

As the booming commercial hub of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City is a whirlwind of chaos. But in the eye of the storm sits a cluster of houses where humans, trees and birds coexist peacefully. People occupy the lower levels, but the roofs are giant plant pots, each with trees sprouting from a thick layer of soil. Chirping birds nest in their branches, quelling the noisy invasion of traffic and construction.

House for Trees is an experimental project by Vo Trong Nghia (pictured below), the Vietnamese visionary whose commitment to the use of natural building materials has earned him the label 'the bamboo architect'. Nghia, 44, wants to see greener and more liveable cities in his home country and beyond. House for Trees' forest canopy provides natural shade from the tropical sun, while the soil absorbs water and reduces the risk of flooding. The houses were also cheap to build – each one cost around £120,000.

"It's about reintroducing nature into modern life," says the devout Buddhist. Nghia harnesses mindfulness to keep his firm's commitment to green architecture on track; his employees' job descriptions include two hours of meditation each day. He also asks that his staff at VTN Architects observe the Five Precepts of Buddhism: no killing, no lying or gossiping, no stealing or cheating, no engagement in sexual misconduct, and no consumption of intoxicants.

The practice of meditation coupled with a respect for the Five Precepts makes Nghia's 20 or so architects "10 times more efficient," he says. The small team undertakes an extraordinary number of increasingly ambitious projects. In 2016, on the outskirts of the old port town of Hoi An, VTN Architects designed the Atlas Hotel in simple brick, but with exteriors hung with greenery.



Putting down roots: House For Trees resembles five giant planters

VO TRONG NGHIA

Bloom town

This Vietnamese architect is cultivating inner-city happiness with flourishing vegetation and a spiritual homegrown philosophy



Three years later, in Da Nang – another of Vietnam's fast-developing cities – it gave the entire 21-floor Chicland Hotel a façade of lush foliage.

At its HQ in Ho Chi Minh City, the firm is now working on enormous green apartment blocks that will house thousands of people, and also office buildings designed to connect employees with

nature. "I want the whole city to look like a huge park," he explains. But Nghia knows that for his architecture to be truly sustainable, his buildings must be timeless in their design and long-lasting in their structural integrity. "The most important thing," he says, "is that all my buildings outlast me."

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