

THE ROLE OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE IN URBAN CULTURAL TOURISM – THE CASE OF THE WATERFRONT CITYSCAPE OF VINH LONG

VAI TRÒ CỦA KIẾN TRÚC CẢNH QUAN
TRONG DU LỊCH VĂN HOÁ ĐÔ THỊ –
TRƯỜNG HỢP CẢNH QUAN ĐÔ THỊ VEN SÔNG THÀNH PHỐ VĨNH LONG

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Tóm tắt:

Vùng Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long nổi tiếng với du lịch sinh thái, với hình ảnh các vườn cây ăn trái, cánh đồng rộng lớn và hệ thống giao thông đường thủy sôi động. Hình ảnh biểu tượng đó dựa trên sự phát triển của nông nghiệp, hình thành từ điều kiện đất phù sa màu mỡ được tạo ra bởi một hệ thống sông ngòi, kênh rạch chằng chịt. Trong tầm nhìn phát triển đô thị mới, cơ quan chính quyền thành phố coi các đặc điểm ven sông là độc đáo và cần được bảo tồn và thúc đẩy như một cơ sở cho phát triển kinh tế xã hội địa phương, bao gồm các hoạt động du lịch.

Bài báo nhằm mục tiêu nghiên cứu giá trị của kiến trúc cảnh quan bản địa trong việc thúc đẩy du lịch văn hóa đô thị thông qua trường hợp khu vực ven sông của thành phố Vĩnh Long. Dựa trên đánh giá tài liệu và các công trình kinh nghiệm, nghiên cứu này xem xét bờ sông thành phố Vĩnh Long để hiểu rõ hơn về ý nghĩa của giá trị kiến trúc trong du lịch đô thị. Ngoài ra, thông tin từ cuộc phỏng vấn với các bên liên quan đến hoạt động di sản và du lịch được sử dụng như dữ liệu chất lượng. Cuối cùng, các kịch bản thiết kế nghiên cứu cho thấy tầm nhìn đa ngành trong việc cải thiện bản sắc của thành phố ven sông. Bài báo lập luận rằng kiến trúc cảnh quan bờ sông có thể là nền tảng cho việc đa dạng hóa các hoạt động văn hóa trong thành phố và phát triển du lịch văn hóa, bổ sung cho chiến lược du lịch sinh thái hiện tại và đóng góp vào chiến lược du lịch bền vững trong bối cảnh Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long.

Từ khóa: Du lịch đô thị, kiến trúc và du lịch, kiến trúc ven biển, Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long Việt Nam, kiến trúc cảnh quan.

Abstract:

The Mekong Delta is famous for ecotourism, with images of fruit orchards, vast fields, and a vibrant waterway transportation system. That iconic image is based on the development of agriculture, which resulted from fertile soil conditions created by an extensive system of rivers and canals. In the new urban development vision, the city authority considers riverside characteristics unique and need to be preserved and promoted as a basis for local socio-economic development, including tourism activities.

The paper aims to research the value of indigenous landscape architecture in promoting urban cultural tourism through the case of the riverside area of Vinh Long City. Based on an extensive literature review and empirical works, this research examines the Vinh Long City waterfront better to understand the significance of architectural value in urban tourism. In addition, information from interviews with different stakeholders relating to heritage operations and tourism is used as qualitative data. Finally, the research design scenarios show the interdisciplinary vision for improving the riverine city identity. The article argues that riverfront landscape architecture can be a foundation for diversifying cultural activities in the city and further developing cultural tourism, complementing the current ecotourism strategy and contributing to a sustainable tourism strategy in the context of the Vietnamese Mekong Delta.

Keywords: Urban tourism, architecture, and tourism, waterfront architecture, Vietnamese Mekong Delta, Landscape architecture.

1. Introduction

Currently, one of the economic priorities of many countries is the tourism industry [1], and Vietnam is no exception to that trend. Vinh Long is located in the center of the Vietnamese Mekong Delta. With distinctive natural conditions and a long history of cultivation, eco-agricultural tourism remains the strength of the province's tourism industry.

According to the official report of the Department of Culture, Sports, and Tourism of Vinh Long province, the years following the pandemic have witnessed a remarkable recovery and growth of Vinh Long tourism. The total number of tourists visiting and traveling in Vinh Long in 2023 is estimated to reach 1,450,000 visitors (exceeding the planned 450,000 visitors, an increase of 45% compared to the same period in 2022). Among them, international visitors are 26,500 (an increase of more than 3.8 times compared to the same period). The revenue from tourism services is estimated to be over 670 billion VND (an increase of 39% compared to the same period).[2] These figures demonstrate the impressive growth of the tourism industry in a small province with only a few scenic features compared to neighboring areas in the Mekong Delta region. Continuing that development trend, Vinh Long Province issued the "Vinh Long Province Tourism Development Plan until 2030", aiming to turn tourism into a key economic sector, with solid investment in various areas to support the development of the tourism

industry. [3]

Although the Ecotourism development orientation is widely used in marketing campaigns, tourism activities in Vinh Long province only focus on eco-agriculture tourism with activities closely related to the ecosystem and orchard cultivation culture. A large part of urban cultural heritage is undervalued in the province's tourism development orientation. Meanwhile, ecotourism can significantly impact the local socio-economic economy when closely linked to indigenous cultural factors. This connection will promote tourism business activities, boost local product production, and improve the lives of indigenous people from various labor groups, from farmers to street vendors. [4]. Therefore, investing in promoting and exploiting the indigenous cultural values of the province is essential for sustainable tourism development in Vinh Long. Moreover, with the maximum urbanization rate and continuous urban landscape transformation process, Vinh Long City needs favorable conditions for developing agricultural ecotourism. Instead, the specific culture of a riverine urban area includes both tangible and intangible values, carrying great potential to create a unique foundation for the city's development in tourism activities.

2. Historical urban structure

The complex system of rivers and canals is also the foundation for a unique urbanization process that today is underrated due to the replacement of road-based urbanization. This

transformation has caused architectural structures that were once iconic to the local development to be disconnected from their origins, diminishing their value and symbolic significance. Many buildings are recognized as National historical relics,

such as the Temple of Literature, the Temple of Meritorious Officials and Gods, and the Long Thanh Communal House. However, these significant structures have yet to be widely promoted to the residents, let alone introduced to tourists.



Figure 1. Map of National historic relics and colonial architecture along the waterbody of Vinh Long City.

Established in the 19th century, the Temple of Literature in Vinh Long is the only structure of its kind in the Mekong Delta region. The Temple is a unique architectural complex combining Confucian principles and Feng Shui, influenced by Chinese culture, with local architectural elements. Many decorative motifs express artistic and indigenous cultural values, reflecting the harmonious combination of ethnographic

features and Vietnamese traditional beliefs.

It represents feudal education and is a symbol of pride for the people of Vinh Long in the field of education. In the southern region, only this Temple is preserved in its original form and layout. The stone steles, standing along the central axis of the temple complex, well-carve all the names of construction and restoration contributors.[5]



Figure 2. Collection of photos of the current state of the Temple of Literature in Vĩnh Long.

Although recognized as a “typical tourist destination of the Mekong Delta” by the Vietnamese Mekong Delta Tourism Association, the actual operation and conservation for tourism contrast with the Temple’s immense value. This is partly due to ineffective connections with travel units. However, it can be seen that the management, operation, and maintenance of the cluster of relics also show many shortcomings. Part of the relic area is used as a parking lot and a cafe, with a design that should harmonize with the heritage landscape. Furthermore, many architectural and artistic elements are deteriorating, and many valuable architectural details need explanations from visitors. Therefore, the value and significance of this heritage are only manifested in the researchers’ documentation.

Along with the royal architectural works, along the waterway, some structures mark the long-term settlement process of the local people. Two other structures on the list of national historical relics are the Long Thanh communal house and the Temple of Meritorious Officials and Gods. Both

structures were established by the local people as places for community activities, reflecting the spiritual life of the indigenous people. The Long Thanh communal house dates back to the 18th century, while the Temple originates from the early 19th century. Currently, these structures still operate according to ancient traditions, with festivals closely associated with agricultural activities following the lunar calendar, a characteristic of the culture of the Southern region.

However, these distinctive features only stop at the potential level because the exploitation process shows many risks for involved stakeholders. Mr. Linh, a member of the management board of a village communal house relic, shared that the festivals are purely activities for local people, with no activities for tourists, and the design of activities for tourists also depends on the management board of the relics. In some cases, opening the door for tourists to visit without management personnel leads to the loss of property in the communal house.

In the meantime, another continuously operated architectural heritage system is the system of French colonial houses, managed

and preserved by the provincial government. This system consists of various structures, some of which have high recognition value in the overall architectural landscape along the riverbank, such as the Vinh Long Provincial Museum, the retirement club headquarters, and the Provincial People's Committee guesthouse.

The museum was originally the provincial governor's palace from the two French and American periods; then, it was transformed into a museum in 1992 and has been operating continuously until today. The museum continuously and actively researches and collects information about heritage in parallel with organizing various educational activities and festivals.

However, these activities only serve a small group of local residents in certain specific events, including students, scholars, and government officials. The other two structures are used as offices for various agencies and do not combine tourism and commerce purposes. Until recently, when the riverside area was renovated, these two structures were also renovated and added commercial service functions. While the garden space of the retirement club headquarters is utilized as a cafe, the other structure was converted by the provincial committee into a guesthouse with an expansion and the construction of a larger structure behind it. The new building is under construction, and its design has not been published.



Figure 3. *The colonial building is swallowed by the urban development.*

The urban landscape of the Vietnamese Mekong Delta region, in general, and the riverside area of Vinh Long City, in particular, may not be grandiose. However, they still convey a diverse culture and harmonious and authentic local lifestyle. The riverbank area is a strong declaration of the identity of Vinh Long City; the local government also recognizes that potential through the approval of the

“Program for Urban Development of Vinh Long City by 2030”, developing the city towards “Green Riverside City – Exchange and Modern City.” [6]

3. New waterfront landscape

According to that development plan, the city continuously implements and completes public investment projects. The distribution of those projects on the city map shows that cultural and educational projects are concentrated in

the central area. In contrast, the central administrative project promotes urban development towards the western urban fringe, and commercial service and tourism projects are concentrated on the riverbank.



Figure 4. Map of hard and soft infrastructure along the waterbody of Vinh Long City.

The current “green riverside city” identity of the local government is currently only manifested through the greening of the riverbank via a multi-target infrastructure system, including a system of anti-erosion embankments, riverside roads, and green space along the sidewalk with nearly uniform dimensions throughout the city. The landscape design of these green spaces is composed of a system of planters, including shrubs and medium-sized flowering trees for decoration, and a pedestrian space along

the riverbank, which is a module that is applied to all riverbank regeneration projects in the entire province, not just in the city of Vinh Long. The concreting program for embanking has been carried out for a long time, starting from the city’s historical center. However, this location has witnessed the most severe erosion and collapse as an inevitable consequence due to its position on the erosion side of the Co Chien River. Meanwhile, in the natural sedimentation areas of the watercourse, the alluvial soil has created conditions

for the development of aquatic flora, most notably the *Sonneratia caseolaris*, a

common plant in the wetland areas of the Mekong Delta.



Figure 5. The collection of photo of existing waterfront green infrastructure.

The city's riverbank is currently the foundation for the locals' vibrant and diverse socio-economic activities. Entertainment, commerce, and services occur throughout the day but are most lively at night. Most households with frontage along the riverbank engage in food and beverage services. During major festivals, when people from afar return to the city for holidays, this area becomes even more crowded. Particularly during the Lunar New Year, the riverside park area transforms into a temporary flower market. Flowers are transported from nearby rural areas via waterways and brought to the park.



Figure 6. the transformation from waterfront sidewalk to flower market.
Soure: internet.

Although the design of waterfront green spaces, with fences and monotonous planters, is not flexible enough for sufficient temporary transformation, the continuous and diverse activities of local people along the riverbank have brought vitality and attraction to the city. This has great potential for the development of urban cultural tourism, which is one of the major growth areas in the tourism industry.

[7] Mr. Kien Bui, a Vietnamese Australian, has experience traveling to many destinations worldwide. He chose several cities in Thailand and Vietnam during his trip to Asia. When asked about his experience with Vinh Long, he shared his personal feelings that Vietnamese culture, in general, and Vinh Long, in particular, give him a more "authentic" than Thailand, where the tourism industry is methodically and professionally trained. Experiential travel is a global tourism trend, especially among young people. Local authorities should grasp the trends to have a suitable direction for tourism development, with an investment process carried out systematically at each level, first by improving the cultural life of the residents

and then by providing opportunities for tourists to engage with that cultural background. This strategy incorporates social and environmental responsibilities, core characteristics of “One Commune One Product” tourism products, which significantly impact the satisfaction level of the tourist. [8]

Although an integrated strategy needs to be developed to optimize the architectural landscape space along the riverbank to unleash the tourism development potential, it cannot be denied that the riverbank infrastructure has significantly altered the city’s appearance, bringing a new image to the city, publicizing the riverfront area, and enhancing urban

greenery. This transformation comes from the state and private sectors, upgrading residents’ housing to serve business activities alongside important state-invested projects.

New cruise terminal

With the orientation of turning tourism into a leading economic activity with the ecotourism product “Đệ nhất homestay,” currently, the city’s infrastructure is focused on investment, construction, and exploitation as a transit point, promoting the tourism image for neighboring areas such as Cu Lao An Binh, facing the city across the Cổ Chiên River, or recently the contemporary heritage of the pottery brick kingdom of Mang Thit.



Figure 7. Collection of photos of the existing condition of the new cruise terminal.

Surrounding the construction are spaces of beverage shops and sidewalk eateries adjacent to advertising panels of famous tourist destinations in Vinh Long. The space of the pier connects to the city’s new park, the riverside infrastructure system, and a park displaying native red pottery. Once again, the occupation of space by local activities has brought vitality to the infrastructure. This demonstrates that the top priority of the constructions is to emphasize local cultures through spatial design to legitimize existing activities.

4. Vision

4.1. Waterfront architecture as a storyteller

Most of the discussion about the impact of architecture on tourism focuses on important buildings with outstanding national value. However, in the absence of such essential heritage buildings, heritage buildings at the provincial level can bring equivalent value when considered within a closely linked urban context. The city’s unique and identity could be enhanced by highlighting its story and sense of place,

providing authentic and precise information in the most impressive method. [9]

In the case of Vinh Long City, highlighting the value of the waterfront actually brings the city back to its origin, to telling the story of distinguished urbanization and history. With just a boat trip along the river system, tourists can have an authentic experience of the history and development of a characteristic urban area in the Mekong Delta region. The route passes through landmarks marking the long-term settlement process of many communities, the cultural heritage of feudal times, and colonial architectural heritage. Expanding the scope of the excursion will provide a more comprehensive experience by connecting to the islet, traditional craft villages, and the magnificent architectural landscape of the Măng Thít pottery village.

Besides the effort of operating the tourist routine, which is being promoted by local tourism authorities, each architectural heritage must be able to present its own story through a comprehensive conservation and development plan. The building should be strategically renovated to add new functions such as a coffee shop or restaurant, a gallery for local products and traditional art, or an exhibition of the historical process of the building that is worth a visit. Conserving a historic building is a complicated process that ensures many levels of value, ranging from the basic structure and material to the building's aesthetic, identity, and historical value. [10] Therefore, a cross-sector collaboration

mechanism needs to be developed to ensure both preserving the heritage value and utilizing the structures for the socio-economic activities of the area.

Developing an architectural guideline is fundamental for managing the urban transformation, especially surrounding historical buildings. This aims to highlight the distinctive characteristics, structure, and bold colors of all three elements of architectural heritage, urban areas, and rivers, thereby enhancing the visual quality or legibility of the city. [11] Furthermore, the building could be aesthetically and functionally reconnected with its environment.

4.2. Interweaving landscape architecture

The general urban planning of Vinh Long City until 2035 [12] envisions developing the entire waterfront area into public green spaces, including the existing industrial and residential area along the Co Chien River. This vision aligns with the development strategy of creating a city with a distinctive riverside identity.

The interweaving between hard infrastructure, local activities, and nature should be recognized as the identity of the city instead of conquering the river bank. The new landscape architecture should enhance the existing value through a flexible design that could be a foundation for sufficient space transformation for festivals and special events. This facilitates more efficient cultural events and emphasizes indigenous activities, contributing to leaving a positive impression on tourists.

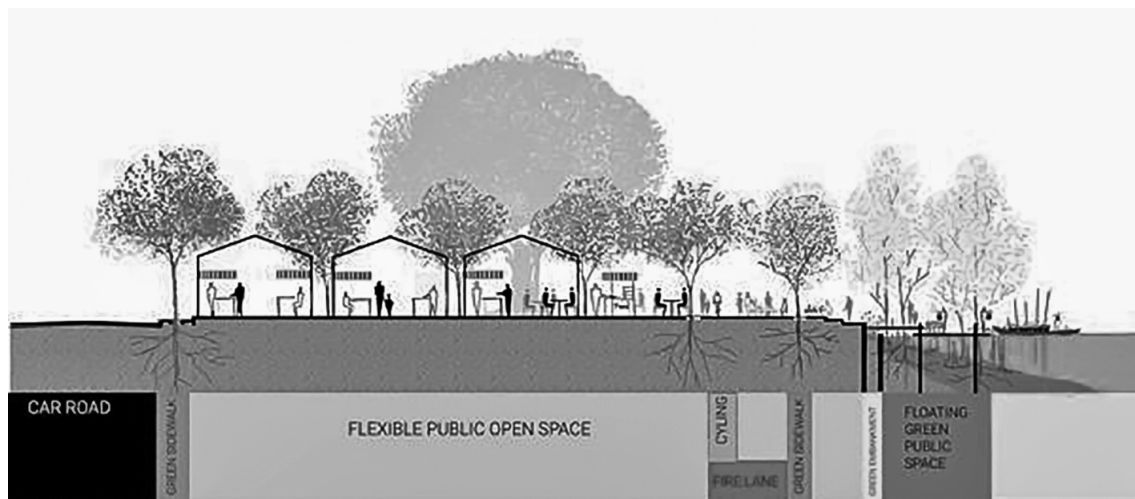


Figure 8. Scenario section 1- Space transformation for festival.

The image of traditional red pottery could be introduced through architectural installations or experience pavilions constructed with red pottery and brick. This could be an interdisciplinary way to present the iconic image of the province, instead of the current method of random displacement of the production. Moreover, promoting the use of traditional

materials in public architecture or state-invested projects is a strong statement on the policy of preserving traditional craft villages. These craft villages can directly access various sources of support, such as the state's investment budget for public projects, local craft village preservation programs, and policies promoting local tourism.

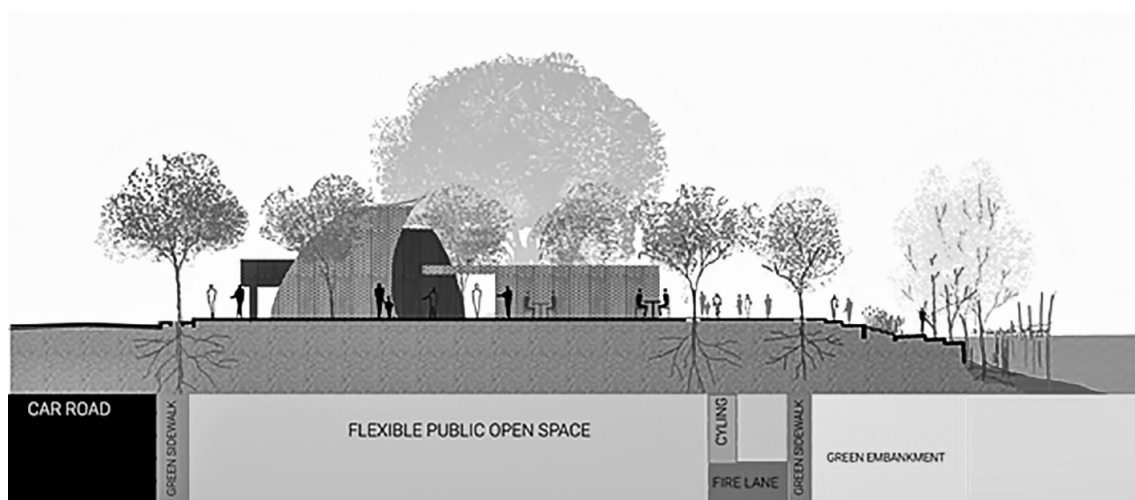


Figure 9. Scenario section 2 - Experience pavilion, made from the traditional material of red brick, in a flexible public space.

5. Limitation of the Research

Research focuses only on evaluating prominent structures along the riverbank as a first step in the reclamation and exploitation of urban architectural values. In reality, many architectural works of value develop along the system of deep canals within the city center and the road system. Furthermore, the process of embankment and construction of riverbanks and the construction of new buildings along the waterbody also make some structures no longer in contact with the water surface. However, these structures are still closely linked to the waterways. Besides, several areas in the city of Vinh Long's boundary remain for agricultural purposes, which can enhance landscape value for sustainable ecogritourism inside the urban area.

Therefore, an in-depth research is needed throughout the entire city to provide the most detailed structure of this city. Although each strategic area is interconnected in the city's historical development, separate integrated research is also needed to provide urban development directions and design appropriate pilot projects in line with tourism marketing strategies and local image at that time.

6. Conclusion

Architecture is not a dominant element in the image of most cities

in the Mekong Delta. However, when buildings are considered in their cultural urban context, they could be significant evidence of the city's history and vivid local culture. Thus, enhancing the value of architecture should be a primary step in developing the local urban condition and then supporting the development of urban cultural tourism.

Promoting the development of urban cultural tourism, approaching from architecture, is a strategy to connect disparate potentials into a more comprehensive overall strategy, creating a unified value chain in the comprehensive urban development of the city. This connection contributes to bringing the city's architectural heritage renovation projects closer to commercial services and tourism investment packages, thereby increasing the feasibility of the projects. The development of urban cultural tourism based on the architectural characteristics of the riverine urban areas is a specific development strategy of Vinh Long City on the province's overall tourism development map. It enhances the competitiveness of local tourism products in the competition within the Mekong Delta region.

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