

The Relationship Between Decorative Sculpture and Architecture: The Artistic Legacy of the Nguyen Dynasty of the Imperial City of Hue, Vietnam

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Abstract

The Nguyen Dynasty as the latest feudal rulers of Vietnam has produced many artistic products that have influenced its society and continue to influence even the modern projects. The Nguyen constructions hold many traditional work of sculptural decorations of architecture. A typical one of these exist in the Hue Imperial City, located in central Vietnam. Hue city is the capital of Thua Thien Hue - a coastal province in Vietnam.

The architectural decorative sculpture in the Hue Imperial City has inherited Vietnamese traditional art, including sculptural patterns that have values of art and culture often considered as “the condensations of elite ancestors’ hands and minds” expressing desire. This is indeed a unique sculpture also enriched by the culture of Hue and by the other fine arts of the great civilizations.

The artisans of the Nguyen Dynasty, with their talent and vibrance have had many novel innovations that have signified the sculptural forms. Among them, the decorative sculpture of the Nguyen architecture is a production of art that takes Nature into architecture and integrates the interior spaces to the built environment. Hue’s philosophy is to create a lively atmosphere in the human settlements by bringing Nature and natural elements such as grass, trees, flowers, fruits, and clouds as the friends of the human soul. The way of doing architectural decorative sculptures in the Hue Imperial City provides great lessons that has remained of value till today.

This paper examines the nuances of meanings of the Vietnamese culture as has manifested in the Hue’s City. It employs mixed research methods such as fine art interpretations, historical analysis, field research as well as anthropological analysis. Data has been collected by observations corroborated with the historical accounts and anthropological data.

The paper concludes that architecture and decorative sculpture in Vietnam are inseparable. Within the Vietnamese culture, decorative sculpture and architecture have become unified as a whole as a visual art. They possess the same language, spatial resolution, and humane directions that serve people living with spirituality rather than materiality. The decorative sculpture and the architecture in Hue’s Imperial City are combined together to become artworks of architecture and make the architectural environment harmonious with the natural environment of Hue.

Keywords: signified forms; decorative sculpture; Hue Imperial City; Nguyen Dynasty’s architecture.

Introduction

Many studies show that deep in the hearts of the Vietnamese people, beauty of a village is intertwined with the communal spaces of pagodas, temples and shrines. Thus, these structures have been ingrained in Vietnamese consciousness and have become the artistic signs integral to Vietnamese living. These structures are almost always sculptural and the Nguyen Dynasty¹ has produced many great works infused with sculpture in such a way that they significantly influence the everyday life of the Vietnamese people. In fact, they have also influenced modern projects tremendously and this influence continues unabated.

The Nguyen constructions have produced a wide variety of traditional works of sculptural decorations of architecture such as the Hue Imperial City. As a typical one of these, it includes sculptural patterns that have values of art and culture as “the condensations of the hands and minds of elite ancestors” in expressing their desire to see that the Vietnamese society prospers. As Nguyen (2014) says, the invaluable art works have ‘themselves bear up’ the messages of the ‘predecessors’. Separation of these forms of decorative sculpture from the architectural work is thus almost impossible because they would become perceivably insentient and will render architectural heritage worthless.

In this context, there is a dire need for research on the inheritance of Nguyen traditional fine arts and their influence on architecture. In response to this, this research focuses on exploring the Hue Imperial City: its formal structure, manifested language, layout form and the visual aesthetic. The intention is to contribute to determining the true values of the architectural vestige. The research asserts that decorative sculpture plays an important role in the architectural design strategies.

Its objectives are as follows.

1. To explore the Hue Imperial City: its formal structure, manifested language, layout form and the visual aesthetic.
2. To divulge the role of sculpture in the architecture of the Nguyen Dynasty.
3. To offer a significant contribution to the field of theory and history of traditional Vietnamese art, especially Nguyen Dynasty Architecture.

Decorative Sculpture and the Nguyen Dynasty’s Fine arts

Phan has studied and identified the architecture of the Hue Imperial City. He says “a palace is an architectural complex consisting of many different large and small buildings, in which there are one or two main palaces located in the middle of the architectural complex, and a temple is just an architectural unit” (Phan, 2005: 41). Here, decorative art attaches to architecture closely and contributes to the transcendental and sacred quality of architecture to emphasize the royal traits. Cadière points out that “one of Hue fine art characteristics might be circulation and complexity of shapes” (Cadière, 1919: 15). Nguyen et al. (1992: 82) say that the traditional pulse of Nguyen Dynasty’s sculpture succeeds to ‘Le one’ and develops with the influence of Western art.

However, the decorative sculptures of the Nguyen period are limited although they are enriched with an unlimited variety of forms with a difference in various materials between folk wood sculpture and royal sculpture such as those at the Imperial Palace (Nguyen, 1992). Tran points out that the national aesthetic pulse has flowed continuously into these art works. Although the fine arts of Hue are different and private with non-traditional elements, as Tran (1979; 1987) says, “Nguyen Dynasty’s fine arts has something that dislike someone’s thoughts”.

Historical and artistic values of the Nguyen Fine arts demonstrate vividly the assumptions of decorative sculpture in the Hue Imperial City. Cadière indicates that the city construction has met the strict laws of Feng Shui. The Nguyen Kings have assigned the buildings to psyche and creeds, an important role of decorative sculpture in sacred architecture (Cadière, 2004). In this regard, Tran (2005) says that he follows the strategy, “the good to employ and the bad to limit”. Therefore, he has applied Feng Shui principles flexibly for the construction of the Hue Imperial City. For example, the main orientation of it is towards the South-West instead of the South as the Feng Shui guidelines indicate.

¹ Nguyen Dynasty 阮 (1802-1945) was the last monarchy in Vietnamese history, established after *Nguyễn Phúc Ánh* ascended the throne in 1802 (King Gia Long) and ended when King *Bảo Đại* abdicated in 1945.

This is because, the Hue Imperial City has arisen from the Nguyen King's achievements in Vietnam's last feudal dynasty, with the contributions of intellectuals, artists, and artisans. The planning and architectural ideas of the Nguyen Dynasty's City reflect the quintessence of the oriental experience and Western technology. Besides, the precedents of valuable research of the Nguyen Dynasty's fine arts reveal the relationship between decorative sculpture and the city architecture.

Literature review

This paper examines the research on the Artistic Legacy of the Nguyen Dynasty of Hue Imperial City in the modern context. Through a critical literature review, the paper analyses the findings of several scholars who have explored architecture in the Hue Imperial City. The article also addresses the issue of preserving traditional vernacular architecture and restoring traditions in modern architecture. By synthesizing these works, this paper aims to provide insight into the status of knowledge on the Artistic Legacy of the Nguyen Dynasty of Hue Imperial City and identify the research gaps.

Hue Imperial City architecture has been studied very early by French scholars published in the *Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Hué* since 1914. Léopold Cadière (1919) has surveyed Hue's fine art, while Ardant du Picq (1924) has carefully examined the Hue citadel as a fortress built in the Vauban style and has also shown the distortion of the second tributary on the left bank of the Perfume River: the Bach Yen River. Later studies by some Vietnamese researchers provide a more specific view of the defensive strongholds under the Nguyen Dynasty from the capital to the province and the district (Nguyen et al., 2018; Phan, 2016).

In recent years, the Vietnamese government has paid much attention to the preservation, restoration and reconstruction of the architectural heritage in the Imperial Citadel of Hue, especially since it was recognized by the UNESCO (1993). To address this issue, Vietnamese experts have done extensive research in many aspects. From 2019-2023, the research team Le and his colleagues have focused on the types of citadels in the Hue imperial citadel (Truong and Le, 2022), and the rebuilding of Can Chanh Palace (Le and Truong, 2020; Le et al., 2022a; Le et al., 2022b; Le and Nguyen, 2023; Le et al., 2023). Meanwhile, Phan and Du have focused on studying the plan to build the Hue citadel in the early 19th century (Phan, 2016; Phan, 2005), which considered the unique identity of Vietnam as well as foreign influences (Phan; Du, 2019). Phan believes that Hue is the place where Vietnamese royal art is preserved (2019). With similar concerns, Tran(2005) provides some thoughts on the plan to build the Hue imperial citadel under the King Gia Long period.

On the other hand, some other authors are interested in the aesthetic aspect of Hue imperial architecture, such as Hue fine art in general (Nguyen et al., 1992; Phan, 2020) from the perspective of meaning and symbols of decoration (Nguyen, 2001), and the heritage of tombs (Nguyen, 2014; Nguyen, 2022). More specifically, in terms of decoration, To (2023) introduces spring decorations with apricot flower motifs in the Thanh Cung corridor. When it comes to Hue decoration, it is impossible not to mention *pháp lam Huế* - Hue enamel (émail: in French) which are shown in many constructions in the Hue Imperial Citadel (Le, 2021; Hoang, 2021), such as Ngo Mon Gate, mausoleums (Nguyen and Tran, 2021; Nguyen, 2021).

This critical review of literature on the architecture of the imperial city of Hue reveals a gap in understanding the decorative sculpture in the architecture of the imperial citadel of Hue. Further research is needed to better understand the relationship between decorative sculpture and architecture in the Imperial Citadel of Hue.

Research Methodology

This research employs logical reasoning as a method of constructing its thesis. It is based on the premise that art is a manifested form of social consciousness in the historical context of culture. The research is focused on decorative art and is aimed at understanding the nuances of meanings underlying the practice of producing sculptural art in architecture. Since it involves aspects beyond architecture and construction, it employs interdisciplinary research methods for this purpose, with the intention to generate a comprehensive view of the role and relationship of decorative sculpture in architecture and their impact on human life, religious beliefs and acculturation.

The research employs fine arts research methods and their theories and specialized knowledge

of sculpture to produce structural analysis of the decorative projects according to the genre, material, and functions of architecture they are associated with: in other words, to find their basic value systems.

The focus of analysis is on the appreciation of art within the residential communities. It also interprets acculturation that has impacted the languages of sculpture and architecture, in order to evaluate the artistic values, expressive meanings, typical characteristics, and uniqueness in the decorative projects.

Findings

Hue Citadel is located in the Thua Thien Hue province - in a narrow strip of central Vietnam (coordinates 16°35 latitude) in the humid tropics with strong monsoons, considerable number of sunny days, high rainfall and high humidity (Le and Truong, 2020). In fact, it is located on the Perfume River and was built in the Southeast direction (Fig. 1).

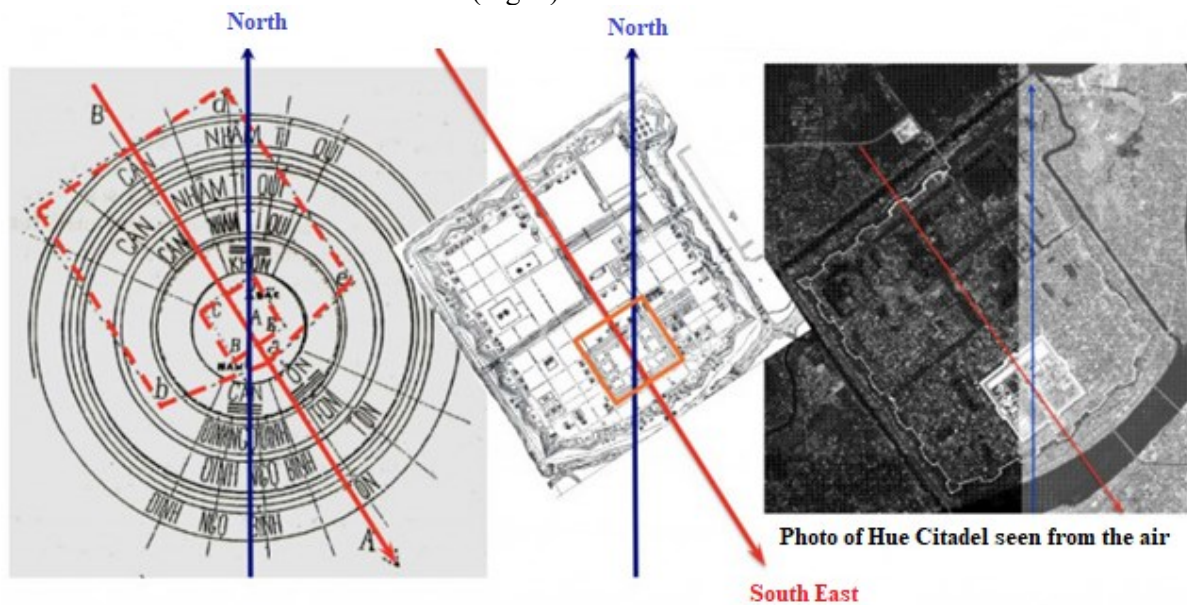


Fig. 1: Axis and direction of Hue Citadel

Source: Le et al., 2022a

Construction of the Hue Citadel has been initiated by the King Gia Long, namely the survey and relocation work in two years (1803-1804), and in 1805, construction had started and has been completed in 1832 (14th year of Minh Mang). Detailed planning has been assigned to Nguyen Van Yen, commander of a military unit specializing in the construction of citadels. Hue Citadel was built on an area of 520ha, with each side being 2235m, with a protective wall measuring 21m thickness and 6.6m height (Fig. 2). It includes the Hue Imperial City and a number of other buildings (UNESCO, 1993).

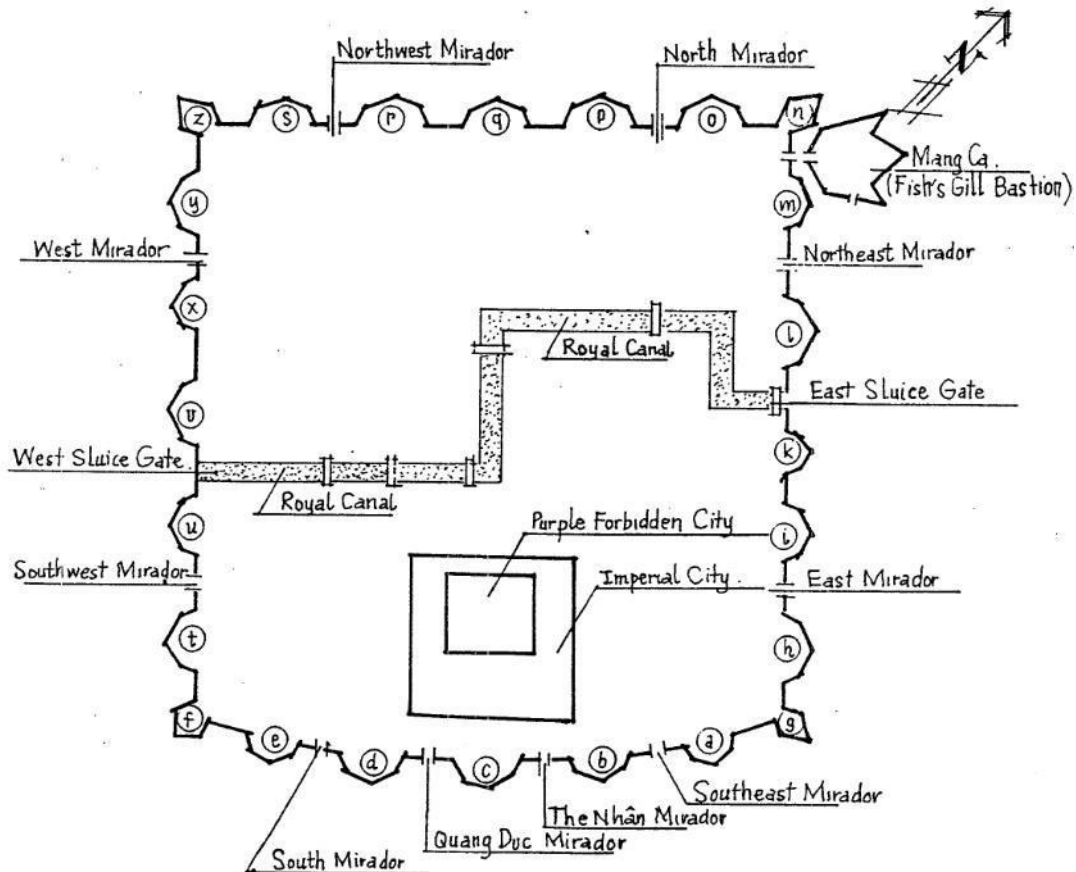


Fig. 2: Map of the Hue Citadel
Source: UNESCO, 1993

The Hue Imperial City has a rectangular plan (622m by 604m) and is protected by brick walls 4.16 m high and 1.04 m thick, supplemented by a moat and a wide bank (UNESCO, 1993). Inside of it is divided by walls into a number of zones: the forbidden city, the worship area, living quarters, warehouses and workshops, gardens and schools for royal princess (Fig. 3). Thus, it has been renovated and parts re-built by the later Kings specifically at the end of 1945, when Vietnamese feudalism was abolished (Phan, 2005; 2009a). The Imperial City suffered considerable damage as a result of the military operations in 1885, 1947 and 1968 (UNESCO, 1993), and some palaces have been ruined (Can Chanh Palace). However, in general, the state of architecture in the Imperial City is great. Each piece of architecture is often located in the whole mixed with Nature as a poetically-rich complex. M. Amadu Mata Mbow, the Director General of UNESCO said on the Hue's vestige complex, "The first people who built Hue intended to frame Hue in marvelous scenery, from Ngu Binh Mountain to Vong Canh Hill, to Tam Giang Lagoon and Cau Hai Lagoon" (Tran, 2004: 26).

When talking about the art of the Nguyen Dynasty, the skills of the people of Hue and their spirit of culture have to be taken into account (Bui, 2010). During the period (1558-1777), following the steps taken by the Nguyen Lords to cultivate new lands, people came from the North, mainly from the *Thanh-Nghê* county. People of Hue are descendants of them. They possessed a native culture of their own and interacted with the indigenous culture of the new homeland and its people. In so doing, they have selectively absorbed the *Chăm*'s culture and other indigenous ethics. They also keep their original culture so as not to lose their local identity. This is clearly expressed in the Hue's folk beliefs and culture including the practices of social harmony, subtlety of expression, and indirect resistance, rather than confrontation. The manifestations of these on the architectural decorative sculpture of the Hue Imperial Citadel does not have the majestic, ostentatious beauty of a Royal palace but is prone to an exquisite and sophisticated beauty with many new elements conceptualized in harmony with Nature (Nguyen, 2007).

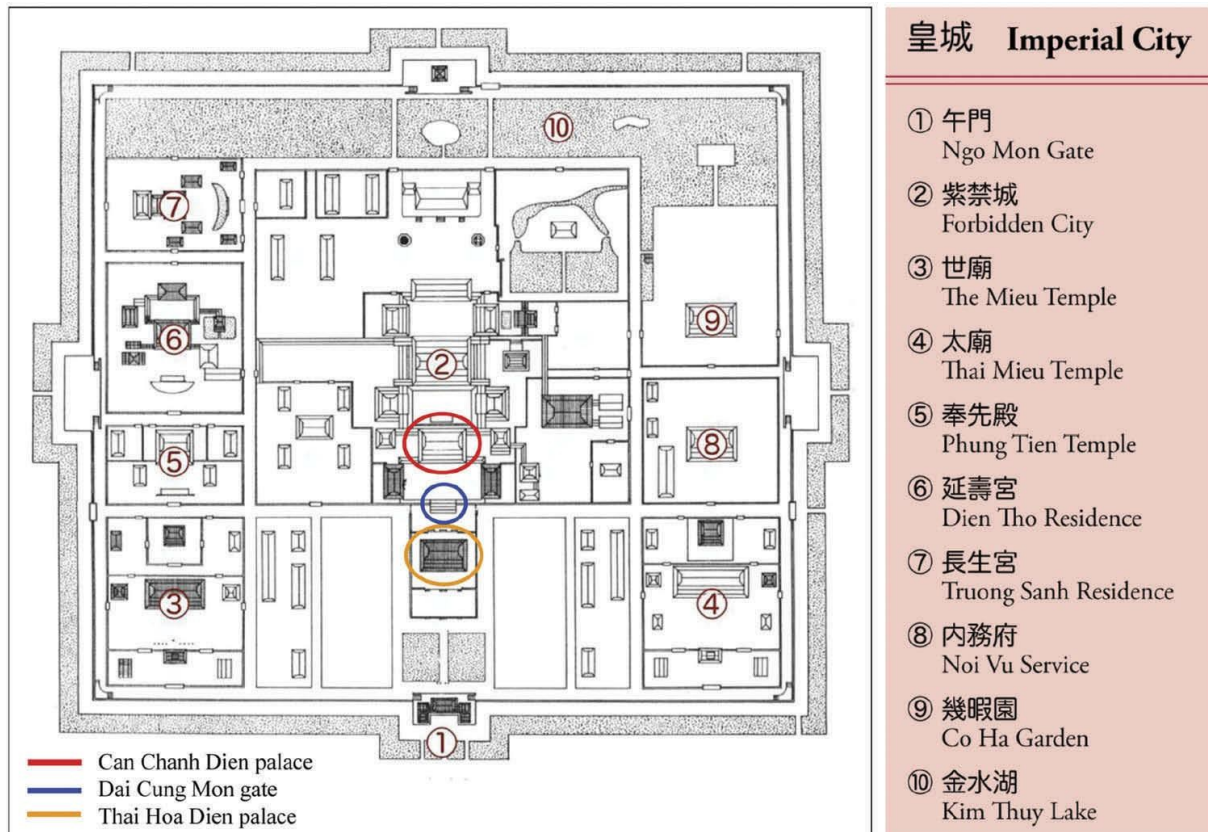


Fig. 3: Site map of the Hue Imperial City

Source: Le and Truong, 2020

In the traditional sculpture the ancient artisans have inherited, they have used hollow blocks and pieces with holes in decorative objects, like the pieces of wood at the Five-Phoenix Pavilion, Ngo Mon Gate, *Trường Du Tạ* (a house on the water – Fig. 4). During the Nguyen's Fine Arts age, the 'pieces with holes' became popular and have almost defined the characteristics of the Hue city. Indeed, they are the symbols of the Khanh (Plaque) in Ngo Mon Gate (Fig. 5) and in the sculptures with the topic "four seasons" in bamboo and peach trees that pierced through the *Trường Du Tạ*. Without a question, they are aesthetically elegant.



Fig. 4: Trường Du Tạ

Source: Author, 2022

In Vietnam, people often engage in the art of 'playing games' with the light of these sculptures following the movements of daylight. This is because they are bright under the early morning sunlight and dark in the gloomy evenings. The voids in between the sculptural parts are shaped by the surrounding blocks to help see the sculptural images vividly though they are unreal. The images that appear through the sculpture vary and allow vivid and joyful imaginations. The popular interpretation of these experiences is "no images but associating the images, no blocks but associating the blocks". Interestingly, they also contribute to extending the interior spaces and link them from the outer spaces to the inner spaces. As explained, the shaping method stimulates the viewer's imaginations. Thus, in the modern sculptures, hollow blocks are considered as innovative and revolutionary in the language of sculpture.

The hollow blocks change their appearances without weight change incessantly as the lighting sources change. Indeed, they create visual hallucinations and "stimulating imaginative thinking". A classic example of this is in the doors on the *Ngũ Phụng*/ Five-Phoenix Pavilion (Fig. 6), which have been pierced with a plaque shape, as well as a circular and a fan shape.

The image of a plaque formerly appeared in the architecture of the communal houses, pagodas, and the temples in the North and have become less common in time. However, in Hue, Plaque became a typical symbol representing itself and has been used extensively in the architectural ornaments. It has a decorative function with a cloud-like symbol of the upper level clouds representing the 'Heaven' and a practical function as a nice vented window like framed painting of the very charming natural landscape, such as Ngo Mon gate (Fig. 5). However, Ngo Mon Gate is a bit special. It is cast in bronze with boxes decorated with *pháp lam* (enamel) with vivid images of flowers and leaves (Nguyen and Tran, 2021; Nguyen, 2021). The window has become a

'dynamic' painting of which the scene changes following time, to create an unparalleled aesthetic in both the interior and the exterior of the structures. The approach of "borrowing scene" is to expand the indoor spaces to enter into the natural environment. Thus, the use of 'holed' pieces to create plastic images in the Yin and Yang relationship is a moderately modern pioneering visual language of Hue's artisans and creates the distinctive features that bears the mark of decorative sculpture in the Hue Imperial City (Luu and Pham, 2002).

Nevertheless, many art researchers who have previously evaluated the Hue arts in the Nguyen age have interpreted them as having lacked objectivity and as a way of showing off. To study Nguyen's fine art, one needs to be especially knowledgeable about the decorative architectural sculpture of the Hue Imperial City comprehensively, the relationship between the architectural works and the surrounding natural environment, and geographical climatic conditions in Hue.

Ceramic mosaics appeared in Hue (in the eighteenth century) and were used for decorating communal houses, pagodas, temples and shrines in folk sculpture, and then in imperial architecture. Gradually, it turned into a porcelain mosaic art (Fig. 7) which became common in Hue, such as in the Khai Dinh's tomb where it reaches a high aesthetic value (Ung, 2011).



Fig. 5: Plaque in Ngo Mon Gate
Source: Minh An, 2021



Fig. 6: Doors in Five-Phoenix Pavilion
Source: Minh An, 2021

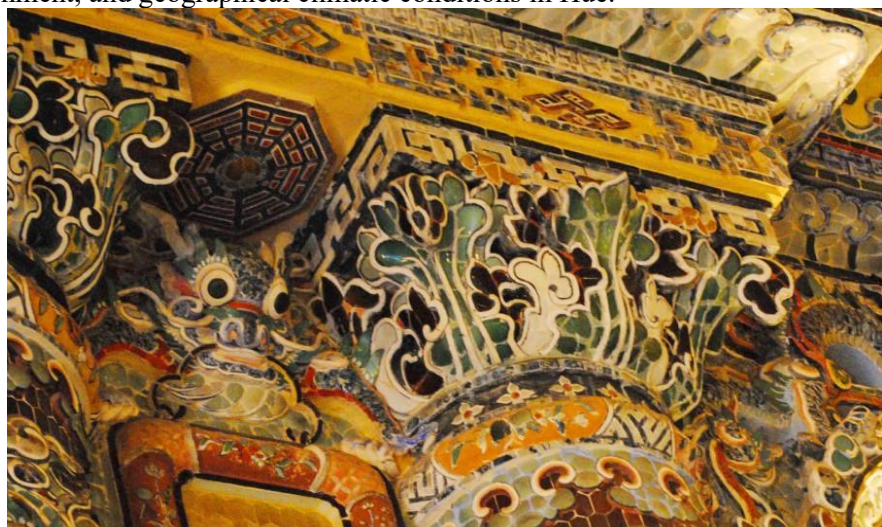


Fig. 7: a porcelain mosaic art in the Khai Dinh's tomb
Source: Nguyen, 2022

The Mason's Association (*Nê ngõa tợng cợc*) during the Nguyen's period have gathered many good artisans at a national scale to meet the needs of building the citadel, the palaces, and the mausoleums (Phan,2009b). Many artisans have brought along traditional porcelain mosaics from the North to the Hue City. As a result of these infusions, many decorative sculpture exist today both inside and outside the palaces, temples, and shrines which are also adorned with colorful pieces of glazed terracotta, as well as glittering and sparkling porcelain and glass. Needless to say, the details of sculpture supported by the porcelain have become sophisticated, luxurious and precious. They still exist despite the harsh climate of Hue in the cold and wet winter and burning sunshine in the summer (Phan, 2009b). Porcelain-bonded patterns show their beauty under the bright sunlight of the midday and bring the warmth in the cold rainy winter in the Hue Imperial City with the hot color.

On the Ngo Mon Gate, Hien Nhan Gate (Fig. 8), Chuong Duc Gate or Thai Hoa Palace, and the Thai Binh pavilion, there are sculptures made of ceramic or glass pieces, carefully trimmed with brilliant colors in contrast. This is a Hue five-color plate based on the Oriental five-color plate, but by the impression penetrated through the aesthetics lens of the artisans that has become the characteristic color of Hue (Phan, 2009a). There are pairs of contrasting colors such as yellow, indigo, orange, blue, red, green, purple, red, yellow and purple. It can be said that the knife tips, dragon roofs and sculptured blocks are wearing splendid gowns that make the cubes/blocks soaring and so more elegant, precious and luxurious. The porcelain and glass pieces are attached by adhesives made of oyster lime combined with molasses with additives well brayed from dodder, or resin of *litsea glutinosa* mixed with cotton and paper, becoming a special sculpture material.



Fig. 8: Decoration on Hien Nhan Gate

Source: Tran, 2016

Even after over 200 years, many decorations in the Hue Imperial City still bloom despite the harsh impact of the climate in Hue. Although colors do not play a major role in the architectural decorative sculpture, they give a great variety of expressive forms of sculptural shapes achieving great aesthetic and spiritual values. With their leading role in sculpture, tail sketches, roof drags and decorative motif surfaces covered with different colors of textures, they have become so elegant and vibrant. It is the hot, brilliant colors of the architectural decorative sculpture and the luxurious highlight in the vast blue of heaven, grass and trees, that make them so unique and so enthralling.

In the midst of the natural landscape of Hue, the rate of hot colors of porcelain mosaic carvings makes up only a small, modest part. In that panoramic view, the architectural decorative sculpture of the roof is not flashy. On the contrary, they are in harmony with Nature, are the pearls glittering amidst the vast, blue and green of grass, the land of heaven in Hue city. Thus, it can be seen that the Hue Imperial City is an inseparable entity with architectural elements that contribute to the uniqueness of Nguyen fine art. Therefore, in discussing architectural decorative sculpture, it is necessary to place them in relation to the space that exists in the overall architectural monument, rather than the individual work. By addressing the problem of scale and space in the "*trùng thiềm điệp ốc*" architecture (two houses joined by the gutter in the middle – Fig. 9), artisans have created an effective vision of the sculptural details, which have become more sophisticated, making all the palaces and temples ... harmonious together in a large overall (Thien Tam, 2003).

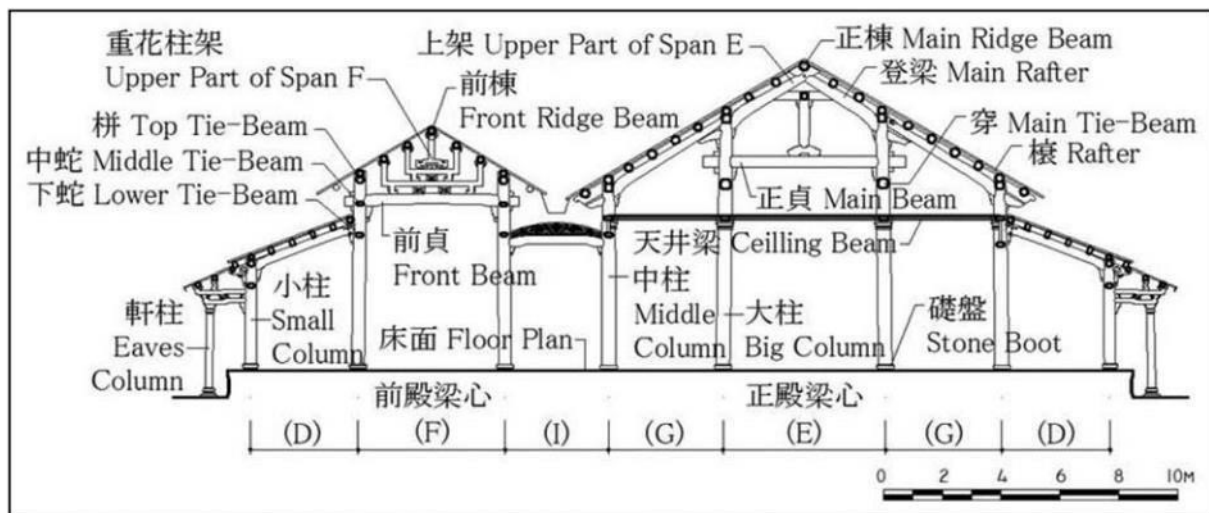


Fig. 9: Glossaries of longitudinal section of the wooden frame (Can Chanh Palace)

Source: Le and Truong, 2020

Some authors have commented that architecture is a portrait of a certain historical period. It is because architecture is the synthesis of knowledge, living needs, aesthetic level, and technical progress in each specific situation and environment (Phan, 2005). The direction of the citadel is toward the South "*Thành nhân Nam diện nhi thính thiên hạ*" (the Saint facing to the South to hear the voice of people), which is also the convenient light direction for outdoor sculpture, contributing to create more effective shapes and shades for the decorative patterns. However, in fact, the Imperial Citadel of Hue in particular and the whole Hue Citadel face the Southeast direction (Fig. 1). This is also an advantage contributing to the external architectural decorative sculpture to more effectively associate with important architecture located along the middle axis such as the Ngo Mon Gate, the Thai Hoa Palace or the temples located symmetrically inside the Royal Citadel in the context of aesthetics under natural light.

As is known, the details of the decorating sculpture become clear and exhibit sophistication under the direction of light. Unintentionally, it also creates an advantage for the exterior decorating sculpture of the Royal Citadel of Hue to reveal the superiority of its cubic beauty in space. This confirms the important role of light in decorating sculpture. As Le Corbusier said, "Architecture is the refined and precise processing of kinds of quantity under the sunlight ... The light and the dark help enhance the image. The cube, the round, the sphere, the rounded maul, the rounded column, the pyramid ... are all major forms manifested unexpectedly by the light" (Truong, 2014: 221). The aesthetic value of the decorative sculpture therefore is inseparable from architecture because they are a 'visual art composite' to be mixed and to respect each other for the purpose of 'beauty'.

Fine art in the Nguyen Dynasty is a decorative art. In it, internal and external architectural components are filled with sophisticated, meticulous and rich decorative patterns (Fig. 10). Traditional wooden architecture has no tendency to develop in height; the artisans of Hue have chosen therefore the most intelligent architectural solution, consisting of linking the front house to the back house with the softly bent *thua luu*/ superfluous ceiling (also known as crab shell ceiling). Post-palace without ceiling,

exposing the bearing wood structure such as “thua luu” ceilings and “gia thu” trusses ... becomes fertile ground for the decorative panels.



Fig. 10: Five-Phoenix Pavilion
Source: Xuan Dat, 2022

The roof is divided into two patches from the top to the down, and thus there is no feeling of being heavy or repressive. The roofs, the edges and the fringe outside and the architecture components inside are meticulously and delicately carved. The architectural decorative sculpture such as dragons, wine gourd on Five-Phoenix Pavilion roof (Fig. 11), phoenix flanking the sun on Dien Tho Palace roof (Fig. 12), Tiger-faced design on Chuong Duc Gate and Hien Nhan Gate (Fig. 8) or sword heads at roof angles (Fig. 13) in the style of “cloud transformed into dragon” has made the roofs softer and more high-faulting (Nguyen, 2001). The architectural decorative sculpture as an indispensable element of architecture relieves the rigid stiffness of the frame, enhancing the aesthetics for the architectural monuments. It has originated from the traditional house style with wooden structural components including columns, trusses, and beams linked together by mortise, and chisel. Thus, Hue imperial architecture is not so dominant against Nature as the adjacent architecture. The beauty of the Hue imperial architecture is not the issue but the one in each architectural unit in a harmonious whole (Truong, 2014; 2016).

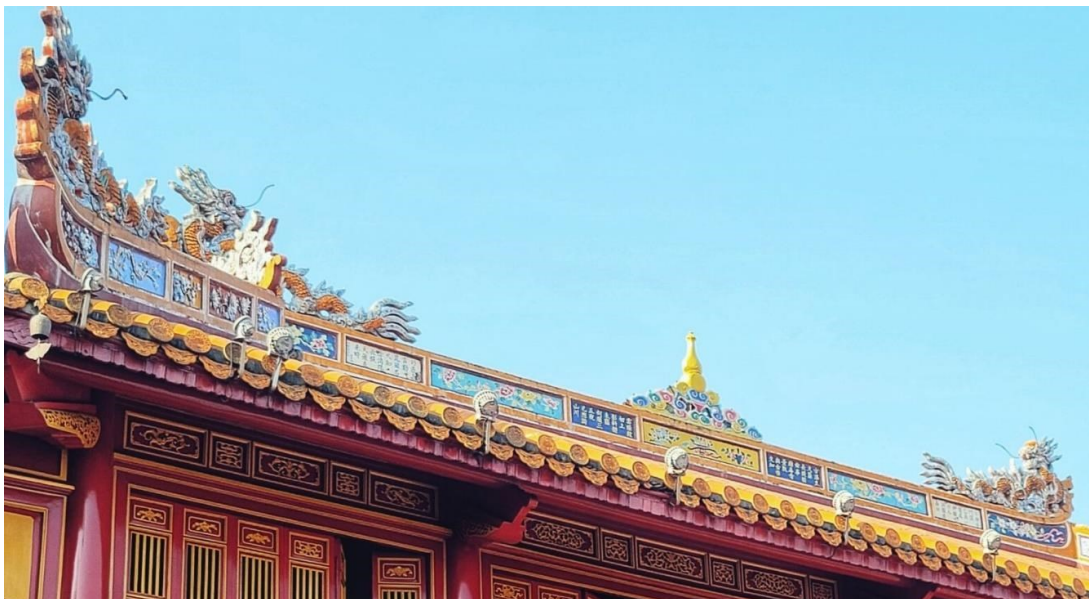


Fig. 11: dragons, wine gourd on Five-Phoenix Pavilion roof
Source: Xuan Dat, 2022



Fig. 12: phoenix flanking the sun
on Dien Tho Palace roof
Source: author, 2022



Fig. 13: sword heads at roof angles
on Five-Phoenix Pavilion roof
Source: Xuan Dat, 2022

The old artisans have paid attention to the finesse and sophistication of each decorative detail and that is also a fine art feature under the Nguyen Dynasty. In addition, there are many elements involved in the architectural environment such as trees, small landscapes, lakes, and grass (Fig. 14). These are also the basic characteristics of Vietnamese traditional architecture. Without doubt they are also suitable for the nature of Hue people living in harmony with Nature. This is evident in the Hue garden house in which Nature is an integral part of their living spaces, reflecting the idea of 'Nature and people are in a unity'. That is the beauty of harmony, and also the philosophical thought of Hue people (Tran, 2003). Therefore, planned interventions of the architectural designer must create unity from the interior, exterior and the surrounding environment in which the work exists.



Fig. 14: Hue Imperial City (from the air)
Source: Thanh Toan, 2020

Architecture is the art of space, in which the involved elements are within that architectural space. When discussing this issue, the author of "Environmental Sculpture", Thien Tam (2003) says, "environmental space plays an important part in creating the artistic value for works. Art works can't exist without the involved spatial art components. Art-works and environmental spaces are a unified whole". The role of architectural decorative sculpture is to integrate directly with architecture or as part of the architectural environment, contributing to form an "aesthetic environment". Resolving the proportions of the decorative projects with the architectural space of the Hue Citadel, the artisans have created an effective vision for the sculptural details which have become more acute and make all the palaces and temples harmonious in the overall context. This can be seen as poetry about spatial planning. Architecture and the architectural decorative sculpture are part of the shaping art, or the visual arts. With the strength of the shape of language and the beauty of the material, the architectural decorative sculpture increases the aesthetics for inanimate shapes, and links them together by human values to bring aesthetic sense and happiness to people.

Discussion

Hue Imperial City has been designed and constructed following the theories of Ching and Feng Shui, as the main ideas in planning and design, and also the essence of Eastern civilization. The whole Hue City is the "second natural environment", a vivid poetic picture in harmony with the "first natural environment", including hills, mountains, and rivers. With the creative thinking of the Nguyen Dynasty, artists have reflected faithfully in the decorative designs of the ventilation panels, by the richness in the expression mode. Decorations sometimes are "reincarnated" into building components, architectural units or *vice versa*. They can be considered as architecture or sculpture. The boundaries between the two arts are blurred by the agreement of beauty and usefulness. Nevertheless, decorative sculpture plays a clear role in enhancing the beauty of the architectural shapes, reducing the feeling about the roughness and hardness of their materials, while adding useful functions to meet the physical demands of architecture.

With their own values, traditional arts in general and Nguyen's arts in particular still have strong vitality. Many temples, shrines, communal houses, pagodas, etc. are still newly built to respond to the people's demand for spiritual spaces day by day. Builders, architects and sculptors have continuously referred to these traditional arts in design and construction. Today, religious architectural works are constructed widespread throughout the whole country using artistic symbols. Usually, the traditional decorative symbols are used with a lack of understanding of their original symbolic meanings.

This breaks the relationship between architecture and sculpture, making many spiritual architectural works becoming less dignified and less aesthetically elegant. The Nguyen Dynasty has a large number of architectural and fine art works spread throughout Vietnam. The vestiges that exist today is quite large. Thus their influences on constructions that use artistic symbols throughout the country are understandable.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that Hue architecture closely combines with applied decorative arts and makes them integrate to general architectural styles. Decorative sculptures create lively rhythms and are associated with the existing works. They bring life to buildings constructed with raw and hard materials. They beautify spaces for human survival and combine with architecture to create spiritual spaces. They function hallowed and opulent for buildings and carry wishes for good rain and wind, for multiplying all living things, and for good wishes for the world. They themselves play as artistic symbols that are coded messages of the content and meaning of architecture.

The research also explores the relationship between architecture and decorative sculpture and shows that it is inseparable. Indeed, decorative sculpture and architecture become the whole of visual arts. They possess the same plastic language, spatial resolution and humane direction that serve people living with spirituality and materiality simultaneously. The decorative sculpture and the architecture in Hue Imperial City are combined together to become artworks of architecture and make the architectural environment harmonious with the natural environment of the Hue city.

However, there is a need to have more research on the Nguyen Dynasty's art icons to contribute to preserving and promoting traditional artistic values. Unfortunately, the training in most of the visual arts schools in Vietnam overlooks the subjects that relate to age-old heritage issues. Educational contents and methods have not been unified and they are still formal. They are considered as a subject to practice drawing skills without analysis of the symbolic meanings and hidden contents of the decorative patterns. It is thus necessary to conduct in-depth studies on traditional fine arts to make objective scientific assessments of the artistic values of architectural decorative sculpture.

In this regard, this research contributes to the field of theory and history of traditional Vietnamese art significantly. It is urgent for the study of deciphering art symbols because they play an important role in people's material and spiritual life, helping to feel the culture and the aesthetics at community and national levels.

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