



Faces of Vientiane: new construction at the city centre (above); the Monument of the Dead (right), honouring the military heroes of Laos.

Growing Pains

As sleepy Laos wakes up to the demands of modernization, Vientiane struggles to keep its quaint, old facade.

By Bertil Lintner

Vientiane has very little in common with the capitals of Laos's neighbours. It isn't big and grand like Vietnam's Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City. It lacks Phnom Penh's sense of drama. And it certainly is no ultra-modern, shopping centre like Bangkok. To outsiders, the Lao-tian capital, with its French colonial architecture and sleepy atmosphere, seems frozen in time—somewhere in the 19th century.

And that's just how the locals like it. "The only thing this place has to offer is its charm," observes one resident. "And if that were to disappear, Vientiane would become like any ugly, Thai provincial town."

That possibility is hard to rule out. Economic development is arriving in Laos in the shape of foreign investment and industrial growth, and bringing with it some of the architectural trappings of progress. But as much as Laotians need development, they don't want its baggage.

Vientiane residents were outraged two years ago, when Siam Commercial Bank

threatened to demolish an old colonial villa and built a modern high-rise in its place. Locals fired off letters of protest to Thailand's two English-language dailies, *The Nation* and the *Bangkok Post*. The impromptu campaign had its desired effect: the bank scaled down its lofty plans. The management agreed to renovate the villa rather than demolish it, and promised that the bank's updated facade would mirror Vientiane's renowned colonial architectural heritage.

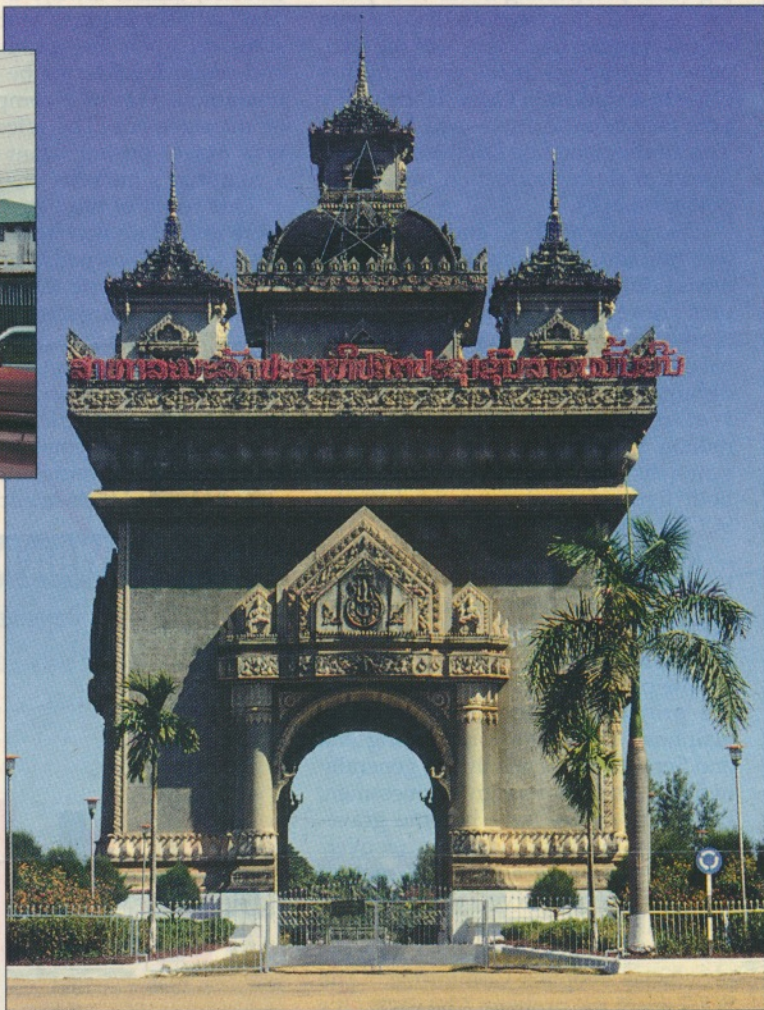
The flap over the bank also alerted city planners to the dangers of unchecked development. In 1994, the Soviet-educated director-general of Architecture and City Planning, Somphone Dethoudom, unveiled a master plan. While allowing the city to keep up with the demands of development and modernization, his department would enforce measures to preserve old Vientiane. "There should be no building taller than 20 metres in the city," Somphone said. "And the styles would have to comply with the rest of Vientiane's architecture."

So far, developers have moulded their designs to conform to the new rules—with

two notable exceptions. City officials gave the nod to a bank building on Lane Xang Avenue, Vientiane's main thoroughfare, and the Lao Plaza & Shopping Centre—under construction next to the Revolutionary Museum in the city centre. Neither project is within the guidelines. And before the new rules took effect, a shopping centre being built on the route to the airport triggered the demolition of several old French buildings.

But city planners have had some successes, too. Thongsay Sayavongkhamdy, director of Museums, Historical Buildings and Archaeology, has been instrumental in preserving famous Vientiane landmarks. An American investor planned to tear down the National Library, next to the Nam Phu fountain, to make way for a luxury tourist hotel. Thongsay's office scuttled the project.

Despite his efforts to preserve Vientiane, Thongsay recognizes that it is a fairly young city—despite its old-fashioned appearance. Invading Thai armies ravaged the old town in the late 1820s. They left only a single temple standing, Wat



B.J. ADAMS INSET: BERTIL LINTNER

A Breath of Fresh Air

Sisaket. Perhaps its design, in the style of the new dynasty in Bangkok, was its saving grace. The historic Wat Phra Keo, once home to the Emerald Buddha—which is now in Bangkok—was not so fortunate. Devastated, it sat amid the rubble for more than 100 years. Finally, in 1936, Prince Souvanna Phouma, then Laos's chief engineer and later its prime minister, launched a drive to resurrect old Vientiane. The city then restored the temple and several other significant sites to their former glory.

Most of Laos's unique architectural heritage actually dates from the 1920s and 1930s. At the time, the French built administrative and residential buildings in this remote outpost of their Indochinese empire. French-style architecture soon dominated the area. In the early 1970s, when the pre-Communist government set out to build a retreat in Vientiane for the King (who normally resided in the royal capital of Luang Prabang), it erected a grand, French-style manor. Called Haw

In the smelly pool of black water behind Vientiane's Morning Market, squatters have erected flimsy homes on tottering stilts. Critics see this 15-hectare lake, Nong Chanh, as an eyesore which should be filled in and reclaimed. But their protests have triggered a heated debate in the Lao capital—and conservationists are sounding an alarm.

They may look repulsive, but Nong Chanh and a few other wetlands are Vientiane's "green lungs." They function as natural drainage systems and valuable sources of oxygen. They are comparable to Bangkok's Phra Padaeng swamps, which Thai environmental-

ists now are struggling hard to save from development's grip.

Their demise would hit the pocketbook, perhaps as hard as the environment. "If natural wetlands like Nong Chanh were removed," says a foreign development expert in Vientiane, "technical substitutes ranging from air conditioners to pumping stations and treatment plants would be required."

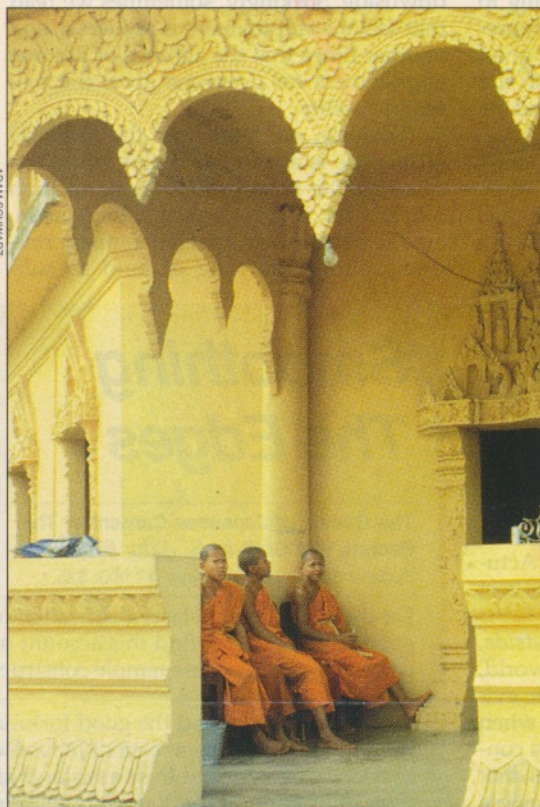
Under one proposal, Nong Chanh would be cleaned up and preserved as a lake for recreational use. In a world that's growing ever more aware of the need to safeguard the environment, that plan holds appeal. But it, too, is bound to stir up

some controversy: Most of the squatters are illegal immigrants from Vietnam and Thailand's northeast corner, who make their living by selling the lake's rich bounty of aquatic plants such as duckweed and water hyacinths. For the first time, Laos would have to evict—perhaps forcibly—an unwanted community that has lived in its midst for years without incident.

This debate points up challenges facing Laos in managing its development. New issues like these sprout from economic growth in a country which for decades was a sleepy, stagnant backwater—not unlike Nong Chanh itself. ■ Bertil Lintner



Standing out: (above) Wat Ammon pagoda near Vientiane; (right) interior of a temple in Luang Prabang.



Kham, or Golden Palace, many visitors mistake it for an old colonial residence rather than a relatively modern building.

The challenge for Vientiane's city planners is to safeguard these new and old traditions while keeping abreast of the requirements of modernization and development. The country doesn't have the resources to tackle this job itself, though. So officials have called in outside help. Last year, the government applied with UNESCO, the United Nations' educational agency, for World Heritage Site status for several historical sites. They included Vientiane's That Luang temple and the Wat Phu temple in Champasak, the Plain

of Jars. Most importantly, they sought to protect the old royal capital of Luang Prabang, considered a centre for traditional Lao architecture and culture.

It takes about 18 months to process an application for World Heritage Site status. But the campaign to preserve Luang Prabang has already kicked off. Initial plans for a new road that would link Vientiane with northern Laos had it cutting

right through the old town. "We managed to stop that," says Thongsas. Instead, a ring road will divert it around the town—and some city planners are even talking about banning private motor traffic altogether in the oldest part of Luang Prabang. Workers there are renovating and regilding the city's ancient temples—more than 40 in all. And they've given the town's many French villas their first coat of paint in years.

Enhancements to the city are more than cosmetic, however. Luang Prabang's master plan also includes a scheme to preserve the forest on the hillsides surrounding the town, and a clean-up of the banks of the Mekong River along which the town sprawls. "It's an integrated whole," Somphone stresses. "It's not just the town."

That development came late to Laos may be a blessing in disguise. Last year, some Thai academics from Chiang Mai invited Lao officials to their city—once a charming, attractive town like Luang Prabang, now rendered nondescript by development. The implied intent was obvious: Was *this* what they wanted from Vientiane's development? Judging from Lao authorities' response, they clearly have grander designs for their growing city. ■

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