



COMMUNE

In Hanoi's Dong Da, young creatives have turned a compound of crumbling colonial houses into Sixty Square, the city's hippest arts hub. So why does its future remain uncertain?

By **Joshua Zukas**
Photography **Bao Khanh**

“PLEASE STEP QUIETLY, THERE ARE PEOPLE LIVING DOWNSTAIRS,”

warns a waitress as guests tiptoe over creaky weathered floorboards. It's eight o'clock in the evening and they are creeping into Quan Cam, a café that turns into a music venue on Friday evenings, so her request for soundless movement seems a little off key.

They are at Sixty Square, a compound occupied by six buildings: two majestic but dilapidated colonial houses connected by a bridge and believed to have been erected in the 1920s, two smaller detached houses from the same era – one of which is hosting the gig – and two additional structures likely built in the 1950s.

Bearing Vietnam's favored shade of yellow paint, they are bedecked with towering palm trees, green wooden shutters and elegant balcony railings. A large tree stretches over the space, while a small shrine dedicated to the spirits sits at its base.

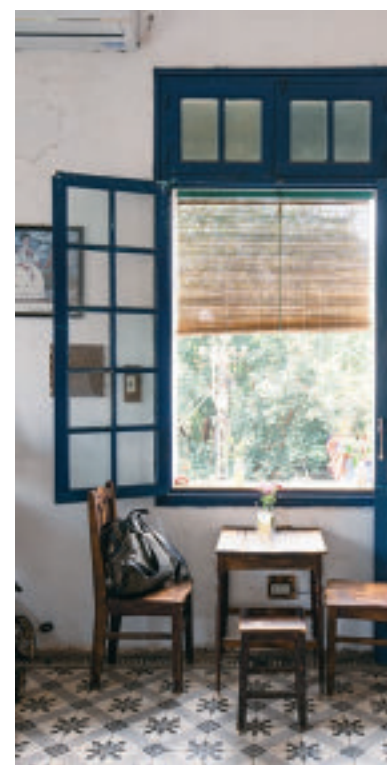
Separated from central Hanoi by the railway, Sixty Square is embedded in an alleyway in Dong Da, a residential district associated with agonizing congestion and breakneck urbanization. Due to its lack of famous sights, few tourists make it this far.

The revelers settle into reclining

bamboo chairs and marvel at the surroundings: large wooden-framed windows and a lofty ceiling covered on the outside by flimsy corrugated iron. (The original roof, once made with sturdy rafters and solid tiles, had been lost after two destructive wars and years of neglect.) A collection of mismatched books, artisanal ceramics and haphazard art decorates the venue.

On a makeshift stage, Dang Duc Minh, a slim man in his mid-twenties sporting round spectacles, a long ponytail and an oversized olive-green shirt, steps up to the microphone and introduces the night's theme: covers from Vietnam's biggest names in music from the 1960s and 1970s.

Dang is Quan Cam's co-owner as well as the host and headline performer for the evening. He speaks with clarity and apparent devotion to the music his grandparents enjoyed decades ago,





THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFTMOST
Quan Cam, a café that turns into a Friday-night music venue; patrons hanging out at Quan Cam; co-owner Dang Duc Minh; the café features a laid-back vibe



such as singers Trinh Cong Son and Pham Duy. Dang sings his first number, accompanied by a young and handsome guitarist with bleach-blond hair and a tattoo running up his neck.

Dang's slight frame belies his powerful voice, with which he serenades the crowd with such fervor that dark patches of sweat appear on his shirt. The audience – made up of alternative youngsters including students and professionals – is captivated. An artist pulls out a notepad and starts sketching the scene before him.

VISITORS TO QUAN CAM AND, BY extension, Sixty Square, are almost entirely local: young Hanoians eager to escape the city's chaos and discover something new about their hometown or culture. "Not many young people know about this important period of Vietnamese music," Dang says between



THIS PAGE, FROM TOP Cao Trung Hieu, owner of KoFi Café; the café's balcony seating offers a tranquil view of the pond; a shelf of items for sale at the shop



“

I wanted to make it a place for art so that Hanoians and visitors can come and get a taste of the city

”

puffs on his traditional tobacco pipe. He's talking about *nhac tien chien* (pre-war music), Western-influenced songs written between the 1930s and 1970s.

"I really want to share this music with other young people. For every one hundred people that come to the café, maybe only ten will like the music. But one will love it and that's enough to keep me going."

Like many of the small business owners in Sixty Square, Dang set up a café here to share this passion. And like those that followed, he's drawn to the compound's architecture and history. "It's hard to find places like this in Hanoi. I wanted to make it a place for art so that both Hanoians and visitors can come and get a taste of the city," he says.

"WHEN I FIRST CAME HERE, ALL I could think was 'wow'. It was peaceful and there were so many birds," says Cao Trung Hieu, owner of KoFi Café, which opened in October 2017, two months after Quan Cam. Donning a loose-fitting shirt and several ear piercings, Cao sips on a glass of iced water while listening to French jazz music emanating from his café. "It was also cheap to rent," he adds with a grin.

Like Dang, Cao opened his café in Sixty Square to indulge his love of creativity. "We often do events – around three times a week – but it's not regular," explains Cao, who trained as an architect and deals in analog cameras. "It's always arts-related, like seminars that introduce a music genre or drawing workshops with



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFTMOST

Knick-knacks at newly opened calligraphy studio Aotrangtinh; a calligraphy sample; shop owner and calligrapher Nguyen Hong Van



an illustrator," he says. Sandwiched between a small shrine and a pond that gives life to an otherworldly banyan tree, KoFi Café seats up to 50 people and has an almost mythological atmosphere – ideal for creative concepts to flourish.

Cao was also eager to evolve the space by involving more like-minded folk. "When I arrived, there wasn't that much going on and I wanted to change that, so I invited friends to help build a community of creativity," he recalls, adding that he made sure there would be a greater variety of crafts.

Eager to contribute to the space and take advantage of affordable rent, those friends set up a range of outlets, including a tattoo parlor, film lab, artisanal jewelry shop, thrift store and a boutique coffee processor. Thanks to these efforts, Sixty Square has grown as

an incubator of artistic pursuits in the last two years.

IN MAY, FRESH UNIVERSITY GRADUATE

Nguyen Hong Van opened Aotrangtinh, a calligraphy studio that occupies the second floor of one of the newer buildings. The space is reminiscent of a gallery with whitewashed walls and simple wooden tables, and Nguyen uses it for client work, such as handwriting wedding invitations and crafting restaurant menus. She also runs classes and workshops teaching calligraphy. "What I like most about Sixty Square is its quietness," says the artist, dressed in a simple yet elegant top and ankle-length skirt. "This is necessary for my creative inspiration."

Similarly, the buildings' old-world vibe is the perfect setting for Nguyen Cao Son, an established tea master and



FUNKY FASHION

Apart from being a place to discover creative hobbies, Sixty Square is also where you can do some bargain fashion hunting. For vintage-inspired dresses, culottes and dungarees, check out **Nancan Vintage**. Fans of urban streetwear should head to **Khac Store**, which stocks preloved uniforms and jerseys of American baseball and basketball teams. And if you want a wardrobe full of 1990s-inspired fashion, look no further than **90s Secondhand**, which has everything from plaid shirts to retro graphic T-shirts. [fb.com/Nancan-Vintage-310722066470014;](https://fb.com/Nancan-Vintage-310722066470014) [fb.com/oldtothanew;](https://fb.com/oldtothanew) fb.com/90s.secondhand



THIS PAGE, FROM TOP
Customers at Cao Son Tea Room; a tea set of local handmade ceramics

traditional-music enthusiast who opened Cao Son Tea Room in September 2017.

"I'm a nostalgic person and I love colonial architecture," the 41-year-old says. Cao Son Tea Room is divided between the first floor of one of the colonial buildings, where he serves traditional tea grown in the northern mountains, and the second level of a separate house, where he organizes *ca tru* performances, which take place on the evenings of the second and fourth Sundays of each month.

Inscribed by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage in 2009, it is an ancient art of sung poetry performed by a trio of musicians – a female singer, a lute player and a percussionist – with roots that can be traced back to the Ly Dynasty of northern Vietnam from the 11th to the 13th century.

Sporting a neat goatee and wearing a traditional tunic, Cao Son believes these

ca tru events at Sixty Square hark back to the buildings' history. "It's very likely that this space would have been used for such performances in the past," he explains, sitting in one of the antique benches used by the audience during the shows. Though he regrets that he's found no proof of this, his theory is not without reason: Nearby Kham Thien Street was famous for its houses that hosted *ca tru* performances before being destroyed by US air raids in 1972.

SADLY, SIXTY SQUARE'S BRIEF

existence may be coming to a close. The buildings are earmarked for demolition so developers can build an apartment block in their wake, and although a date hasn't been set, this instability is keenly felt by the motley crew of creatives. In February, the space was sold to a new owner, resulting in all the Sixty Square inhabitants being forced out with just two weeks' notice. "I knew before moving here that this place wasn't stable, so when we were kicked out I



GET CULTURED

In the area and want to visit another culture hub? Make your way to **Ga Phe**, a café and arts venue that's also in Dong Da district. A 10-minute drive from Sixty Square, this multistory shop offers artisanal coffee, souvenirs from local design group Tired City, a rooftop gallery and a space for drawing and illustration workshops. fb.com/gaphecoffee



THIS PAGE, FROM TOP
Cao Son Tea Room,
which opened in 2017;
the entrance to the
tea shop

wasn't surprised at all," explains Cao with surprising nonchalance. He then moved to Danang, a 17-hour train ride from Hanoi, to start something new. "It was a fun time and it came to an end. But my customers were difficult to console – I could feel that they'd lost something."

Refusing to let Sixty Square go, Dang was more persistent. He rented a room nearby, talked to people in the neighborhood and tried to find out as much as he could about the future of the space. Two months later, he managed to approach the new owner directly. For unknown reasons, the demolition had stalled, so the owner allowed the creatives to return and Sixty Square was back. Cao, who felt a deep commitment to his customers, also returned from Danang to continue KoFi Café. "We now have a contract until the end of 2020, and there's a chance that it will be extended further, but who knows," says Dang. "We're not completely safe. If the contract is cancelled then there's little we can do."

Despite the ever-present shadow of potential closure, the people at Sixty Square remain refreshingly upbeat, which could be a positive sign for Hanoi's creative future. Dang and Cao are thankful for their time here and if they have to leave for good, they'll simply move on. "No plans," replied Dang when I asked what he'll do then. "I'll go somewhere else and reinvent the space."

HANOI



Experience a heartwarming, world-class journey with the Philippines' only 4-Star Airline. PAL flies 4x weekly between Manila and Hanoi.

Website:
philippineairlines.com

Facebook: [fb.com/flyPAL](https://www.facebook.com/flyPAL)

Reservations (Manila):
+63 2 8885 8888

Swingaround tour package:
swingaround.philippineairlines.com