local materials, labor practices, and environmental needs. This resulted in an adaptive vernacular form of Brutalism, in which buildings were both expressive and responsive. Pham (2024) emphasizes that this adaptation is not merely technical but also cultural, as Brutalist buildings in Southern Vietnam convey both institutional authority and regional identity (Pham, 2024).

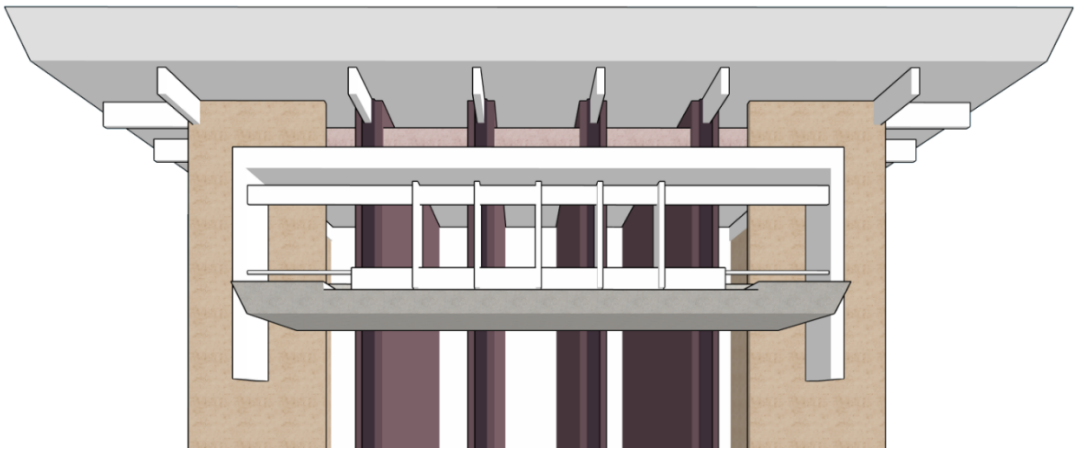

Figure 17. The separation between the building mass and the roof mass of the Ton Duc Thang Museum, 1988.

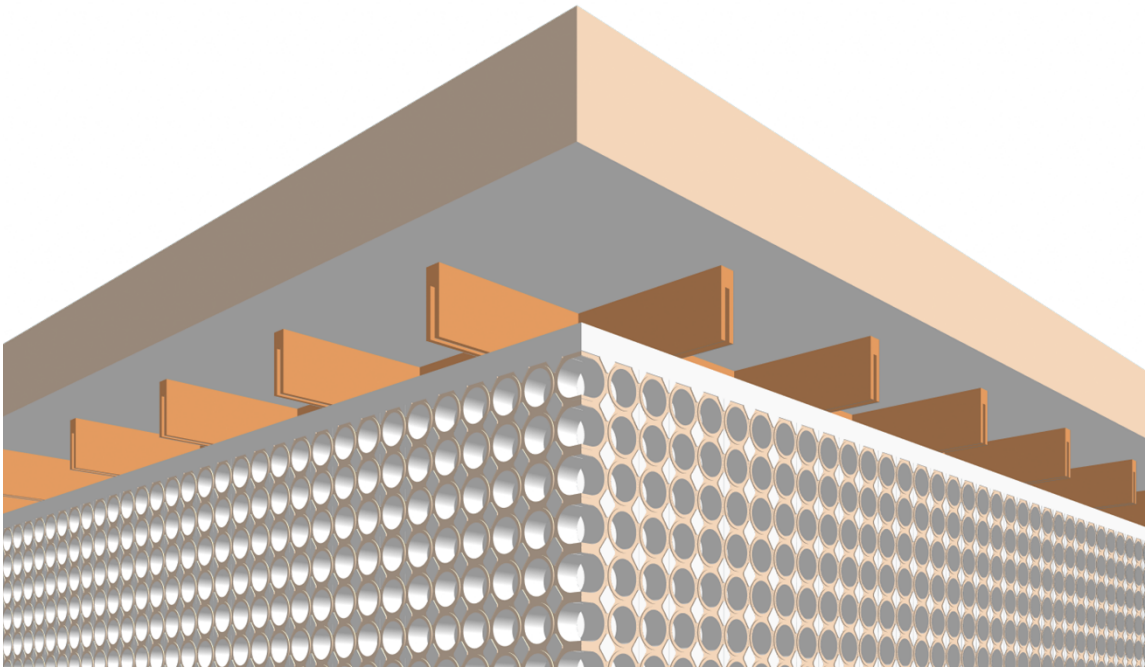

Figure 18. The separation between the building mass and the roof mass of VOH Radio Station, 1969.

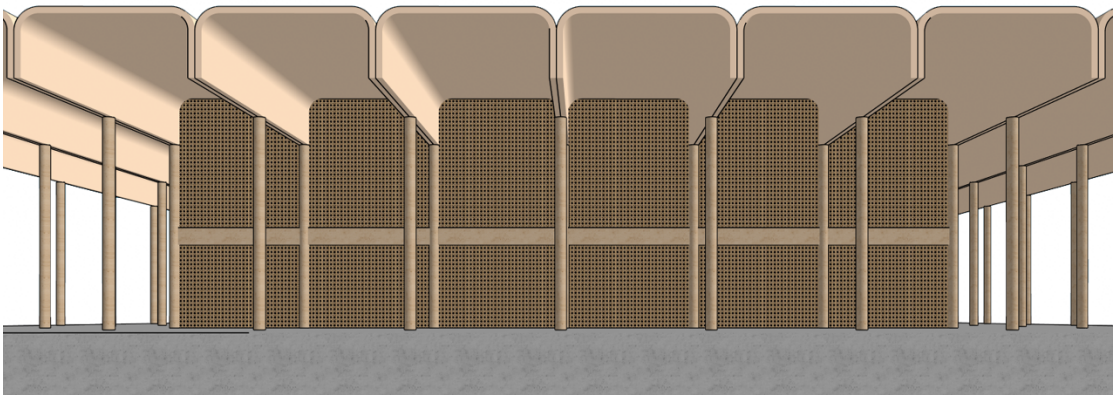

Figure 19. The separation between the building mass and the roof mass of Thu Duc Water Plant, 1966.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that modern architecture in southern Vietnam between 1950 and 1975 was not merely a peripheral adoption of international Modernism but a distinctive form of adaptive indigenous architecture. Through historical analysis, theoretical foundations, and architectural case studies, the research shows that modernism in the South emerged from an ongoing negotiation between global architectural ideals and local climatic, cultural, and social conditions. Surveyed evidence - from façade layouts and spatial organization to structural systems and the use of local materials - indicates that modern public buildings in Saigon combined international principles with longstanding indigenous knowledge to create architecture that was both modern and deeply rooted in local identity.

The political context shaped the rapid pace of urbanization and the demand for new public infrastructure, enabling modernism to become a tool for national governance while creating opportunities for local architects to assert cultural identity. The natural conditions of a tropical monsoon climate and abundant local materials promoted the development of design strategies such as brise - soleil sunshades, transitional verandas, shaded corridors, and water features - elements that transform externally derived forms into climate - adaptive

architecture. The region's rich cultural history and centuries of migration have nurtured a spirit of openness to adaptation, allowing traditional values, symbolic motifs, and spatial customs to be naturally woven into modern architectural layouts. Finally, the development of architectural education and professional practice during this period empowered Vietnamese architects to reinterpret modern ideals rather than merely replicate them, resulting in works that harmoniously combine technical rationality with cultural continuity.

After the liberation of the South in 1975, the unification of North and South Vietnam marked a significant turning point for modern architecture in the South. The post-war economy focused primarily on recovery, agricultural development, and the reconstruction of production facilities. Contemporary architecture in Southern Vietnam before 1975 had been closely tied to a market-oriented economy under U.S. sponsorship, characterized by internationalization, which no longer aligned with the reconstruction priorities of the unified state. Meanwhile, the North was strongly influenced by the collective principles of Soviet architecture, emphasizing functionality and economic efficiency. From 1975 to 1986, modern architecture - dependent on industrial materials such as concrete, steel, and glass, as well as modern construction techniques - struggled to develop amid economic crisis and material shortages. Buildings constructed during this period, under strict government management, were mainly standardized and straightforward, with private individuals playing a minimal role in housing or public works. The pre - 1975 construction efforts in the South had a distinctly "bourgeois" character, leaving a capitalist legacy incompatible with the egalitarian aims of post - war reconstruction. Investment in modern - style public works gradually ceased, and many valuable pre - 1975 modern architectural works in Saigon and the South were demolished or altered, remaining unrecognized as significant components of urban heritage. The unique "adaptive vernacular" was a product of its time and could not survive the subsequent political and economic paradigm shift.

This study demonstrates that modern architecture in Southern Vietnam between 1950 and 1975 was not merely a peripheral adoption of international Modernism but a distinctive form of adaptive indigenous architecture. Through historical contextualization, theoretical synthesis, and architectural case analysis, the research shows that modernism in the South emerged from an ongoing negotiation between global architectural ideals and local climatic, cultural, and social conditions. Evidence drawn from façade articulation, spatial organization, structural systems, and material practices indicates that modern public buildings in Saigon combined international modernist principles with longstanding indigenous knowledge, producing architecture that was both technologically modern and deeply rooted in local identity.

The political context shaped the rapid pace of urbanization and the demand for new public infrastructure, enabling modern architecture to function as an instrument of governance while simultaneously creating opportunities for local architects to assert cultural agency. Tropical monsoon conditions and the availability of local construction materials encouraged the widespread adoption of climate-responsive strategies, including brise-soleil sunshades, transitional verandas, shaded corridors, and integrated water features, which transformed externally derived architectural forms into environmentally adaptive buildings. Moreover, the region's long history of cultural exchange and migration fostered an openness to selective adaptation, allowing traditional spatial logics, symbolic motifs, and social practices to be embedded within modern architectural layouts. The development of architectural education and professional practice during this period further empowered Vietnamese architects to reinterpret modernist principles rather than merely replicate imported models, resulting in architectural works that reconcile technical rationality with cultural continuity.

At the same time, several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is based on a purposive selection of public buildings located primarily in Ho Chi Minh City and surrounding urban areas. While these cases are representative of broader architectural tendencies in Southern Vietnam, they do not capture the full diversity of modern architectural production across smaller cities, rural contexts, or private residential typologies. Second, the study relies largely on archival sources, published documentation, and visual analysis; access to original design archives, construction records, and first-hand accounts from architects or users remains limited, constraining the depth of insight into design decision-making processes. Third, the qualitative nature of the analysis prioritizes interpretive depth over quantitative assessment of environmental performance, meaning that claims regarding climatic adaptation are based on architectural logic and historical evidence rather than measured performance data.

Following the liberation of the South in 1975, the unification of North and South Vietnam marked a decisive turning point for architectural production in the region. Post-war reconstruction priorities, economic

constraints, and centralized planning mechanisms fundamentally altered the conditions that had previously enabled adaptive vernacular modernism to flourish. Modern architecture in the South before 1975 had been closely linked to a market-oriented economy and international exchange under U.S. sponsorship, conditions that no longer aligned with the reconstruction agenda of the unified state. Influenced by Soviet-derived principles emphasizing functionality and economic efficiency, architectural production between 1975 and 1986 became standardized and materially constrained, with limited scope for architectural experimentation. As a result, many pre-1975 modern public buildings were altered or demolished, their cultural and architectural value remaining largely unrecognized within official heritage frameworks.

Despite its historical specificity, the adaptive vernacular modern architecture examined in this study holds enduring relevance. Recognizing these buildings as products of localized architectural agency rather than as politically contingent artifacts contributes to a more inclusive understanding of twentieth-century architectural heritage. Future research could extend this framework through comparative studies across Southeast Asia, incorporate quantitative environmental performance analysis, or examine contemporary reinterpretations of adaptive vernacular principles in current architectural practice. Such directions would further clarify the continuing relevance of adaptive vernacular architecture in addressing climate-responsive and culturally grounded design in rapidly urbanizing regions.

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