

The Domestic Edge in Vientiane, Lao PDR



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Introduction

Vientiane, the capital city of Lao PDR presents particular urban situations that appear as transitional between rural and urban living. The city lying on the edge of the Nam Kong River doesn't seem urbanized. Indeed, the French who colonized Laos from the beginning of the nineteenth century until 1953 didn't develop the country to the level of their other colonies for the land in Laos didn't present significant mines or agricultural lands. Therefore, Vientiane, the capital city, has not been urbanized and do not present major French Urban planning interventions. The actual communist government, in power since 1973, is implementing for the first time urban and building codes to regulate the urban fabric. Despite the effect of new urban regulations on architecture, the urban fabric is still rural in majority and still organized on enclaves called urban villages constituted of with a group of families gathered around a chief, a temple and a market. In this context of contemporary Vientiane, the paper investigates the domestic edge as experienced in a field work carried out in January 2004. I look at the edge condition in regard of social status, income and the new urban laws being applied since the last decade. I first explore the different domestic edge conditions encountered in the traditional milieus of the city by looking at the material used to define the edge and the opacity level of these edges. I further look into the "modern" structures as they impose a hard edge delimitating property to ensure security and status of the dweller. I finally conclude by showing how the new urban laws and the modern constructions have been modified and adapted to the traditional social structure.

The Domestic Edge in Rural and Traditional Milieus

Domestic edges in rural milieus are varied and adapted to the immediate context, neighborhood ties and climatic conditions. Due to the close family ties among neighbors, and the tribal structure of Vientiane urban villages, domestic edges seem fluid with no clear property delimitation. The houses in rural milieus are built with baked bricks and wood, materials easily accessible at low cost. Due to the recurrent floods that take place during the monsoon season, the common house typology in the Harddonechan Island Village consists of an elevated house sitting on pilotis and topped with a slanted wooden or red tiled roof. The elevated structure is totally made of wood

accessible by a single flight of stairs arranged parallel to the house. Protecting the house from flooding ensures also the privacy of its inhabitants by a vertical edge. The upper house is the private family space while the lower is used for outdoor activities, storage of unwanted objects or for hanging laundry. The land is opened to the wanderer with no property delimitation, in direct connection with the street.

Family income seems also a major factor in determining the domestic edge. Some families with no source of income take advantage of their house street façade and build shops to sell goods for the neighborhood; they add another layer to the domestic edge, right on the street. This commercial edge is also fluid for it does not follow the property line but rather the street edge defined by traffic. In some cases such as the rental houses adjacent to Dong Pa Lanh Tha Market, the property edge is not delineated by a specific structure but rather it is defined by the intensity of commercial and service activities. There, some households converted the room overlooking the street to a café catering for passers-by and young men at night. During the day, the activity at the café is quite slow; consequently the property merges with street. While in the late afternoon, tables and chairs are set outside serving the clients and therefore create the space of the café.

In higher income families, the vertical edge and the commercial edge mentioned above becomes irrelevant for the house is no longer elevated on pilotis but rather sits on a brick enclosure built on the ground floor that can endure flooding. Indeed, higher income households can afford to build bigger houses and use the ground floor as additional living space. Now that the house is in direct contact with the street, the vertical edge is no longer valid. To resist flooding and mark its territory, the household resorts in elevating the ground floor on a thirty centimeters concrete slab that creates a private outdoor space and prevents flooding waters to get into the house. In the Nong Boua Thong Tha village, this situation is quite common. Families who make a living out of the silk industry are not on the bottom of the poverty ladder. The houses are on two distinct floors serving two different families most of the time blood related. The upper storey follows the traditional rural typology of an elevated wooden house serviced by a parallel staircase while below lies another house built in bricks. The elevated platform that delineates the domestic edge is used as an outdoor sitting area.

It is in direct visual connection with the street but at the same time creates an edge between the private house domain and the public one of the street. It is considered a private outdoor open space. In some cases, the use of different materials is an indicator of a change in privacy level. The elevated concrete platform becomes a transition between the dusty street and the tiled interior. In the field work, some cases have been encountered where this transition is being achieved literally and also for decorative purposes, with lying fragments of the living room tiles within the outdoor concrete platform. The path towards the house is being gradually expressed from street dust to concrete inlaid with tiles reaching the living room entirely covered with tiles.

Another edge situation encountered in rural environments which spans all income level households is the green edge. It is a method to delineate property and ensure privacy that can be achieved with no major budget nor maintenance. It is the most common edging method used in rental housing or illegal settlements for it can be permanent and it is easily removed. Moreover, the big foliage ensures privacy for the household and creates pleasant scenery. Furthermore, this edge situation that is mostly seen in traditional milieus is well adapted to the climatic conditions; the roots well into the ground prevent the soil from sliding due to the recurrent flooding.

These several edge situations described above as encountered in traditional milieus of Vientiane reveal how the society in the Lao capital is structured. People living in family or tribal circles do not seem in need for hard edges to delineate their property especially when the properties are not legally demarcated but rather they are the outcome of time or need. Moreover, hard edging between household seems irrelevant for neighborhood with close kinship ties; it is neither needed in villages of households with similar income level where the level of securing the household is not necessary. Domestic edges are marked with temporary and semi opaque fences that encourage neighborhood relationship and dialogue. As described above, the street width is defined by the intensity of traffic and method of transportation; it is the main element in situating the border of adjacent properties. Moreover, these traditional milieus that have been formed over decades and several generations are not structured according to planning strategies but are rather imported and copied over the rural village structure brought to the city.

The Domestic Edge in Urban Milieus

However, this urban village structure seems threatened under the modernization planning strategies implemented by the Vientiane municipality and the Vientiane Urban Development Authority, VUDA. Established in 1999 the VUDA is generating zoning regulations and building laws for the city of Vientiane. Having been under the French authorities for one hundred and fifty years, the French planning ideas can be seen in the newly developed quarters and urban schemes. The Parisian Haussmanian avenues have been copied and applied in Vientiane after the independence period. Lao PDR has an avenue compared to the Champs Elysées; it links the official guest palace to a triumphal arch with local decorative elements. Nevertheless, these new urban and architectural regulations written by VUDA are also copied on the French model.

Having to abide by the new regulations, the new constructions in the urban milieus seem at odd amid the traditional urban fabric and especially in regard of the delineation of domestic edges. The traditional urban structure of the city is being threatened by rules and zoning regulations. The city has been surveyed thoroughly and cadastral maps are being produced to document all constructions and outline property limits. Newly bought lands are now certified with official tenure documents issued by the planning authorities and the wealthy population is rushing to register their lands or buy new ones. Therefore, traditional urban milieus are witnessing new urban typologies copied on western rigid fenced property models and are sometimes guarded by security individuals.

In Dong Pa Lanh Tha market village, this new urban typology is very obvious. This new urban pattern can be related to the owner's social status, his/her display of economical or social power and security. The house of the chief of the village—the most prominent person in the community elected by the village as their representative at the local municipal authorities—has been belted with an opaque fence. Contrarily to the other new landlords in the village, the fencing material used to delineate the chief's property is traditional. However, the edge differs from the remaining houses in the community. The house following the traditional typology of an elevated wooden construction has a ground floor build in bricks and painted in white. The property is

fenced with plants which are a traditional fencing method as well as a mixture of wooden studs and metallic grills that render the edge mostly opaque. A two-fold gate is the only access point to the property. This model follows the western gated type but uses traditional elements to achieve it. However, this fencing method, still using traditional material, is totally different from her lower income neighbors; it denotes the similar economical income between the chief and the villagers but also displays the social status as different and superior, hence gated and separated from her community.

Higher income households, originally from Dong Pa Lanh Tha, legalized their properties by registering its limits at the VUDA and hence fencing it. The house has been rebuilt with new materials imitating the French colonial houses that were built entirely of bricks and topped with a pitched tiled roof. The property has been fenced as an indicator of economical status, and consequently elevating the social status of the household in the community. The fence imitates wrought iron gates with golden pinnacles and automated grills designed to imitate big western mansions. The recent influence of western planning and urban regulations is well illustrated next to the market, where a high opaque wall was built around a property with no house. Moreover, an elaborate wrought iron gate signals the entry point to the land.

In a similar pattern, Mr Suvannassak, the biggest landowner in the village, owning the market and developing a newer one adjacent to older one, had his property re-fenced. Looking at his property, it seems that the fence between the house and the market has long been here, built with concrete hollow blocks lower than the eye level. The fence is a solid wall that allowed the passer-by to sneak into the property. However, after the implementation of the new market place, the fence has been reinforced and an additional tin layer has been added to render the edge totally opaque. Indeed, Mr Suvannassak, didn't rebuild his house or delineated his property, but developed a new market according to an elaborate architectural and urban design to the image of the western malls, and this to maximize the use of space and cater for an outer community. The village has therefore been invaded by a new clientele that shook the village equilibrium. Consequently, to reinforce his social status as the owner of the new market and to increase the privacy of his house, now that people from other villages are coming, the fence has been doubled and a tin sheet added on top.

Aside from the original dwellers of Dong Pa Lanh Tha who “upgraded” their property, new comers are attracted to invest in the village for the site is subject to major urban changes. Not only the market has been restructured and modernized to cater for a larger crowd but also a national park funded and designed by the Danish government is now being implemented on the southern side of the village. This new national park caused the increase in real estate value up to four times and triggered gentrification. New comers are attracted by the new prime land along the park edge. Land is being bought according to the new cadastral maps with legal tenures. It is also fenced to “protect” the foreigners. Hence, the village is witnessing the erection of several new villas on the edge of the park, including the one owned by the future governor of the city. This house attempts to imitate the colonial mansions in the city by borrowing certain elements such as the tiled roof—that has been colored in blue. Fancy balustrades are being added in a locally created neo-classic style and wooden details supporting the roof in the colonial style are now executed in concrete. The fence itself imitates the colonial fences with high pillars holding metallic gates constructed above one meter high walls. However, this typology is evidently copied with no consideration to the context. It is not even adapted to the status of the owner for he had to add layers to render it more opaque, but, it holds the image of power associated with the colonial French fences.

Conclusion

The fencing system mentioned above seems related to social status and income level. It also reveals the changes triggered by the new urban regulations. Modernization and bureaucracy generate building forms with Colonial influence. Indeed, in the pre-VUDA Vientiane, the only gated domestic properties were the colonial mansions. In this race for modernization and display of power, it seems that the traditional urban structure of Vientiane is threatened especially with the new regulations that tend to standardize the fabric, to the image of the modern alias colonizer. The new village intruders such as the coming governor of Vientiane, or developers such as Mr Suvannassak are using the colonial image of “house” to establish a social status in their new environment. As seen in Dong Pa Lanh Tha, islands of wealth are appearing in

traditional urban settings, which look at odd with their nearby fabric. They seem like foreign element in a fabric that doesn’t seem to support them.

However, despite the urban regulations and new urban forms, the traditional urban structure of Vientiane is not changing in the low income environments. The urban fabric of Vientiane might seem physically altered to resemble the ‘modern,’ having commercial activities developed along newly planned streets abiding by the new urban regulations; however, the social and urban structure seems unchanged. The local populations of villages, in majority of low income, are adapting these foreign laws inspired by the French code to serve their own interest. Despite the physical appearance of new constructions in a locally adapted neo-classical style, the urban structure is still traditional. The new buildings transferred the traditional system of horizontal neighborhood patterns—where same family houses are built next to each other—to the a vertical pattern—where family households are staggered on top of each other occupying the same building. The fluid edge between the different households is transferred inside the same residential building framed by the new regulations.

In this changing urban context of Vientiane, I argued that now, in the early days of the implementation of the new regulations, only high income households are adopting a new urban structure and a living pattern different from the traditional one. It is interesting to follow this study in the near future to see if the traditional way of living will remain related to lower income or disappear as influenced and inspired by the new modern structures built around for higher income households. Will the modern structure of living disseminate itself into and be appropriated by the lower income household? Is the traditional urban structure only encountered in lower income environments?



The vertical edge in the traditional urban fabric



the two level houses in traditional higher income level urban fabric



The market edge in lower income traditional urban fabric defining the street limit



The concrete outdoor platform delimiting the private space



the temporary edge created by laundry and sales activities in lower income traditional urban fabric



Things differentiating the public from the private

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Examples of green fences in traditional urban fabric



Examples of green fences in traditional urban fabric



Higher income villagers rebuilding their houses and fencing it



Island Villa adjacent to the park development project



Colonial style gates and fences



The fences added to ensure more privacy to the high income household