

Urban jungle

From vertical gardens to bamboo bridges, Vo Trong Nghia is set on greening Vietnamese architecture

PHOTOGRAPHY: HIROYUKI OKI WRITER: JOSHUA ZUKAS

A few kilometres from Ho Chi Minh City's heaving centre, a building is being grown. Unlike its lifeless neighbours, the concrete structure is encased by suspended troughs sprouting tropical ferns, pandan plants and other flora native to southern Vietnam. The office, less than a year old, is the new headquarters of Vo Trong Nghia Architects, a firm celebrated for its innovative use of nature and environmentally friendly materials. Over the years, the plants will propagate and flourish, eventually wrapping the office in a thick barricade of vegetation. Peppering the green glaze are flowering vines, mango trees and lime bushes.

Embedding trees, plants and flowers in architecture is a trademark of Vo Trong Nghia, who is calling for a rethink of the way that Vietnam is urbanising. 'We destroy real jungles and replace them with concrete ones,' he laments. 'So, our aim is to reintroduce green to the cities.' Vo's motivations are practical as much as they are aesthetic; embellishing buildings with plants is less costly than importing marble or wood. The HQ's verdant blanket also absorbs sunlight, preventing the office from overheating, while large open windows catch the breeze through the foliage. According to Vo, they rarely need to use air conditioning.

'People think that there's a lot of maintenance, but there's not really,' explains Vo. 'We have systems that >>

Vo Trong Nghia Architects' new HQ is located on a corner site in Thanh My Loi, a newly developed area in Ho Chi Minh City. Its glazed facade is clad with hanging boxes planted with a selection of vegetables, herbs and fruit trees, all irrigated with stored rainwater



Right, the ground floor of the architects' HQ. The building's planted green curtain filters direct sunlight and purifies air, while the water evaporating from its irrigation system helps keep the rooms cool

Below, located in the coastal city of Danang, the Chicland Hotel features concrete balconies overflowing with tropical plants and shrubs such as boat orchids, heliotrope trees, ficus, bougainvilleas and Indian camphorweed



allow the buildings to look after themselves.' In the rainy season, which in Ho Chi Minh City lasts for half the year, tropical downpours water the plants every day. The office also collects water and channels it to the basement, where it is stored and pumped to the concrete plant troughs during the dry season. A gardener needs to inspect and treat the plants for diseases only a handful of times a year.

While the exteriors are busy and wild, the interiors remain bare and open. A large lightwell pierces six of the seven floors, bathing the workspace in natural light. The vertical void, coupled with a lack of walls, also allows for easy communication: when one of the architects has something to say, they simply shout across the shaft to different floors.

'Everything needs to be decided quickly and efficiently,' says Vo, who is confident that his team of 20 or so architects can handle a dizzying array of projects. 'That's why I designed the office like this.' The six floors served by the lightwell are a vociferous hive of activity, but the enclosed top floor is an oasis of calm. Vo requires his staff to meditate twice a day – one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening – and has dedicated an entire floor to the practice. Vo started meditating in 2012. Witnessing an increase in his efficiency, he began making regular trips to Myanmar for long meditation sessions in 2017. Now meditation is part of the job description for his staff.

Mindfulness has helped Vo focus his efforts on pursuing an architectural transformation in a country experiencing unprecedented urban growth. But his humble upbringing in a remote corner of the Vietnamese countryside also left a strong impression. 'We didn't have electricity, so we had to rely on the natural surroundings,' he remembers. 'I learned that trees can protect us from the sun and from flooding.' Like other Vietnamese people from the countryside, he began farming at a young age, and this taught him which plants to select for his buildings.

Vo wants Vietnam's cities to look like huge parks, a tall order considering only 0.25 per cent

Architecture



'We are trying to work with the government to achieve a bigger impact on Vietnam'



of central Ho Chi Minh City is covered by greenery. The architect highlighted the issue in 2014 with his House for Trees project, a set of prototypes that demonstrate how residential houses can be both affordable and green. The houses, each constructed for less than \$155,000 in a densely populated district of the city, support roofs that double as giant plant pots. The trees provide shade for the houses, and the thick layer of soil can absorb large amounts of water to reduce the risk of flooding.

In summer 2019, Vo Trong Nghia Architects completed Chicland Hotel in Danang, central

Top and above, one of the practice's latest projects is a contemporary bamboo bridge for the Thanh Tam Bamboo Ecopark in Thanh Hoa. The 160ha tourist attraction aims to promote organic agriculture, sustainable development and contemporary bamboo construction techniques

Vietnam's largest city, with balconies that overflow with plants. To spruce up the wall of green, the firm also planted low-maintenance bougainvillea trees on the larger balconies. Throughout Danang's dry season, the trees erupt with pink and purple flowers to spectacular visual effect. Chicland Hotel gives a sense of what the headquarters may look like in the years to come; a little over a year after construction and its ocean-facing façade is already caked in foliage. The hotel also boasts another of Vo Trong Nghia's trademarks: bamboo. Treated bamboo arches over the ground-floor Tra House & Bistro, giving the tearoom a warm, earthy character.

Vo's firm attracted international attention with its bamboo architecture at the Expo 2015 in Milan, where it constructed the Vietnam Pavilion with 41 bamboo-clad columns. Now able to manipulate the material into increasingly intricate shapes and patterns, it has built bamboo structures across Vietnam. In 2017, the firm completed a collection of five bamboo ceremony domes in Son La, a mountainous province in northern Vietnam. Rather than impose on the landscape, the bucolic thatched roofs, inspired by local basketry techniques, complement the rugged scenery. Earlier this year, the practice wrapped a bridge in Thanh Hoa, a rural province neighbouring Son La, with a mesmerising, undulating sleeve.

Vo's architecture is getting attention beyond Vietnam's urban elite. But he knows who he needs to win over to enact real change. 'We are trying to work with the government to achieve a bigger impact on Vietnam,' he explains. Simultaneously pursuing greener cities and retaining the natural artistry of the countryside is no small feat in developing Vietnam, but Vo remains optimistic. 'We haven't achieved anything really impactful yet,' he accepts. 'But we will.' ✪ vnarchitects.net