

ECHOES

in the

EARTH

Post-War Spatial
Practices of Memory, Adaptation
and Inhabitation in Vietnam

NGUYEN NGUYEN

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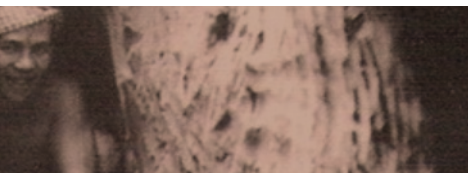
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INTRODUCTION

My interest in this topic began during Vietnam's 2/9 Independence Day celebrations, watching the 80th-year military parade unfold in front of the nation. The spectacle was both powerful and unexpectedly moving. Growing up in an international school, I was never taught Vietnamese history in depth, yet I always felt a strong emotional connection to my country. Seeing the pride and unity on that day made me question how this sense of history and collective memory is spatially represented, how places, ruins, and architecture embody what a society chooses to remember or forget. As a spatial design student, I became fascinated by how memory can live within materials, soil, and form, and how architecture itself becomes an archive of emotion and history.

This thesis, *Echoes in the Earth: Tracing Memory through Ruins of Post-war Vietnam*, explores how the physical and emotional afterlives of architecture continue to shape our understanding of loss, repair, and freedom. Through three key sites, the Củ Chi Tunnels, the Vinh City socialist housing complexes, and Rừng Sác, a biosphere reserve, I trace a layered narrative of Vietnam's built environment. The Củ Chi Tunnels, carved from the earth, represent a spatial language of resistance and hope during war. The Vinh housing complexes, reconstructed with East German collaboration, reflect post-war ideals of collectivism and socialist solidarity. Meanwhile, Rừng Sác, once a strategic war zone devastated by defoliation and bombing, has regenerated into a mosaic of ecological, touristic, and protective zones, revealing how landscapes of conflict can evolve into new environmental and civic terrains.

Together, these sites uncover how Vietnam's architecture and ecology bear emotional imprints of survival and transformation. This research asks:

How do material traces, landscape succession, and heritage curation reveal or obscure wartime memory? How do post-war structures in Vietnam, as they are inhabited and adapted today, rework the meanings of loss, repair, and freedom? How can partial abandonment be mobilised to support livelihoods and regeneration instead of neglect?

By combining architectural analysis with historical and ecological inquiry, this thesis aims to understand how spaces marked by war can be reimagined as living archives of memory and resilience.

While this thesis initially approached post-war spaces as sites of survival and resilience, the research gradually complicated this assumption. Across the case studies, endurance does not emerge as a fixed quality embedded in architecture itself, but as something continually negotiated through use, decay, and adaptation. This shift reframes architecture not as a stable container of memory, but as an unstable medium shaped by social, ecological, and political forces beyond design intent.

“Tàn nhưng không phế,” Ruined but not useless

“Tàn nhưng không phế.” – Ruined but not useless. Ruined but not useless, captures the enduring soul of Vietnam, a nation that emerged from one of the most devastating wars of the twentieth century (Báo Đồng Tháp, 2012).

Despite approximately 15 million tonnes of bombs, the destruction of entire cities, and the deaths of over three million Vietnamese between 1955 and 1975, the nation refused to fall apart. Vietnam rebuilt its cities and identity from the rubble. Tunnels, craters, memorials, and communist housing are just a few of the remnants of the war’s aftermath. However, the Vietnamese people’s sense of collectivism, flexibility, and pride demonstrate their deep cultural endurance. After 1975, reconstruction happened under extreme scarcity: an embargo, material shortages, and mass displacement. Post-war housing, informal extensions, communal courtyards, and improvised repairs reveal a culture built on adaptation rather than replacement. The Đổi Mới reforms of 1986 then shifted these spaces again, from survival infrastructure to evolving sites of memory, tourism, and economic growth. The lingering effects of conflict still influence how people view freedom, memory, and space today. To study these traces is to understand how a nation turns destruction into continuity, and how the spirit of “tàn nhưng không phế” still defines Vietnam’s path of recovery and renewal (Spector, 1998).



Fig 1: Post War ruins in Vietnam (Nic Hilditch-Short, 2017)



Fig 2.3.4: Archival photos of soldiers inside tunnels (Granger.com, 2025)

To understand how survival reshapes spatial form under extreme conditions, this chapter turns to the Củ Chi tunnels. Unlike monumental war architecture, Củ Chi represents a spatial practice defined by concealment, improvisation, and bodily endurance. The tunnels offer a lens through which architecture can be read not as designed object, but as lived infrastructure shaped by urgency, scarcity, and collective labour.

Beneath the quiet forest of Củ Chi, located 70 kilometres northwest of Hồ Chí Minh City, lies one of the most extensive underground networks in the world, spanning over 250 kilometres across multiple districts. Constructed gradually from the late 1940s to the 1960s, the tunnels were carved entirely by hand using basic tools through dense layers of lateritic red soil. Once built during the resistance against French colonial forces, the system expanded exponentially during the Vietnam– U.S. War, becoming a vital military base for the liberation army (Hoà Bình, 2005).

The Củ Chi tunnels have evolved from an underground system of survival into a cultural and spatial symbol deeply embedded in Vietnam’s collective identity. During the war, their purpose was purely functional: a defensive architecture of endurance, enabling guerrilla fighters to live, communicate, and resist beneath the earth. This architecture shaped a new relationship between people and landscape, where the ground itself became both shield and home. That intimate bond with the soil, digging, breathing, and moving through it, formed a powerful spatial memory that continues to influence how the site is experienced today (Nguyễn, M.N. 2019).

***“We lived underground for weeks.
The earth was our breath, our shield.”***

– Former Củ Chi guerrilla

Undeground Layout of Tunnel

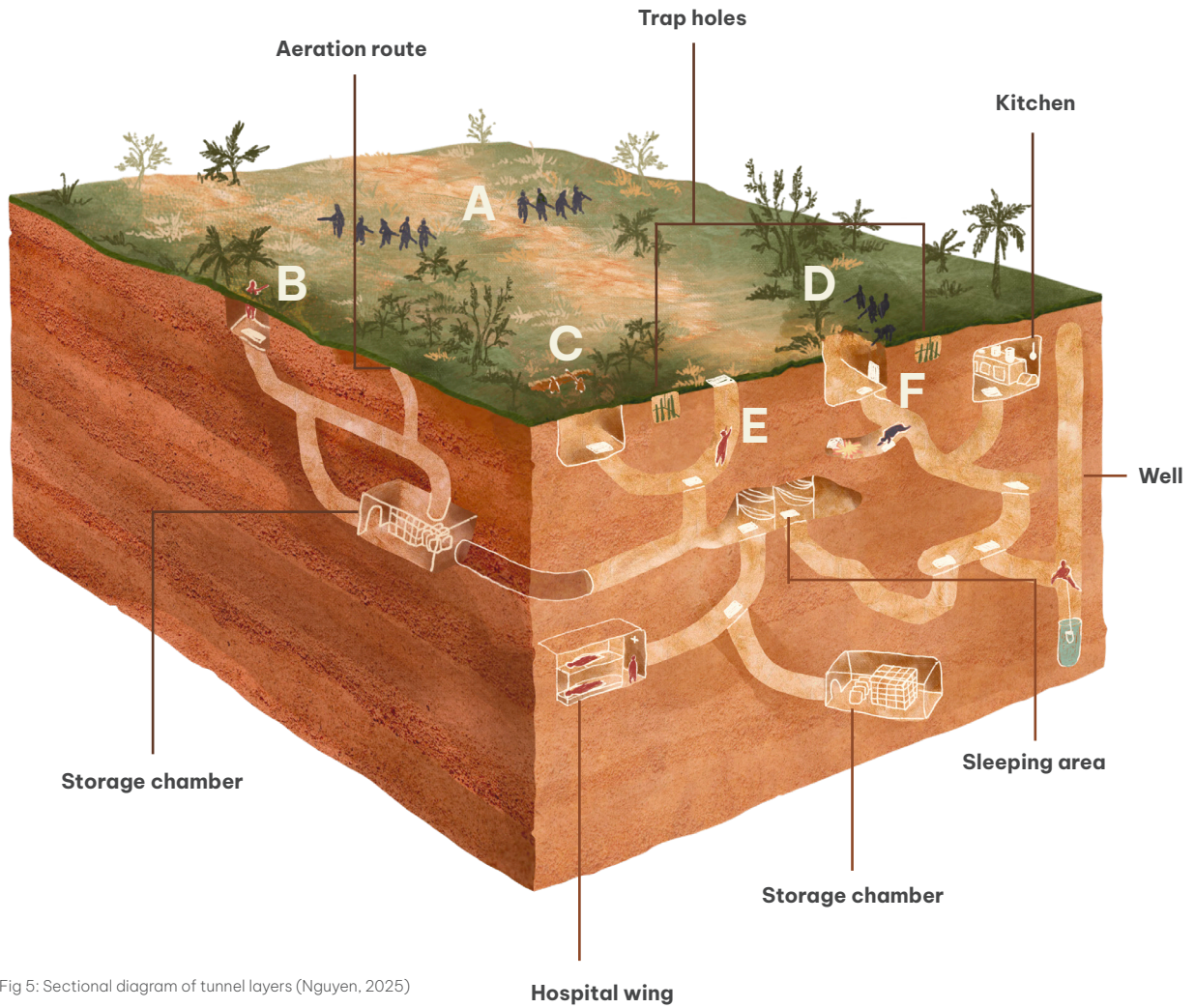


Fig 5: Sectional diagram of tunnel layers (Nguyen, 2025)

A Enemy firing squad

D Enemy entering trap zone

B Hidden soldier

E Tunnel entry

C Hidden soldier

F Misleading trap

Materials Anatomy of Survival

The Củ Chi tunnels are defined not by their form but by their material condition. Every surface is raw and unrefined, inseparable from the iron-rich red earth of southern Vietnam (lateritic soil). Over time, this soil has come to carry emotional residue, absorbing the fear, endurance, and touch of those who lived within it, a kind of collective subconscious pressed into the ground. The walls shift with humidity, darken with moisture, and hold the imprint of bodies, becoming what could be called a memory fossil, a material that quietly records psychological experience (Hoà Bình, 2005).

Within this environment, space becomes deeply sensory: silence, claustrophobia, darkness, and compression construct intense emotional atmospheres, pulling the occupant into the psychological depths of the underground. This material world heightens the disorientation of the tunnels, where unclear, labyrinth-like paths amplify vulnerability. This understanding draws from Paul Virilio's *Bunker Archaeology*, where wartime structures are seen as containers of psychological intensity and materialised experience. Here, instinct replaces sight, and architecture becomes a living archive of subterranean memory (Virilio and Collins, 1994).



Fig 6: Diagram of materials used in tunnels (Nguyen, 2025)



Fig 7.8: Diagram of materials used in tunnels (Au Lac Charner Hotel, 2025)



The extreme smallness of the Củ Chi tunnels reflects bodies shaped by famine and prolonged hardship. Built by hand by farmers and teenage soldiers, the spaces are scaled to diminished physical frames. Their narrow, low passages register scarcity, urgency, and survival, embedding the human cost of war directly into architectural form. Confusing layouts and concealed entrances further allowed life to continue by remaining unseen and unreadable to the enemy (Phong Trần, 2025).

1 Bunker Archaeology

A key idea from Virilio's Bunker Archaeology is the notion of defensive spaces as thresholds between presence and absence—places where human intention continually meets the unpredictable forces of impact, erosion, and collapse. The Củ Chi tunnels operate within this same boundary. Their structure sits between what was deliberately carved into the earth and what the environment repeatedly threatened to undo. Under relentless bombing, the tunnels were never repaired uniformly; instead, they existed in a state of controlled entropy, shaped by improvised fixes, partial collapses, and the constant need to navigate around damage. This instability became a defining characteristic, turning the tunnels into spatial records of conflict where the pressures of war were inscribed directly into their organisation (Virilio and Collins, 1994).

Yet the emotional meaning of this underground world differs sharply from Virilio's concrete bunkers. While bunkers embody paranoia, isolation, and the weight of modern warfare, the Củ Chi tunnels express something more collective and hopeful. They produce similar sensations of enclosure and protection, but instead of signalling entrapment, they reflect survival, adaptability, and unity. What began as functional shelter evolved into a powerful cultural symbol: an architecture where people lived, communicated, and resisted beneath the earth. This intimate relationship with the soil—digging into it, depending on it, and moving through it—created a spatial memory that continues to shape how Củ Chi is understood today.

“Hệ thống địa đạo ba tầng ăn sâu trong lòng đất là nơi ăn, ở, làm việc, chiến đấu của bộ đội và dân quân – những con người sống giữa lòng đất nhưng luôn mang trong tim khát vọng độc lập, tự do.”

“The three-level tunnel system dug deep into the earth was a place to eat, live, work, and fight for the soldiers and militia – people who lived beneath the ground yet always carried in their hearts the desire for independence and freedom.”

– Nguyễn, M.N. (2019)

1 Ambiguity and Memory

The Củ Chi tunnels now occupy an ambiguous position, suspended between memorial, museum, and tourist attraction. As a site shaped by both beauty and trauma, it retains the emotional weight of underground life while presenting a carefully curated surface for visitors. Many physical alterations reflect this shift in purpose: entrances and passages have been widened, interiors are artificially lit, and traps once designed for defence are now sealed. What was originally a landscape of concealment and endurance has been reshaped into an educational environment, allowing visitors to move safely through a controlled version of the past. This transformation aligns with Per Strömberg's observation that post-military landscapes often become "readymade" cultural spaces, reinterpreted to suit contemporary social and economic conditions (Strömberg, 2016).

Such adaptation is not without justification. Tourism provides essential funding for the site's maintenance and long-term preservation, making a degree of commercialisation both practical and unavoidable. However, this shift also introduces tension.

As staged reenactments and photo-oriented routes turn lived history into a consumable experience, the tunnels increasingly sit between remembrance and entertainment. While preservation and education remain vital, the growing emphasis on spectacle risks flattening emotional complexity. This condition calls for a careful balance, one that allows the site to remain accessible and sustained, while ensuring that the reality beneath the ground is not overshadowed by what is curated above it.

Beyond physical modification, the transformation of Củ Chi also reshapes who controls historical narrative. Interpretive signage, guided routes, and institutional storytelling frame the tunnels within a coherent national history, privileging collective victory and resilience over fragmentation, fear, or doubt. In this process, certain experiences are amplified while others are muted, producing a stable and legible account of the past. The site no longer operates as an open-ended landscape of memory but as a managed historical text, where meaning is fixed in advance. This raises questions about whose memories are preserved, whose are simplified, and how sites of conflict evolve when remembrance becomes inseparable from governance, tourism, and cultural economy.

From Survival to Spectacle



Fig 9: Tourist experience in tunnels (Sai Gon Adventure - Street food tour, motorbike tour, 2025)



Fig 10.11: KTT Vinh city (Nghệ An Provincial Museum, 1968)

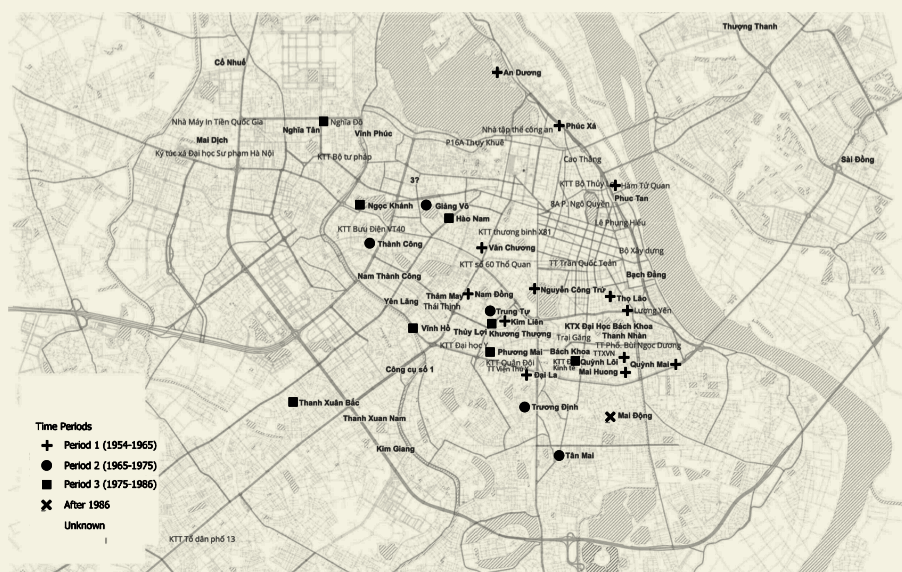
Rebuilding Collectivity after the Ruins

After the war, Vinh was 95% destroyed (Vietnam Ministry of Construction, 1973) The construction of khu tập thể (KTT) housing in post-war Vietnam acted as a form of moral and social reconstruction, providing continuity after collective trauma through a new ideological framework. Rooted in Marxist-Leninist principles of collectivism and social equality (St John, 1980), these buildings were designed to cultivate communal living rather than individual comfort. Their spatial structure prioritised shared kitchens, courtyards, and corridors, spaces of co-operation and mutual dependence, while private rooms remained minimal and secondary. Such design choices materialised the belief that individuals exist through collective contribution, reflecting the socialist ideal of a community bound by shared labour and responsibility (Anguyo,I, 2024).



Fig 12: "Urbicide: American destruction of cultural heritage," Vinh City, Vietnam (Nghệ An Provincial Museum., 1968)

If the Củ Chi tunnels reveal architecture formed under immediate threat, socialist housing complexes such as KTT blocks reflect survival translated into peacetime governance. Here, endurance is no longer underground or invisible, but institutionalised through standardisation, repetition, and ideological control. This shift exposes tensions between collective ideals and everyday inhabitation. The development of Khu Tập Thể (KTT) housing across North Vietnam formed a spatial strategy of post-war stabilisation rather than a purely architectural response. Through standardised layouts and collective living arrangements, domestic architecture functioned as a medium of controlled memory, reinforcing ideals of unity, discipline, and shared responsibility. As illustrated in the mapped timeline of KTT development and reinforced through spatial analysis by Hanoi Ad Hoc, this approach extended beyond Vinh to form a coherent northern housing network shaped by allocation systems, labour distribution, and state-managed proximity (Hanoi Ad hoc, 2025).



Selected spatial observations informed by direct correspondence and unpublished research material from Hanoi Ad hoc, Hanoi (2025).



Fig 13: "Heroic mother laying the first bricks to rebuild Vinh City in collaboration with East German architecture" (Vietnam News Agency, 1972)

As Christina Schwenkel explains in *Building Socialism: The Afterlife of East German Architecture in Urban Vietnam*, the reconstruction of Vinh after the 1972 bombings was one of the most ambitious international aid projects of the socialist world. East Germany (GDR) provided not only financial assistance but also comprehensive planning expertise, technical training, prefabrication technology, and building materials.

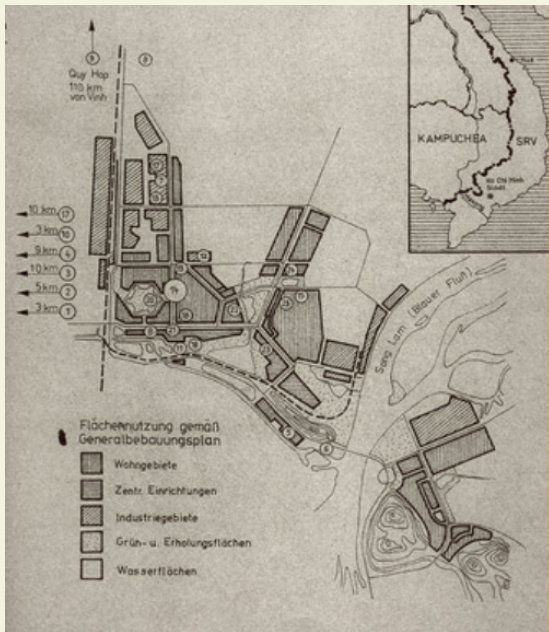


Fig 14: Plan of Vinh city by GDR (Cerise and Shannon, 2012)

The GDR's reconstruction of Vinh carried powerful political symbolism. Beyond technical assistance, architecture operated as a medium of socialist brotherhood—a spatial expression of solidarity between two allied states. Concrete itself became ideological: prefabricated panels, slab blocks, and rational grids embodied efficiency, collectivity, and modern socialist order (Cerise and Shannon, 2012). Yet once inhabited, these rigid forms encountered everyday realities, climate, informal adaptation, and communal practices, revealing tensions between imported ideals and lived spatial culture.

Memory » Control » Amnesia

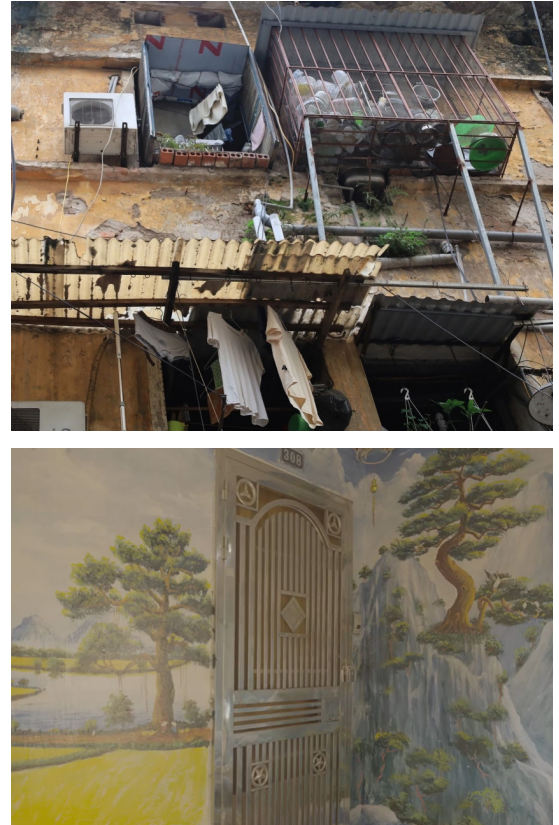
In Mark Crinson's *Urban Memory: History and Amnesia in the Modern City* (2005), architecture is seen as both a carrier of collective memory and a mechanism of selective forgetting. The KTT housing in post-war Vinh embodies this dual role, acting as a form of moral reconstruction, restoring order and continuity after trauma through socialist design. Its repetitive facades and disciplined spatial organisation translated ideology into material memory, reminding citizens daily of their collective purpose and the state's vision of unity. Yet this same repetition also enforced amnesia: erasing traces of individual loss, personal expression, and pre-war identity beneath the surface of uniform modernity (Crinson, 2005).

2 From Ideology to Everyday Life

Fig 15.16: Social housing in Berlin (Minkjan, 2016)



Fig 17.18: Social housing in Vietnam (Hanoi Ad hoc, 2025)



Same Ideology, different Afterlives

The German social housing blocks remain clean, uniform, and well-maintained, supported by a stable economy and regular public investment. In contrast, Vietnam's khu tập thể housing has aged under harsh tropical weather and limited funding. Without resources for maintenance, residents adapted by adding makeshift repairs, plants, and extensions. What was once rigid socialist order has become a patchwork of personal solutions, evidence of both economic constraint and everyday resilience (Schwenkel, 2020).

These improvised changes not only reveal the gap between two economic systems but also show how architecture in Vietnam has become deeply human, shaped by care, adaptation, and memory rather than state control. This shift reflects broader structural conditions: prolonged budget shortages after reunification, the absence of a comprehensive welfare housing system, and the gradual transfer of responsibility from state provision to household self-management. As formal investment declined, domestic labour, informal economies, and shared maintenance practices became critical to the buildings' survival, embedding economic reality directly into the architectural fabric (Rashela Dyca, 2026).

“When it rained, the water ran down the walls like tears, but this is our home – we have made it ours.”

(Resident of Quang Trung KTT, Vinh – quoted in Schwenkel, 2020, p. 145)

Vietnamese Modernism

As Mel Schenck (2020) notes, Vietnamese modernism developed its own architectural language long before GDR aid arrived. Unlike the strict, machine-like uniformity of East German housing, Vietnamese modernist buildings were shaped by climate, craftsmanship, and resourcefulness, ventilation blocks, deep balconies, and playful ornament. These features reappear in KTT housing, demonstrating that the project was not a pure East German transplant but a hybrid form. The improvised extensions, plants, and repairs made by residents today continue this tradition of adaptation, showing how Vietnamese architecture has always been flexible, human, and quietly resilient (Schenck, 2020).

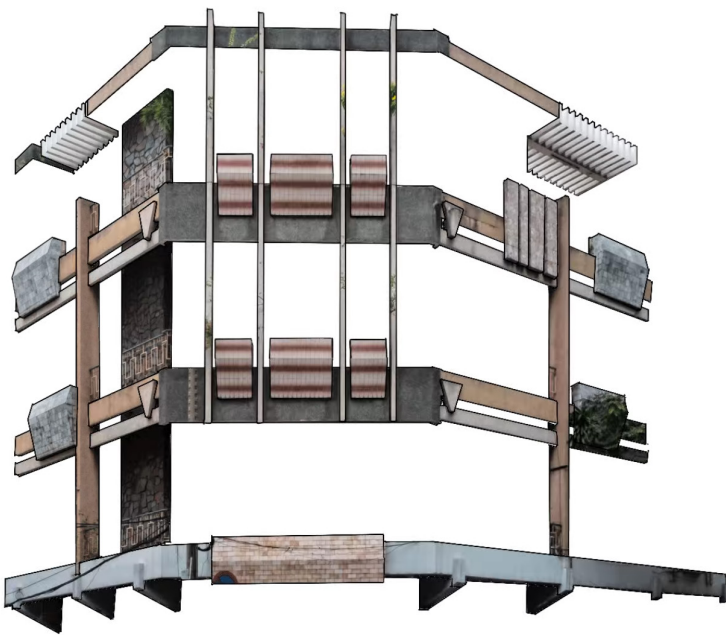
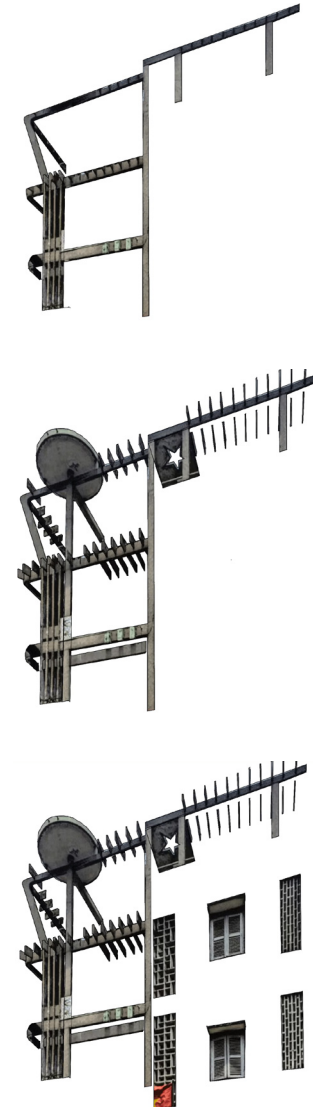


Fig 19: Diagram of housing features in KTT (Saigoneer, 2021)



Vietnamese modernism treats the wall not as an object, but as a breathing surface.

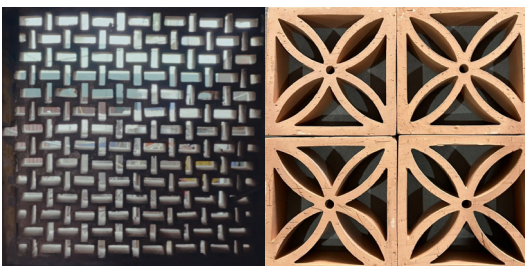


Fig 20.21: Gạch hoa, concrete screens ((Hanoiadhoc.com, 2026)

This flexibility is not only visible at the scale of balconies and extensions, but also embedded within the architectural surface itself. Building on this climatic logic, Vietnamese modernism frequently employed perforated concrete and brick screens (gạch thông gió) as an environmental device rather than a purely decorative gesture (Hanoi Ad hoc, 2025). From an interior and spatial design perspective, these conditions foreground threshold, bodily movement, and material intimacy over formal composition.

2 KTT as Lived Architecture

Hành lang (Hallways)

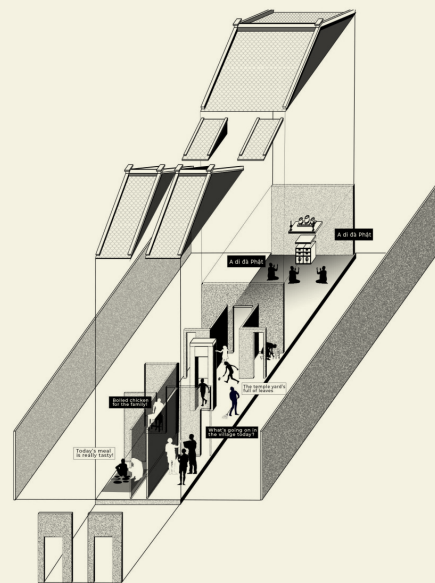


Fig 22: Hang lang shots KTT research (Hanoiadhoc.com, 2026)

Hallways (hành lang) in Vietnam's khu tập thể (KTT) housing are far more than transitional corridors. They are one of the most socially, climatically, and ideologically significant parts of the entire architectural system. Their role reveals how collectivist ideals, tropical climate, economic constraints, and human adaptation intersect within socialist housing. KTT hallways create a unique threshold condition between home and society. They blur the boundaries between inside and outside, private and communal. Residents step directly from their living spaces into a shared environment, meaning life is always partly visible, audible, and collaborative. This spatial arrangement reflects both Confucian social structures and Marxist collectivist ideals, where the home is never fully isolated from the community (Schwenkel, 2020) (Rashela Dyca, 2026).

Architecture as Memory

Perhaps most importantly, KTT hallways accumulate layers of memory. Children grew up playing there; families cooked and shared meals; neighbours strengthened bonds over decades. Cracks, stains, improvised repairs, and hand-made additions are all traces of lived history. In this sense, the hallway acts as a living archive of post-war recovery, community resilience, and the slow humanisation of socialist architecture. These improvised changes not only reveal the gap between two economic systems but also show how architecture in Vietnam has become deeply human, shaped by care, adaptation, and memory rather than state control (Schwenkel, 2020).



Selected spatial observations informed by direct correspondence and unpublished research material from Hanoi Ad hoc, Hanoi (2025).



Fig 23,24: Rừng Sác pathway ((VIETOURIST HOLDINGS, 2023)

While the previous case studies focus on human-made structures, Rừng Sác complicates the notion of architecture by extending it into landscape and ecology. As a terrain shaped by chemical warfare and later ecological regeneration, Rừng Sác challenges anthropocentric readings of space, positioning non-human processes as active agents in spatial memory and recovery.

Hidden beyond the southern edge of Hồ Chí Minh City lies Rừng Sác, a vast mangrove wetland once designated as the Rừng Sác Special Zone. During the Vietnam War, its dense network of roots and waterways became both refuge and battleground, a landscape of strategy, resistance, and loss. Intersected by rivers feeding the Lòng Tàu shipping route, Rừng Sác functioned as a critical lifeline to the city and a heavily contested terrain of conflict (Đế, 2022).

Today, the same landscape stands transformed: over 75,000 hectares of re-generated mangrove forest recognised by UNESCO as Vietnam's first Biosphere Reserve. Yet beneath this calm surface, traces of chemical devastation and militarised intervention remain embedded in the ecology. Rừng Sác is not simply a recovered natural site, but a terrain where memory, violence, and regeneration continue to coexist.

The scale and density of the mangrove forest shaped not only military movement but also perception, compressing vision, slowing time, and dissolving clear boundaries between land and water. Life in Rừng Sác was governed by tides, humidity, and concealment, producing a landscape that resisted fixed orientation or control. Even today, this instability remains legible in the forest's shifting surfaces and layered textures. The mangroves continue to grow, decay, and regenerate, carrying within them traces of past disturbance while quietly asserting their own rhythms. Rừng Sác thus unfolds as a landscape shaped as much by duration and endurance as by events, where history lingers not as monument but as condition (Đế, 2022).

1960 - 1975:
War Period



“The forest endured what humans could not.”

– Nguyễn Duy (1985)

Post 1975:
Withdrawal of Human Control



“After war, the earth repairs itself in its own time.”

– Nguyễn Duy (1985)

Rừng Sác was shaped into a war zone by the spatial logic of the mangrove forest itself. Its low-lying, tidal landscape dissolves clear boundaries between land and water, forming a dense, unstable terrain of roots, mud, and narrow waterways. Limited visibility, shifting ground conditions, and thick canopy cover made the forest difficult to map or penetrate, while its position along the Lòng Tàu River placed it at a critical threshold controlling access to Hồ Chí Minh City. These ecological features transformed the mangrove into a natural fortress, where spatial ambiguity became both protection and threat (Vietnam Coracle, 2025) (Md Isa and Suratman, 2021).

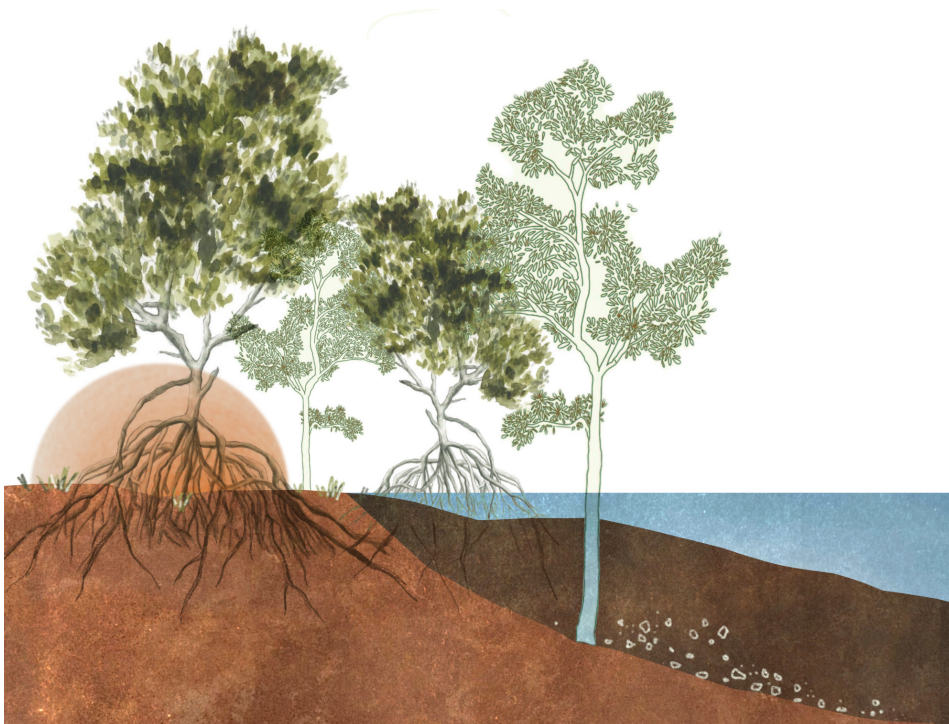


Fig 26: Spatial reading of mangrove (Nguyen, 2026)

Dense mangrove roots produce a horizontal, labyrinthine ground condition that disrupts clear movement and orientation. Constant tidal flooding repeatedly redraws paths and spatial boundaries, preventing fixed routes from forming. Above, a thick canopy limits aerial visibility and surveillance, while narrow, branching waterways enable concealed movement through the forest. The site's proximity to the Lòng Tàu River made it strategically vital, and its ecological complexity directly shaped military tactics, ultimately turning the forest structure itself into a target of chemical warfare (Md Isa and Suratman, 2021).



Fig 27: Collage of chemical warfare in Rung Sac (Nguyen, 2026)

During the Vietnam War, chemical defoliation in Rừng Sác was deployed as a spatial weapon. Herbicides such as Agent Orange were used to erase mangrove canopies that provided concealment, mobility, and shelter for Vietnamese forces, transforming the landscape into an exposed and controllable terrain. Rather than targeting people directly, the chemical assault focused on roots, foliage, and dense vegetation in order to dismantle the ecological structure that enabled resistance (Young and Ford, 2008).

Agent Orange contained high concentrations of dioxin (TCDD), a persistent toxin designed not for immediate destruction but for long-term spatial denial. In mangrove environments like Rừng Sác, its effects were amplified: defoliation collapsed the interdependent system of roots, soil, and tidal flow that stabilised the landscape. As vegetation died, erosion accelerated, salinity increased, and habitats were rendered uninhabitable for both human and non-human life. What had once been a protective, legible environment for those who knew how to move within it became flattened, unstable, and fully exposed to aerial surveillance (Aspen Institute, 2025).

This process reframed the forest as an abstract surface to be monitored and controlled from above. Defoliation thus functioned as an architectural operation at a territorial scale—removing enclosure, eliminating thresholds, and converting a complex three-dimensional landscape into a legible military diagram. Control was achieved not through occupation or construction, but through subtraction. The violence lay in erasure: stripping away the spatial conditions that supported autonomy, resistance, and ecological continuity (Young and Ford, 2008).

Crucially, the effects of Agent Orange extended far beyond the war itself. Residual toxins remained embedded in soil and sediment for decades, shaping post-war recovery and complicating ecological regeneration. The later rehabilitation of Rừng Sác therefore cannot be understood simply as environmental repair, but as a slow negotiation with a landscape permanently altered by chemical warfare—where memory, toxicity, and regeneration coexist within the same ground.

**Nature was now treated as
Hostile Architecture**

3 Ecological Rehabilitation

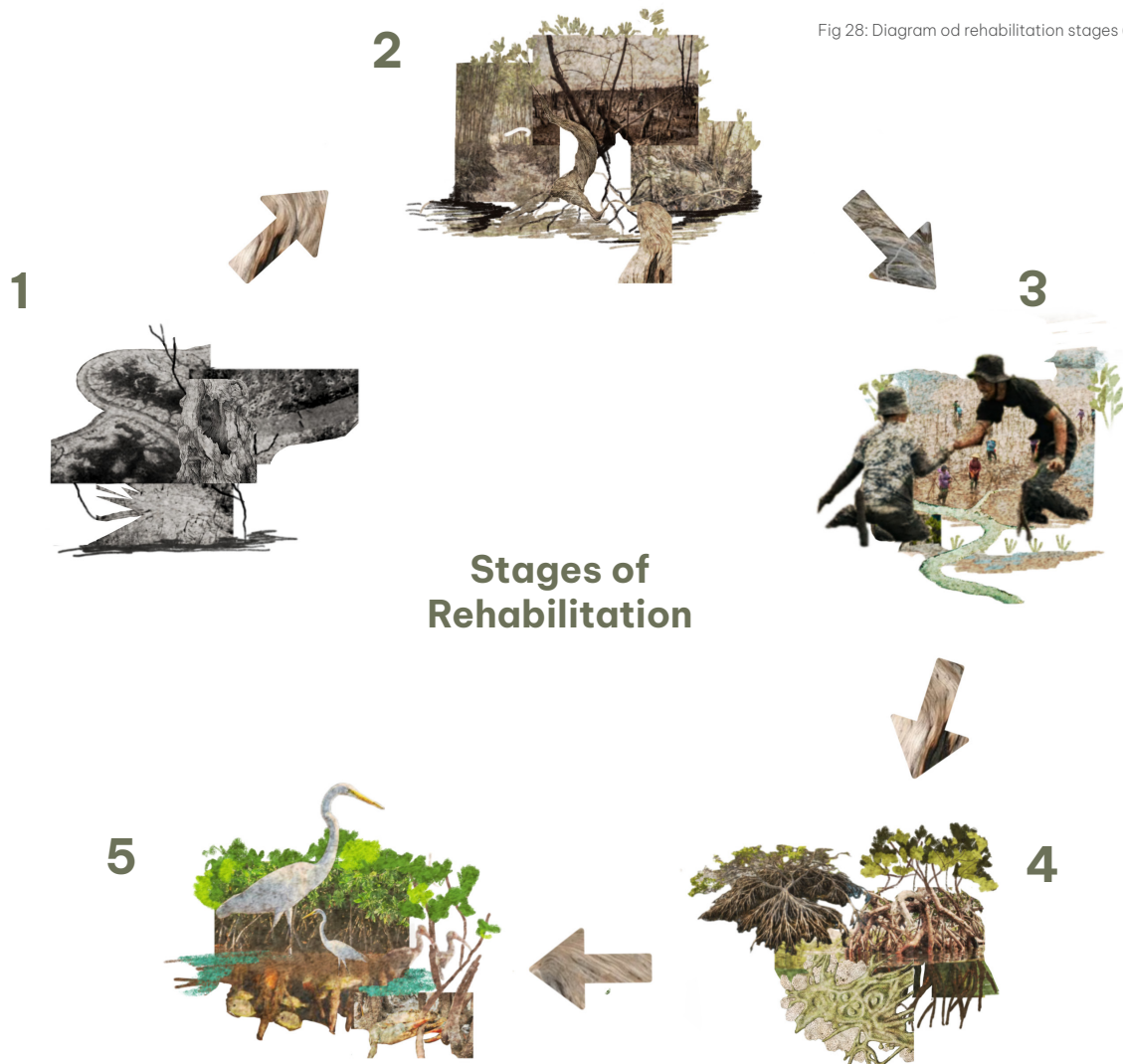


Fig 28: Diagram of rehabilitation stages (Nguyen,2026)

Building without a blueprint describes a mode of making in which form emerges through ongoing interaction rather than fixed design. As Tim Ingold suggests, environments are not planned and then occupied, but continually grown through processes of dwelling, positioning nature itself as a form of architect (Ingold, 2016).

Anna Tsing extends this thinking by examining how life persists within the ruins of dominant systems. In post-war Rừng Sác, partial abandonment following 1975 created conditions for such emergence (Tsing, 2015). Rừng Sác was once approached as a hostile territory, a landscape to be neutralised, controlled, and made visible. Today, it is encountered as a peace zone, not through erasure of its violent past but through a shift in narrative and use.

- 1 **Disturbance/ Erasure**
- 2 **Survival/ Latent Recovery**
- 3 **Assisted Regeneration**
- 4 **Pioneer Return**
- 5 **Succession/ Recovery**

Ecological rehabilitation in Rừng Sác occurred through withdrawal, limited intervention, and long-term autonomous processes rather than total restoration (Tran, Reef and Zhu, 2024).

3 Regeneration as Negotiation

Rừng Sác sits along a sensitive line between what is right for nature and what is right for human use, requiring constant negotiation rather than fixed solutions. While it is often celebrated as Vietnam's triumph of ecological regeneration, this dominant narrative risks simplifying a far more complex and contested reality. Regeneration here is not a neutral return to nature but a managed process shaped by post-war governance, conservation policy, and the desire to stabilise and frame the landscape as a success story. As James C. Scott argues, environments that are rendered legible, mapped, categorised, and made readable, become easier to administer and control. In this sense, recovery does not eliminate power but redistributes it through quieter, less visible forms (Scott, 2021).

At Rừng Sác, ecological repair has enabled new modes of engagement such as eco-tourism, environmental education, and local livelihoods. These are supported by selective human interventions including museums, observation towers, interpretive signage, and guided boat routes. While these additions are currently limited in scale, they introduce systems of access and visibility that reorganise how the forest is seen.

Complex ecological processes are translated into curated narratives, fixed viewpoints, and designated paths, gradually shifting the forest from an autonomous, self-organising system toward one that can be navigated, observed, and explained. What appears as protection may therefore also function as a form of soft governance, where regeneration is permitted so long as it remains orderly, accessible, and compatible with institutional frameworks.

This process raises critical questions about the long-term implications of post-war recovery. As the forest becomes increasingly legible, the space for ecological unpredictability and withdrawal narrows. The very success of regeneration generates new pressures: to maintain visibility, to accommodate visitors, and to justify continued management. Rừng Sác thus exposes a post-conflict paradox in which ecological freedom must be continually defended against renewed forms of control that emerge in the name of care, education, and sustainability. Regeneration, rather than marking an endpoint, becomes an ongoing condition—one defined by negotiation, restraint, and the unresolved tension between letting the forest live on its own terms and shaping it for human use (Scott, 2021).



Fig 29: Rung Sac tourism spots (GetYourGuide, 2025)

Abandonment »

Self-organisation » Human Re-engagement » New Livelihoods »

Renewed Pressure

Conclusion and Reflection

Across the case studies, this thesis reveals a persistent yet often overlooked condition within Vietnamese spatial culture: a deep-rooted tendency toward community, everyday self-expression, resilience, and remembrance that exists beyond ideology, government, or formal planning. While political systems, historical moments, and imported architectural models have undeniably shaped the built environment, Vietnamese people continuously inhabit the gaps between these structures, adapting, modifying, and reinterpreting space through lived practice. This reflects a cultural ethos of *nếp sống giản dị, thoải mái và mang tính cộng đồng*, a simple, comfortable, and communal way of living, where imposed uniformity rarely survives intact at ground level (Cuuchienbinh.vn, 2024). Rather than architecture shaping people, these case studies demonstrate how space is ultimately reshaped through everyday inhabitation, adaptation, and communal use.

GDR-influenced housing models such as KTT sought control, efficiency, and ideological clarity, yet their survival depended less on design intent than on residents' capacity to transform them. Where space allowed flexibility, informal modification, and communal negotiation, architecture acquired a second life. Where rigidity prevailed, buildings became abandoned, outcast, or slowly reclaimed by nature. Architecture therefore emerges not as a fixed object, but as a palimpsest continually rewritten through politics, economy, culture, and everyday inhabitation (Anguyo, 2024).

Through this lens, material traces, ecological regrowth, and heritage practices become active agents in shaping memory. Sites such as Rừng Sác, Củ Chi, and KTT housing persist today not because of their original functions, but because they have been reinterpreted through present cultural needs. Spaces once shaped by survival, concealment, or control have shifted toward remembrance, reflection, and collective identity. In this transition, architecture no longer operates solely as a tool of endurance, but as a medium through which loss, repair, and freedom are continuously renegotiated.

The contrast between northern and southern Vietnam further reinforces this argument. Despite sharing similar ideological origins, their spatial outcomes diverged significantly. In the North, stricter policy control and cultural restraint often limited adaptation, contributing to abandonment. In the South, openness and communal agency enabled reuse and transformation (Liêu Lãm, 2017). This divergence reveals that architecture survives not through ideology alone, but through the ability of people to inhabit, adapt, and sustain it over time.

Through this thesis, sustainability emerges not as technological performance or stylistic consistency, but as the capacity for change. Architecture that cannot evolve will eventually be reclaimed, whether by people or by nature. Humans are not separate from ecological processes but part of them; when architecture resists adaptation, nature completes the cycle, as seen most clearly in Rừng Sác. True sustainability therefore lies in creating frameworks that accept uncertainty, negotiation, and transformation rather than resisting them.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that post-war Vietnamese spaces cannot be understood solely through architectural form, ideology, or historical narrative. They emerge instead through continuous acts of adaptation and inhabitation that resist fixed meaning. By examining tunnels, housing, and landscapes shaped by conflict and recovery, the research reframes interior and spatial practice as a mutable condition rather than a stable object, capable of engaging with memory, decay, and ecological change not by resolving instability, but by working within it.

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