

STYLE & DESIGN

# BACK TO THE SOURCE

INNOVATIVE LOCAL ARCHITECTURE FIRMS ARE USING TRADITIONAL VIETNAMESE BUILDING STYLES TO BUCK SUBURBAN HO CHI MINH CITY'S NEO-VICTORIAN TREND OF TOWERING WHITE WALLS, ELABORATE GOLDEN GATES AND MERCEDES-SIZED GARAGES. BY SIMON STANLEY. PHOTOS BY HIROYUKI OKI.

A soft afternoon breeze lazily browses the pages of my notebook as I sit down with Michael Charruault of MM++ Architects. We're in the open-air dining room of the home and office he shares with wife, partner and company founder Pham Thi My An.

"In every country, developers are proposing mass [housing] projects which they think are really suited to demand," he says. "But I think that people are actually much more open-minded than the developers."

Surrounded by imposing neo-classical mansions and slender tube houses in a sleepy corner of Nha Be District, MM++'s headquarters have become one of the firm's most talked-about buildings, perfectly embodying the core principles of this husband and wife design team. Based on the layout of a traditional Vietnamese salt house, the ground floor dining and kitchen space is open on three sides to the lush greenery of the garden. A cobalt blue swimming pool projects dancing ribbons of sunlight onto the contemporary concrete ceiling above, and my two-wheeled fight across the city centre has become a distant memory. With a background in high-end holiday resort design, it's no surprise to learn that relaxation is near the top of MM++'s design agenda regardless of size, shape or location. I half expect a waiter to arrive with a cocktail menu.

"When you look at our portfolio of projects," says Charruault, "it's all about tropical weather and the relationship between interior and exterior: finding some greenery, natural ventilation, controlling the sunlight."

Founded in 2009 by My An, a University of Hanoi graduate, MM++ provides client-focused residential property design while blending contemporary aesthetics, traditional and modern materials and time-tested features best suited to the climate. It's

a refreshing alternative to the ready-made housing solutions popping up like toy towns all over the country.

"We always think about traditional Vietnamese or French colonial architecture," says Charruault. "In the past, in Vietnam, they found so many smart ways to build, smart ways to use the space. It's a good start, even in contemporary architecture." The palm leaf roof above us is certainly proof of that. Elsewhere on the property, open-plan rooms, ventilated brick walls and carefully positioned shutters keep temperatures comfortable without the need for air-conditioning.

"Here, it's really cool, we have lots of large streets, lots of air around, so we've taken advantage of that," says Charruault. He motions towards the row of opulent multi-gabled mansions currently under construction nearby. "If you make that kind of house, you kill it. You kill the airflow...It's completely closed."

Despite its striking dissonance with the houses surrounding it, the local community's reaction has been surprisingly positive. "When people are walking around, all the neighbours, they really enjoy this house," says Charruault. "With these materials, it reminds them of their past, of when they were a child maybe; it reminds them of things they enjoy."



## THE REBEL ROUSERS

MM++ is not the only firm looking to shake things up in Vietnam. Inspired by the global success of Hanoi-based heavyweight Vo Trong Nghia, designer of the Vietnamese pavilion at the 2015 Milan World Expo; and Saigon's A21 Studio, winners of the 2014 World Architecture Festival's Building of the Year Award, an expanding collective of small, dynamic design houses are rising up to challenge current conventions. "They're changing all the usual codes," says Char-

ruault, "[and] developers are starting to listen."

For MM++, the layout of a home comes first, with each floor plan tailored to suit the specific needs of the client while offering a 'back to nature' way of living, something Charruault believes is possible even in a dense urban environment. "Each site is different but your target can be the same. How you think about natural ventilation, natural lighting, for example, or a small garden, maybe we'll try to use the roof; it's possible in every typology. It's a way of designing."

With Saigon's green-space under constant threat, many contemporary architects are

focusing on the integration of plants and trees into building design. A recent Vo Trong Nghia project in Tan Binh District, entitled House for Trees, is one example. Consisting of five interconnected concrete housing modules, each doubles as a giant plant pot, measuring up to 10 metres in height, with micro-gardens and banyan trees sprouting from the roofs.

"An over-abundance of motorbikes causes daily traffic congestion as well as serious air pollution," Nghia said in a 2014 interview with *ArchDaily* Magazine. "As a result, new generations [living] in urban areas are losing their connection with nature."

## DESIGN FOR THE MASSES

But can contemporary design provide practical, long-lasting solutions for those of us without huge budgets or the sort of space required to turn our homes into giant plant pots? My An and Charruault's response would be a definite "yes". Their compact residential projects in Go Vap and Phu Nhuan districts look almost as bright and spacious as their villas in Binh Phuoc or Dalat, while their 'design and build' service allows them to monitor costs and adhere to a client's budget from the drawing board to the handing over of keys.

Charruault explains that, unlike in Europe or the US, this is a fairly typical practice for Vietnamese architects. "It changes the way we do projects," he says, "because it means that when you design something, a few months later you will have to build it." In this way MM++ can offer real-world, low-cost solutions, acting simultaneously as architect, quantity surveyor and project manager.

"Of course you cannot get luxury with a low budget, but even if we have a very restricted budget and a smart client, then we are able to do something really good. My An's approach to architecture is all about people: listening and understanding first, then sharing her enthusiasm with everyone,

from the client to the workers on the construction site."

One challenge for firms like MM++ is obtaining building permits for their 'unconventional' modern designs. In the case of many new development sites, such permits are issued by a local administration office, often a public/private company imposing strict limits on the types of buildings allowed. Many landowners therefore find themselves faced with just a handful of pre-prescribed designs. "They always find people who enjoy [those houses]," says Charruault, "but the problem comes when you don't have a choice."

This is just a small part of what MM++

sees as a wider issue in Vietnam, where progress in areas such as urban development, sustainability and environmental impact is stalled because of a simple lack of cohesion. Although firms like MM++, A21 and Vo Trong Nghia are nudging things forward one building at a time, Charruault feels that a collaborative approach, involving both local and national authorities, promises to bring the most benefits. "It needs to be a chain," he says, "from politics - the people who choose, the people who plan the city - to the architects. Then we can all work together. The challenge is to find this workflow between the different parties." ■

