

Hybrid Aesthetics in Khai Dinh’s Court Architecture (1916–1925): Cultural Modernization and East–West Encounter in Early 20th-Century Vietnam

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Abstract

This study explores the hybrid aesthetics embodied in the court architecture under Emperor Khai Dinh (1916–1925) as a distinctive expression of Vietnam’s cultural modernization during the early 20th century. In the transitional period between tradition and colonial modernity, Hue’s imperial monuments, such as Khai Dinh’s Mausoleum, An Dinh Palace, and Kien Trung Palace, became architectural palimpsests that fused Eastern cosmological symbolism with Western stylistic and material innovations. Through a qualitative and comparative approach combining morphological analysis, iconography, and postcolonial aesthetics, this research investigates how Khai Dinh’s architectural projects negotiated power, identity, and modernity. The study situates these works within the theoretical framework of postcolonial hybridity (Homi K. Bhabha) and cultural translation, viewing architectural hybridity as both an aesthetic choice and a political discourse. Findings suggest that the fusion of Baroque, Rococo, and Art Deco elements with Confucian-Buddhist iconography was not merely decorative but reflected an emerging “vernacular modernity,” in which Vietnamese elites redefined cultural identity amid colonial transformation. By reinterpreting these monuments as dynamic cultural texts rather than passive relics, the paper contributes to broader discussions of Southeast Asian architectural modernity and heritage interpretation in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: hybrid aesthetics, court architecture, Khai Dinh, cultural modernization, east–west hybridity, postcolonial studies, Hue, Vietnam

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Introduction

The period from 1858 to 1945 represents a major turning point in Vietnamese history, marked by Vietnam's extensive encounter with French colonial rule and Western civilization. These encounters initiated a broad process of cultural interaction between Eastern and Western traditions, producing hybrid cultural forms across multiple domains of social life, including architecture, the arts, and urban development.

Within this broader historical context, the architectural landscape of Hue underwent significant transformations during the reign of Emperor Khai Dinh (1916–1925). This period represented a moment of profound political and cultural transition. Under French colonial rule, the Nguyen dynasty retained symbolic authority while its political autonomy was substantially limited. At the same time, colonial administrators pursued policies intended to consolidate political control and reshape the cultural environment of Indochina (Thúy et al., 2017). Colonial urban planning initiatives and new architectural projects were introduced throughout Vietnam as visible expressions of colonial governance (Tùng, 2025).

During the administration of Governor-General Albert Sarraut (1911–1919), architecture assumed an increasingly strategic role within colonial policy. Sarraut's policy of association viewed architecture as a symbolic instrument of colonial authority while also promoting the selective incorporation of local cultural elements (Betts, 1961). In this context, the Khai Dinh court faced the challenge of maintaining cultural legitimacy within a political environment shaped by colonial modernity.

Architecture therefore became one of the most visible arenas of cultural encounter. Buildings constructed during the reign of Emperor Khai Dinh departed from earlier Nguyen architectural traditions. Reinforced concrete increasingly replaced timber structures, while Western stylistic vocabularies such as Baroque, Neoclassical, Rococo, and early Art Deco elements appeared alongside traditional East Asian symbolic systems (Phát & Sirisuk, 2025). Rather than representing simple imitation, these architectural developments reflected complex processes of cultural translation and adaptation (Long, 2005).

This study interprets Khai Dinh-era architecture through the concept of hybrid aesthetics, understood as the interaction of different architectural languages that generate new cultural meanings. The article addresses three central questions: how Western architectural forms were incorporated into imperial architecture while preserving traditional cosmological symbolism; why hybridity emerged as a dominant architectural strategy during this period; and what these architectural transformations reveal about broader processes of cultural modernization in colonial Vietnam.

Literature Review

Previous studies on Vietnamese court architecture have largely focused on the early Nguyen dynasty, particularly the major architectural projects constructed during the reigns of Emperors Gia Long, Minh Mạng, and Tự Đức. These works established the spatial and symbolic order of the Imperial City of Hue. The planning of the capital followed principles derived from Chinese cosmology and Confucian political philosophy (An, 2005), reflected in the axial symmetry of the urban layout, the hierarchical organization of space, and the carefully structured ceremonial zones that shaped the imperial citadel and palace complexes. Vietnamese scholars such as An, P.T. have documented the architectural characteristics of these structures and emphasized the

close relationship between architectural form and the cosmological worldview of the imperial court (An, 2005). Within this perspective, architectural decoration and artistic elements have been interpreted as expressions of an aesthetic system that preserved cultural identity while selectively absorbing external influences (Thông, 2001).

Research on colonial architecture has introduced broader interpretive frameworks for understanding architectural hybridity. Mark Crinson argues that colonial architecture often produced hybrid forms shaped by complex negotiations between colonial authorities and local elites (Crinson, 2003). From this perspective, colonial architecture should be understood as a site of cultural interaction rather than merely the imposition of European architectural forms.

Vietnamese scholars frequently employ the concept of acculturation to explain such processes of cultural transformation. Cultural acculturation refers to changes in cultural patterns that occur through sustained contact with external influences (Tân, 1996). Similarly, the concept of cultural refraction suggests that foreign cultural elements are transformed through the interpretive frameworks of local traditions rather than adopted unchanged (Hiệu, 2021). These perspectives emphasize the active role of Vietnamese cultural actors in receiving, adapting, and transforming external influences.

Postcolonial scholarship further highlights the creative possibilities that emerge from hybrid cultural forms within contexts of East–West encounters (Scriver & Vikramaditya, 2007). Hybrid architecture can therefore be understood as a product of colonial interaction, in which Western architectural technologies and stylistic vocabularies intersect with indigenous symbolic systems (Harris & Myers, 2007). This phenomenon is closely related to the concept of cultural hybridity. Homi K. Bhabha conceptualizes hybridity as a “third space” in which cultural meanings are negotiated, translated, and redefined through intercultural contact (Bhabha, 1994). This theoretical perspective provides an important framework for interpreting cultural and artistic transformations in colonial societies, where identities are continually reshaped through processes of interaction and reinterpretation.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs three interconnected theoretical concepts to interpret architectural transformations during the reign of Emperor Khai Dinh: hybrid aesthetics, indigenous modernity, and cross-cultural exchange.

Hybrid aesthetics refers to the coexistence and interaction of multiple architectural traditions within a single built environment. In colonial contexts, such hybridity often emerges through processes of cultural translation and reinterpretation. As Mark Crinson (2003) argues, colonial architecture frequently reflects the negotiation between European aesthetic models and local cultural practices, producing architectural forms that cannot be attributed to a single cultural origin.

Indigenous modernity describes forms of modernization that develop through local reinterpretation of global influences rather than through direct imitation of Western models. Anthony D. King (2004) notes that modern architecture outside Europe often arises through processes in which external technologies and design ideas are integrated into existing cultural frameworks. In this perspective, modern architecture in Asia can be understood as a locally mediated expression of modernity shaped by interactions between global and indigenous traditions.

Cross-cultural exchange refers to the multidirectional circulation of ideas, technologies, and aesthetic forms across cultural contexts. Logan (2000) demonstrates that colonial cities in Southeast Asia often developed architectural landscapes shaped by the interaction between European planning systems and local building traditions.

Together, these concepts provide a framework for interpreting Khai Dinh–era architecture as the result of dynamic cultural interaction within the broader historical context of colonial modernity.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodological approach that combines architectural analysis, historical interpretation, and cultural theory.

Architectural morphological analysis focuses on the spatial organization, construction techniques, and structural systems of the buildings under examination.

Table 1

Analytical Framework for the Morphological Study of Khai Dinh–Era Court Architecture

Analytical Component	Analytical Focus	Manifestation in Khai Dinh–Era Architecture
Spatial Organization	Overall layout, ceremonial axes, spatial hierarchy	Stepped courtyard systems and axial approaches leading toward the central core of the complex
Structure and Materials	Construction technologies and building materials	Reinforced concrete, brick masonry, and mortar
Decorative Arts	Architectural decorative systems	Porcelain and glass mosaic inlay, relief sculpture, ornamental motifs, floor tiles, and murals
Stylistic Influences	Sources of aesthetic influence	Baroque, Rococo, Beaux-Arts, Art Deco, and related stylistic elements
Symbolic System	Symbolic meanings and cosmological worldview	Sacred animals, mythical creatures, immortals, auspicious symbols, human and natural imagery, imperial motifs, and other cosmological references

The analytical framework employed in this study is summarized in Table 1, which consists of five principal components: spatial organization, materials and structural systems, decorative programs, stylistic influences, and symbolic systems.

Iconographic analysis examines decorative motifs and figurative representations associated with the cosmological frameworks of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism.

Comparative analysis situates the architectural characteristics of the Khai Dinh period within the broader context of colonial architectural development in Southeast Asia.

The study is based on multiple sources of data, including architectural documentation, field observations of the monuments in Hue, historical photographs, and secondary historical literature on Vietnamese architecture and colonial urbanism. Through the integration of these

sources, the research seeks to reconstruct the architectural and cultural context in which Khai Dinh–era monuments were designed and constructed.

Three architectural complexes were selected as the principal case studies in this research:

- An Dinh Palace
- Kien Trung Palace
- Khai Dinh Mausoleum

These monuments were selected because they represent three distinct architectural functions within the imperial landscape: mausoleum architecture, royal residence, and palace architecture.

Through this methodological framework, the study aims to provide a comprehensive interpretation of architectural hybridity in Khai Dinh–era monuments and to situate these structures within the broader processes of cultural negotiation and architectural modernization in colonial Vietnam.

Case Studies

Three architectural complexes were selected as case studies in this research: An Dinh Palace, Kien Trung Palace and the Khai Dinh Mausoleum. These structures represent three distinct architectural typologies within the imperial landscape of Hue in the early twentieth century: royal residential architecture, political architecture within the Imperial City, and mausoleum architecture. The selection of these three cases enables an examination of architectural hybridity at multiple levels, ranging from spaces of royal residence to ceremonial environments and symbolic spaces of imperial authority. The morphological characteristics of these structures are analyzed according to the methodological framework presented in Table 1, with particular attention to spatial organization, materials and construction, decorative systems, and layers of stylistic influence.

An Dinh Palace

An Dinh Palace offers a distinctive perspective on how hybrid architecture entered the everyday life of the imperial court. Originally, the complex functioned as the residence of Khai Dinh before his accession to the throne, when it was known as Phụng Hóa Prince’s Residence. Between 1917 and 1918, An Dinh Palace underwent a comprehensive reconstruction, marking a fundamental transformation in both its scale and function. The original timber architectural system was entirely replaced by more durable structures, primarily employing modern materials such as reinforced concrete. Consistent with Vickers’s (1996) argument that modernity often seeks inspiration from heritage in order to generate new forms, the spatial planning of An Dinh Palace can be interpreted as a reinterpretation of the traditional sacred axial layout through a modern lens. Rather than strictly adhering to the static symmetrical principles characteristic of earlier court architecture, the spatial sequence from the riverside landing area to Khai Tuong Pavilion, the theatre, and the rear garden was organized as a dynamic, interconnected progression. This transformation represents a significant shift in both scale and function: from a purely ceremonial setting to a multifunctional architectural complex that reflects the aspirations for change and integration expressed by its historical actors during a period of profound transition. As noted by An (2005):

An Dinh Palace constitutes an architectural ensemble that was designed, constructed, and decorated in a style distinct from other auxiliary palaces previously built in the Nguyen imperial capital. Its architecture, decorative programs, sculpture, and painting all bear a vivid imprint of a historical moment characterized by the convergence of Eastern and Western influences, as well as of the ancient and the modern, within the history of Hue art and that of Vietnam more broadly. (An, 2005, p. 336)

This transformation represents a process of architectural modernization within the imperial court, marking a transition from traditional forms toward Western Neoclassical stylistic influences. The architecture of the palace clearly reflects elements associated with French colonial villa typologies. As can be observed in Figure 1, the palace façade displays a pronounced axial symmetry and decorative details influenced by European Neoclassical design. Architectural features such as balconies, ornamental reliefs, and the tripartite composition of the façade recall the colonial villa forms widely found in Indochinese cities during the early twentieth century.

Figure 1
An Dinh Palace



However, inside Khải Tường Pavilion, the murals decorating the interior spaces of the palace depict royal ceremonies, scenes of courtly life, and episodes from Vietnamese history. Within the same architectural environment, Western formal elements and indigenous cultural symbolism coexist and interact. Through the combination of these different architectural languages, An Dinh Palace illustrates how Western residential architectural forms were adjusted and reinterpreted within the cultural framework of the Vietnamese imperial court.

Kien Trung Palace

Kien Trung Palace is one of the most distinctive architectural structures within the Imperial City of Hue. The construction of Kien Trung Palace, carried out between February 1921 and May 1923, provides a representative example of the theory of cultural acculturation operating through the mechanism of cultural refraction (Hiệu, 2021). Rather than passively imitating foreign models, the historical actors actively formulated an architectural form that corresponded to contemporary tastes. This approach clearly reflected the aspirations of

modernity, expressed in a desire to move beyond the perceived constraints of the past in search of new sources of inspiration (Vickers, 1996).

The result was a performative architectural entity in which reinforced concrete structures and Western architectural forms provided the structural framework, while the underlying spirit remained guided by inherited cultural values and imperial symbolism. This synthesis produced a balance between global influences and local identity. Figure 2 clearly illustrates the combination of Western architectural massing with roof forms that retain a distinctly courtly character.

Figure 2
Kien Trung Palace



Kien Trung Palace was a completely new structure, reconstructed on the foundations of an earlier building but presenting an entirely different appearance, scale, and stylistic character. The building represents the modernization of Nguyen court architecture along the central ceremonial axis of the Imperial City. Quynh et al. (2024) observe that:

...most notably Kien Trung Palace, whose interior and exterior were designed in a European style. This structure altered the architectural character along the main axis of the Hue Imperial City compared with traditional Nguyen architecture, while retaining the original location and spatial scale within the overall layout of the citadel. (p. 532)

The destruction of the building during the wars of the twentieth century and its recent reconstruction have further highlighted important questions concerning authenticity and heritage memory. Kien Trung Palace therefore constitutes a significant case for examining how hybrid architectural works are interpreted and reconstructed within contemporary heritage conservation policies.

Khai Dinh Mausoleum

The Khai Dinh Mausoleum is often regarded as the most elaborate and complex architectural project undertaken during the reign of this emperor. Construction began in 1920 on the slopes of Châu Chũ Mountain, located outside the city of Hue. The complex is organized as a sequence of terraced courtyards connected by stairways that gradually lead toward the central sanctuary. The spatial composition of the mausoleum reveals an architectural logic reminiscent of European Baroque design, in which the movement of the viewer through successive spatial layers produces dramatic visual effects. As shown in Figure 3, the sequence of terraced

courtyards and the ceremonial axis guiding visitors toward the central structure creates a spatial experience characterized by theatricality, comparable to the visual strategies commonly associated with Baroque architecture.

Figure 3

Khai Dinh Mausoleum



However, within this spatial framework influenced by Western architectural principles, the decorative program draws deeply from the symbolic system of East Asia. The surfaces are richly ornamented with intricate mosaics composed of porcelain and glass fragments, forming elaborate patterns that depict dragons, clouds, and other cosmological motifs.

This artistic synthesis emerged from the cultural encounter between East and West during a period of historical transition, combined with the personal aesthetic preferences of Emperor Khai Dinh. Through careful selection and the skilled craftsmanship of Vietnamese artisans, the monument was transformed into an exceptional work of art. (Hue City People’s Committee, 2025)

The combination of Western spatial composition with traditional symbolic systems produced an architectural environment characterized by a dense visual texture and multiple layers of symbolic meaning. The architectural characteristics of the three buildings are summarized in Table 2, which demonstrates that despite their differing functions, all of them exhibit forms of hybridity that integrate Western architectural forms with traditional symbolic systems.

Table 2*Comparison of Architectural Characteristics of Three Khai Dinh–Era Structures*

Architectural Element	Khai Dinh Mausoleum	An Dinh Palace	Kien Trung Palace
Function	Imperial mausoleum	Royal residence (outside the Imperial City)	Royal residence (within the Imperial City)
Spatial Layout	Terraced courtyard system organized along a ceremonial axis	Symmetrical villa layout with a longitudinal axis	Two-storey palace structure
Primary Materials	Reinforced concrete, colored glass, decorative tiles, oil paint	Brick, concrete, colored glass, decorative tiles, oil paint	Brick, reinforced concrete, colored glass, decorative tiles, oil paint
Western Influences	Baroque-like spatial organization	French colonial villa architecture	French academic architecture
Indigenous Symbolism	Sacred animals, mythical creatures, immortals, cosmological motifs, imperial motifs	Murals depicting court rituals and imperial motifs	Imperial court motifs
Hybrid Characteristics	Western spatial composition combined with East Asian symbolism	Hybrid residential architecture	Hybrid palace architecture

As summarized in Table 2, all three case studies exhibit distinct forms of architectural hybridity. The Khai Dinh Mausoleum combines a Baroque-like spatial composition with East Asian symbolic systems. An Dinh Palace reflects the adaptation of the colonial villa typology within the cultural setting of the imperial court. Kien Trung Palace illustrates the modernization of palace architecture through the adoption of European academic architectural forms.

Discussion

Architectural Hybridity as a Historical Condition

The architectural transformations that occurred during the reign of Emperor Khai Dinh cannot be explained solely through stylistic analysis. The hybridity evident in these structures reflects broader historical processes associated with colonial modernity. In the early twentieth century, Vietnam existed within a complex network of cultural exchanges shaped by colonial governance, global trade, and technological change. The introduction of reinforced concrete, industrial production techniques, and new decorative materials expanded the expressive possibilities of architecture. However, these technologies were not simply imported from Europe. They were mediated through local artisans and builders, who adapted new materials to existing aesthetic traditions. Architectural hybridity in this context therefore involved both stylistic choices and wider historical conditions. Architecture became a site where different cultural systems encountered one another and generated new forms of expression. The buildings constructed during the reign of Khai Dinh can thus be interpreted as material manifestations of a broader process of cultural transformation. As Phát and Sirisuk (2025) observe:

With the political context during his reign and the country's situation, Emperor Khai Dinh was aware of the weak position in all aspects of the court. Therefore, he innovated a new Vietnamese identity with the acceptance of Western cultural and artistic elements. The hybridity in architecture at An Dinh Palace is a display of the quintessence of indigenous traditions. It is a lesson in preserving the core spiritual values of a culture by embracing an outside influence. (p. 287)

However, the case of Khai Dinh retains a distinctive character marked by the coexistence of cultural transformation and symbolic continuity. Rather than adopting Western architectural forms in their entirety, Vietnamese elites translated foreign stylistic vocabularies into an existing system of indigenous symbolism. This process is particularly evident in the decorative program of the Khai Dinh Mausoleum. While the spatial composition of the monument exhibits a dramatic quality reminiscent of European Baroque architecture, the symbolic system embedded in its mosaic decorations remains rooted in East Asian cosmology. Mythical creatures, sacred animals, natural imagery, human figures, and mythological motifs continue to function as symbols of imperial authority and cosmic harmony. These elements derive from long-standing Vietnamese court traditions shaped by Confucian political philosophy and Buddhist cosmology (Thông, 2001). The multiple cultural influences present in these monuments can therefore be analyzed through different symbolic sources, ranging from Vietnamese imperial traditions to Western architectural styles. These layers of influence are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3
Layers of Cultural Influence in Khai Dinh–Era Architecture

Source of Cultural Influence	Architectural Expression	Examples
Vietnamese imperial tradition	System of imperial symbolism	Sacred animals, mythical creatures
Confucian cosmology	Spatial order and ceremonial organization	Ceremonial axis, audience courtyards, Taiji symbolism
Buddhist symbolism	Religious motifs and decorative elements	Lotus motifs, swastika symbol
Daoist symbolism	Religious motifs and decorative elements	Eight Immortals, Seven Sages, gourd of immortality
Western architecture	Style, spatial composition, structure, materials, decoration, column orders	Reinforced concrete, stained glass, balconies, relief sculpture, Ionic, Corinthian, Composite orders
International modern aesthetics	Geometric motifs and decorative styles	Rococo, Art Deco, Beaux-Arts

The juxtaposition of Western spatial composition and traditional symbolic systems does not produce visual contradiction. Instead, it creates a multilayered aesthetic environment in which different cultural frameworks coexist. This overlap of symbolic layers reflects the capacity of indigenous traditions to absorb and reinterpret external influences. Western architectural and decorative elements therefore function not merely as signs of cultural imposition but as materials for creative adaptation and reinterpretation. As Hải (2021) has argued:

In the course of historical development, the architectural ensemble of the Nguyen imperial court in Khai Dinh represents a harmonious and skillful synthesis of Eastern and Western techniques and aesthetics, as well as a convergence between artistic influences from abroad and locally rooted artistic traditions. These forms constitute both novel achievements and inevitable outcomes of the continuous evolution of national aesthetic sensibilities, shaped by the historical, geographical, and psychological context of the people of Hue. (Hải, 2021)

The Role of Royal Patronage

Although political authority was significantly constrained under colonial rule, the Nguyen court continued to function as a symbolic institution. Architectural projects sponsored by Emperor Khai Dinh therefore carried important aesthetic and ideological significance, expressing the continuity of imperial authority within a rapidly changing historical context. Emperor Khai Dinh himself played a key role in shaping the architectural direction of this period. While many historical narratives portray him as a ruler dependent on the French colonial administration, the architectural initiatives undertaken during his reign suggest a more complex degree of cultural agency. Royal patronage provided the institutional framework that enabled architectural experimentation, bringing together artisans, engineers, and designers capable of working with both traditional techniques and modern building technologies. Within this context, the decision to employ reinforced concrete rather than traditional timber materials was particularly significant. Concrete enabled architectural forms that would have been difficult to achieve with conventional construction methods. As An (2003) notes:

The emperor preferred such materials. Instead of the traditional local construction material of wood, Emperor Khai Dinh favored durable materials such as reinforced concrete, stone, brick, porcelain fragments, and glass. In the mausoleums and palaces built during his reign, modern technologies and facilities such as electric lighting, piped water, fountains, lightning rods, and iron doors were also introduced. (p. 156)

Despite the adoption of industrial materials, the decorative programs of these buildings continued to rely heavily on artisanal craftsmanship. The combination of industrial materials with traditional decorative techniques produced an architectural language that was neither entirely Western nor entirely traditional. Rather, it reflected the hybrid nature of colonial modernity (Phát & Sirisuk, 2025).

Moreover, the prominent visual presence of An Dinh Palace along the An Cựu River, the Khai Dinh Mausoleum on the slopes of Châu Chử Mountain, and Kien Trung Palace within the Imperial City of Hue can be interpreted as an effort to reaffirm the symbolic authority of the monarchy within a changing political environment. Dramatic spatial compositions and richly layered decorative programs create an atmosphere of solemnity and grandeur. Such architectural strategies demonstrate how visual expression functioned as a form of cultural assertion under colonial constraints. In this sense, royal patronage facilitated processes of cultural transformation within architecture.

Indigenous Modernity in a Colonial Context

The architectural transformations that occurred during the reign of Emperor Khai Dinh can be interpreted through the concept of vernacular modernity. This concept refers to forms of modernization that emerge through processes of local cultural adaptation and reinterpretation

rather than through the direct imitation of Western models. In colonial societies, modernity rarely develops along a linear trajectory. Instead, it typically arises from complex interactions between globally circulating technological innovations and local cultural traditions (King, 2004).

In the case of early twentieth-century Vietnam, modernization unfolded within conditions shaped by colonial power structures. However, the introduction of new construction technologies and Western aesthetic vocabularies did not necessarily lead to the complete replacement of indigenous architectural traditions. From the perspective of postcolonial theory, such zones of contact often generate hybrid spaces in which different cultural elements are reconfigured through processes of negotiation and reinterpretation (Bhabha, 1994).

Within the architectural landscape of the Khai Dinh imperial court, local cultural actors, including the court itself as well as artisans and craftsmen, played an active role in adapting foreign influences. Buildings from the Khai Dinh period demonstrate how modern materials such as reinforced concrete, together with references to international stylistic vocabularies, were integrated into the traditional symbolic system of imperial architecture. This synthesis produced an architectural language that reflected global modernity while preserving the continuity of indigenous symbolic structures.

From this perspective, Khai Dinh–era architecture may be interpreted as an expression of vernacular modernity within a colonial context. Such forms of modernity illustrate how modernization in non-Western societies often unfolds through cultural adaptation and hybridity rather than through a straightforward trajectory of Westernization. As Logan (2000) demonstrates in his study of Southeast Asian cities, colonial architectural landscapes frequently emerged from the intersection of European planning principles and building technologies with local cultural traditions, producing distinctive hybrid architectural forms.

Hybrid Heritage and Contemporary Interpretation

Hybrid architecture often poses challenges for heritage interpretation because such structures do not easily fit into conventional categories such as “traditional architecture” or “colonial architecture.” As a result, hybrid buildings have frequently been undervalued, particularly when heritage evaluation relies on aesthetic criteria based on stylistic purity. Laurajane Smith argues that dominant heritage discourses are commonly constructed around notions of authenticity, originality, and the continuity of tradition. She describes this framework as the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD), in which heritage values are defined according to standards of cultural purity and historical origin (Smith, 2006). Within this framework, hybrid forms of heritage emerging from complex processes of cultural interaction are often regarded as lacking legitimacy or interpreted as signs of aesthetic decline. Consequently, hybrid architectural works have sometimes been viewed as evidence of Westernization or as indicators of the degeneration of imperial architecture rather than as outcomes of cultural negotiation within colonial contexts.

The significance of Khai Dinh–era architecture extends beyond the historical moment of its construction. These monuments continue to shape contemporary debates on heritage conservation and cultural identity in Vietnam. Yet interpretations based solely on stylistic coherence or notions of authenticity often overlook the historical importance of hybridity as a cultural process.

In postcolonial scholarship, hybridity is understood as a space in which different cultural systems interact and generate new forms of expression (Bhabha, 1994). From this perspective, architectural landscapes formed in colonial contexts should be interpreted not only as products of colonial power but also as material traces of negotiation, adaptation, and cultural transformation.

Studies of urban heritage in Southeast Asia further support this perspective. Logan (2000), in his research on colonial cities in Vietnam, argues that these architectural environments constitute valuable historical records documenting the interaction between planning systems, construction technologies, and cultural traditions. Reassessing Khai Dinh–era architecture is therefore significant both for understanding Vietnamese architectural history and for broader discussions on hybrid heritage in postcolonial contexts.

Conclusion

Architecture of the imperial court constructed during the reign of Emperor Khai Dinh marks a significant turning point in the history of Vietnamese architecture. Rather than representing aesthetic decline, these buildings reveal a complex process of cultural negotiation between courtly traditions and colonial modernity.

In the context of Khai Dinh, debates surrounding hybrid heritage are particularly evident in relation to Khai Dinh–era monuments. For many decades, structures such as the Khai Dinh Mausoleum, Kien Trung Palace, and An Dinh Palace were often interpreted as signs of the aesthetic decline of the Nguyen dynasty. Such evaluations, however, reflect an understanding of heritage grounded in the notion of stylistic purity, rather than an approach that recognizes architecture as the outcome of historical processes of cultural interaction.

Through the selective appropriation of Western architectural stylistic elements, Vietnamese elites produced hybrid architectural forms that both maintained the continuity of symbolic traditions and engaged with global artistic currents. From this perspective, Khai Dinh–era architecture should not be understood as an aesthetic deviation within the history of Vietnamese architecture. Instead, these monuments represent a distinctive form of hybrid heritage characteristic of the colonial modern period, reflecting the cultural strategies through which local elites negotiated identity and authority within a rapidly globalizing world.

Recognizing the significance of this hybridity allows us to move beyond simplified interpretations of Westernization and instead appreciate the cultural creativity embodied in the architectural works of this period.

More broadly, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on architectural modernity, colonial heritage, and cultural hybridity within the context of Southeast Asia.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author utilized generative AI and AI-assisted technologies, specifically ChatGPT and Gemini, for linguistic refinement and grammatical editing. These tools were employed solely to enhance the clarity, flow, and technical accuracy of the language, as well as to perform comprehensive spell-checking.

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