

No. 9 Ngo Thoi Nham Street: the evolution of a traditional garden house in Hue, Vietnam

NGUYEN NGOC TUNG, HIROHIDE KOBAYASHI
and MASAMI KOBAYASHI

Abstract

In recent decades, urbanization, modernization, economic development and natural disasters have caused many traditional garden houses in the Vietnamese city of Hue to be demolished or reconfigured. It is important, therefore, to develop a sustainable approach to conserving these houses and adapting them to contemporary use. This paper selects the house at No. 9 Ngo Thoi Nham Street as a case study to discuss and analyze the spatial organization, transformation and conservation of these traditional houses, the living environment they provide and the lifestyles of their inhabitants. We hope that this paper will be a useful reference for the further study of traditional garden houses in general.

Keywords

Hue traditional garden house, spatial organization, transformation, living environment, conservation.

1. Introduction and review of previous studies

Hue traditional garden houses (HTGHs) are integral to the charm and cultural heritage of this garden city and approximately 100¹ HTGHs remain in the Citadel area. This part of the city lies within the outer walls of the imperial enclosure of the Imperial City, which was built during the period of the Nguyễn Phúc Ánh Dynasty (1802-1945). However, many of these houses are being demolished or reconfigured in response to urbanization, economic development, natural disasters and population growth (Nguyen et al. 2010a). These houses comprise *Nha Chinh* (the main house, usually built in the *Ruong* style popular in central Vietnam), *Nha Phu* (a sub-house), a garden and other elements (Hoàng 1999 and Nguyen 2007a). After the Nguyen Dynasty collapsed in 1945, a number of *Ruong* houses were built inside gardens from the Nguyen Dynasty period. These houses also qualify as HTGHs in this paper.²

This paper proposes that the declining condition of these HTGHs is a potentially unrecoverable loss of Hue's architectural heritage. By extension, it is necessary to propose

some approaches to sustainable conservation and contemporary use. Although previous studies by Trần (2005), Nguyễn (2001) and Hoàng (1999)³ have focused on the history, distribution, layout, garden and wooden structure of HTGHs, few studies have looked at aspects relating to their transformation, the living environment they offer or their conservation. A number of HTGHs have been preserved and restored with the help of local government and international organizations and merit particular attention. For example, a house located at 73 Le Thanh Ton Street was restored in 2006 as part of a conservation and restoration program run by Hue and Lille Metropole Urban Community, France, and is now used as a museum (Figure 1). Several other HTGHs have been conserved and used for tourism purposes with the agreement of the local government and the buildings' owners. Many of them are located in Kim Long, an ancient village south west of the Citadel.



Figure 1. HTGH at 73 Le Thanh Ton Street

In terms of the regulation of conservation, the national government has promulgated some conservation policies such as Ordinance No. Zero (Hội Đồng Nhà Nước 1884), Law on Heritage No. 28/2001/QH (National Assembly 2001), Law amending and supplementing a number of articles of the Law on Cultural Heritage No. 32/2009/QH12 (National Assembly 2009) and Decree No. 98/2010/NĐ-CP for detailing the implementation of a number of articles of the above two laws (Chính Phủ 2010). In Hue, the Hue Monuments Conservation Center is the organization responsible for managing, protecting, conserving, preserving and improving the cultural heritage of Hue (Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Tỉnh Thừa Thiên Huế 2010a). In practice, the center mainly focuses on important heritage sites such as the kings' tombs and royal buildings and palaces in the Imperial City. In the Citadel area, there is a Decision promulgated by Thua Thien Hue People's Committee to stipulate principles for construction management of buildings in the Citadel area (Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Tỉnh Thừa Thiên Huế 1999a; 1999b). Generally, the implementation of this decision is effective but some of its articles do not work well. For example, Article No. 8 of the Decision stipulates that normal dwelling houses should not be more than three stories high and that construction materials should be in harmony with ancient buildings, employing light colors such as light yellow, light brown and white. However, many three-story buildings built from modern materials such as red brick and concrete can be found inside the Citadel.

Regarding the conservation of HTGHs, the Thua Thien Hue People's Committee proposed a protection policy for Hue garden houses on 23 March 2006. Some 150 Hue garden houses were to be selected for protection between 2006 and 2010 and would provide evidence for providing suitable mechanisms and policies in the future for the protection, conservation

and improvement of HTGHs. Resolution No. 3i was subsequently adopted by the People’s Council on 10 April 2006. But it was more than three years later, on 4 November 2009, that Decision No. 2434 for promulgating stipulations about policies for the management and protection of Hue garden houses was established. It declared that the 150 HTGHs selected for protection would be eligible for financial support from a conservation fund, based on the evaluation of a council set up to evaluate, assess and classify Hue garden houses. However, the conservation fund was established on 25 January 2010 by Decision No. 184 (Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Tỉnh Thừa Thiên Huế 2010b), while the council was finally established on 5 September 2011 by Decision No. 1801 of Thua Thien Hue People’s Committee (Figure 2). The process of making the proposal, selecting garden houses for protection, evaluating practicability and establishing a final decision has taken too long. The implementation period (2006-2010) of Resolution No. 3i has ended but work has only just started. This process has been so slow that many HTGHs have already lost their value by being altered and transformed. Our field surveys show that at least seven HTGHs have been lost since 2006 and the length of the process has made many of the houses’ owners tired and weary.

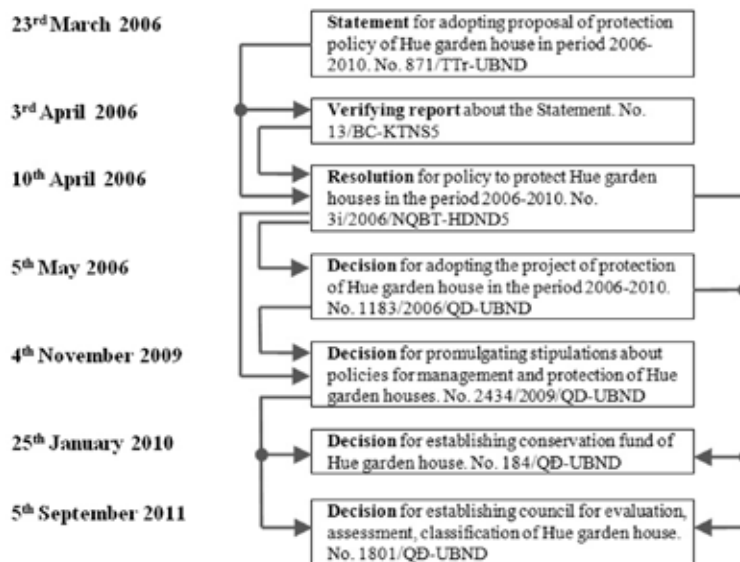


Figure 2. Process for adopting and promulgating the proposal to protect Hue garden houses

Among 56 HTGHs surveyed in the Citadel area by the authors from 2009 to 2012, the owners of 21 houses were asked to register on the list of 150 garden houses to be protected. However, the owners of 17 houses refused, citing reasons such as inefficient implementation and lack of agreement between residents and government about some of the articles in Decision No. 2434. The house located at 9 Ngo Thoi Nham Street is typical in this respect. Built in 1938 in the traditional garden-house style, it retains many original features along with the original layout (although there has been some minor renovation). In addition, despite facing financial difficulties, the houseowner has not accepted support from the local

government based on Decision No. 2434 for protection of Hue garden houses. We have chosen this house for this paper's case study. The paper will attempt to understand why the owner rejected participation, how the inhabitants there have responded to urbanization, economic development and conservation regulations, and how this house can represent and reflect the living conditions provided by other HTGHs.

2. The house at 9 Ngo Thoi Nham Street

2.1 Overview

From 2005 to 2008, the authors conducted preliminary field surveys of 91 HTGHs in the Citadel area by photographing their exteriors – often from the street – and mapping their location. Of these, 51 houses were measured and the residents interviewed on the history of their house, its spatial organization and the process by which it had been transformed (Nguyen 2007b). These initial field surveys did not consider the living environment or conservation regulations. For this reason, detailed field surveys of 56 HTGHs (indicated by the dark symbols in Figure 3 below) began in 2009, incorporating interviews with residents, measurements (house layout, plan and section) and photographs of interiors as well as exteriors. The house at 9 Ngo Thoi Nham Street was chosen as the case study of this paper.



Figure 3. Distribution of the 84 HTGHs surveyed and the location of the house at 9 Ngo Thoi Nham Street

Originally named Cau Dat, Ngo Thoi Nham Street was built in the early 19th Century at the same time as the construction of the Citadel (Thành Phố Huế 2005). In 1955, the name of this street was changed to Nguyen Thien Thuat. The street has been Ngo Thoi Nham Street since 1977 and it belongs to Thuan Hoa Ward, Hue City. The 9 Ngo Thoi Nham Street house is located in an area, named “*Hố-Oai*” (Cadière 1933: 56), and may once have housed an army unit during the period of the Nguyen Dynasty.

According to the interview with the present owner, Mrs Bui Thi Phuong Xuan, her family originally lived in the north-eastern part of the Citadel area. Her father – a court official of the Nguyen Dynasty in the reign of Bao Dai (1925-1945) – bought the land on which No. 9 currently stands and built the house in 1938. After her father’s death, the house passed to her older sister because most of their relatives had already moved away. Mrs Xuan gained ownership of the house in 2001 on the death of her unmarried sister. The house’s succession suggests that ownership is not based on gender but family relationship.

In 1954, Vietnam was divided into two regions: North and South. From then until 1975, Mr Viem, Mrs Xuan’s husband, who worked for the Southern Republic of Vietnam in Hue city, supported the family. The house was practically vacated in 1963 for a short time when the family moved further south to Da Nang city to escape the war. Mr Viem, however, stayed in the house.⁴ When Vietnam became unified in 1975, the owner and her husband found themselves unemployed. Today the couple mainly derive their income from the sale of vegetables and fruit grown in the garden and the support of approximately 500,000-1,000,000 VND per month from their daughter.

2.2 Description of current characteristics and spatial organization of the house

Figure 4 shows the current plan, section and elevation of the house. It can be divided into four parts: *Nha Chinh* (main house), *Nha Phu* (sub-house), garden and other elements. The following will describe these parts of the house in detail.

Nha Chinh is situated centrally towards the back of the grounds, facing south-east. Vietnamese people believe that homes should ideally face south or south-east because this orientation promotes prosperity, health and provides good natural ventilation (Nguyen et al. 2010b: 487). This *Nha Chinh* has three chambers (called *Gian* in Vietnamese) and two lean-tos (*Chai*). Nguyen et al. (2010a: 528) divide HTGHs in the Citadel area into three types, based on the number of *Gian* and *Chai*: Type A has one *Gian* and two *Chai*; Type B has three *Gian* and two *Chai*; and Type C has three *Gian* (Figure 5). The configuration of the 9 Ngo Thoi Nham Street house conforms to Type B. The area of *Nha Chinh* is about 126.65 sq m, constructed in the *Ruong* style common in Nghe An, Quang Binh, Quang Tri and Thua Thien Hue provinces in central Vietnam. It uses a timber frame comprising a roof supported by two central pillars and including *Ram Thuong* (an attic) and *Ram Ha* (a ground storage space). All pillars are put on foundation stones (*Da Tang*) for protection from termites and moisture. The *Nha Chinh* is open spaced, with only light partition walls distinguishing between *Gian*

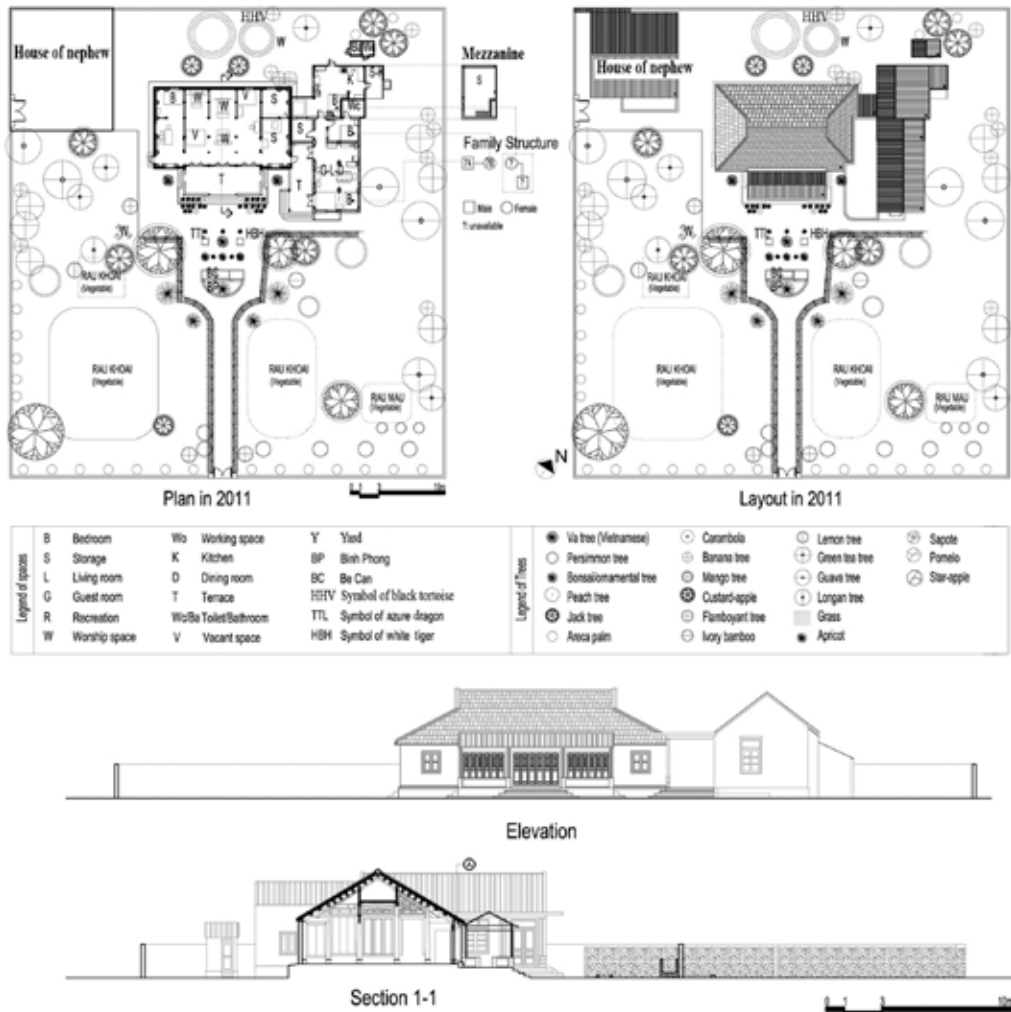


Figure 4. Plans, façade and section of 9 Ngo Thoi Nham Street in its current state

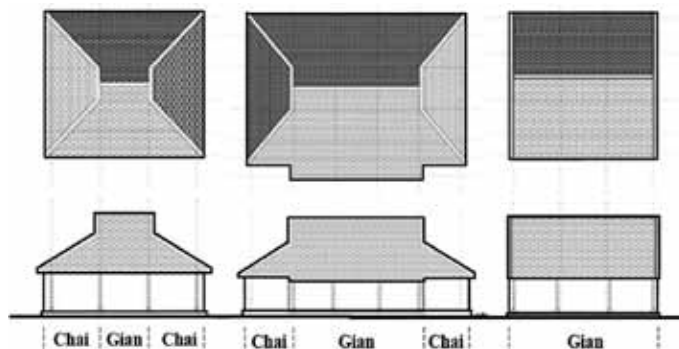


Figure 5. Classification of HTGHs located in the Citadel area: Type A (left), Type B (centre) and Type C (right)

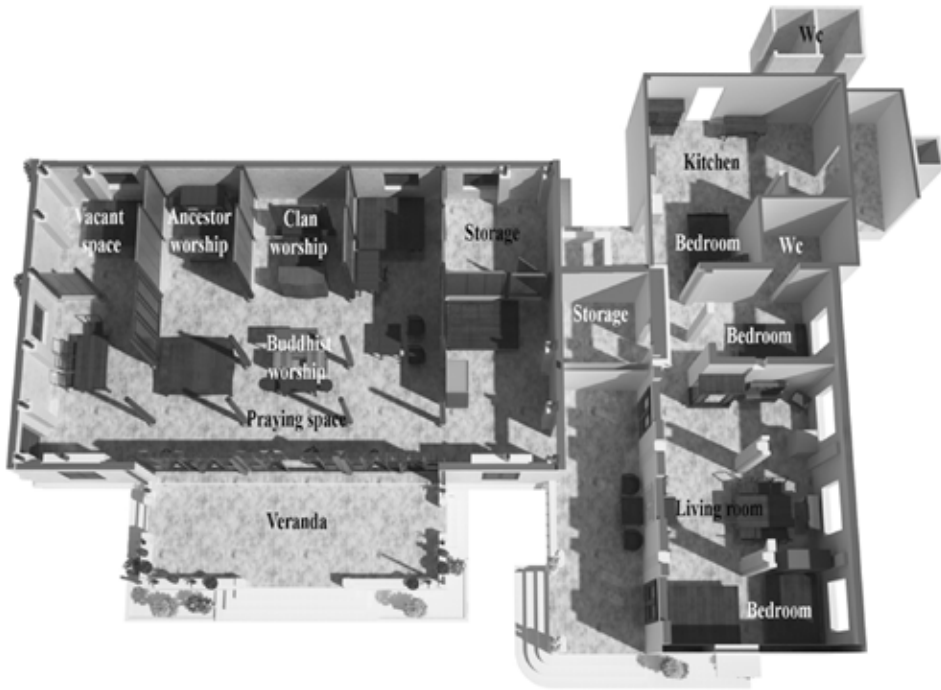


Figure 6. Perspective of the house's interior (drawn and edited by the author and Võ Văn Quã, a Hue architectural student)



Figure 7. Space for worship in Nha Chinh

and *Chai*. The *Gian* are currently used for ancestor and clan worship, Buddhist rituals, ceremonies and prayer (Figures 6, 7). The *Chai* on the left of the building is not in use and the *Chai* on the right is being used for private storage.

At present, living space for the family is in *Nha Phu*. This building is located on the left side of *Nha Chinh* (north-east orientation) and it combines with *Nha Chinh* to create the typical arrangement of *Nha Chinh* and *Nha Phu* in the HTGHs of the Citadel area.⁵ This *Nha Phu* was rebuilt in 1959 with brick walls and concrete pillars. Since then, successive rear extensions have been added to provide a private bedroom for the owner, a kitchen, storage space and a bedroom for the domestic servant. A wooden ladder providing access to a mezzanine – added in 1999 as a place of evacuation and for storing foodstuffs and valuables during a flood – stands in the kitchen next to the bedroom of the domestic servant. The original part of *Nha Phu* currently houses the bedroom of the owner's husband, a dining room, a living room and guest room. A corridor in front of *Nha Phu* serves as recreation space for the family members and connects the *Nha Chinh* and *Nha Phu*. This space between the two buildings also houses a small storage room of around 6 sq m. The house has two toilets – the original one located outside on

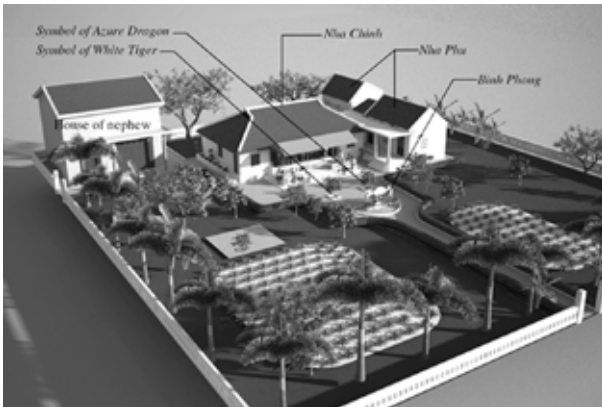


Figure 8. Perspective of house and garden (drawn and edited by author and Võ Văn Quả, Hue architectural student)

the rear part of the land and a new one, built in 1992, connected to the bedroom of the present owner of the house

This house's garden is the second largest of its kind in the Citadel area, stretching to about 1800 sq m. Its various plants include guava, banana, jackfruit and many types of vegetable. The owner explained that her father and husband decided upon

the arrangement of the trees. A row of areca palm trees have been planted at the front of the garden behind the perimeter wall (Figure 8). Banana plants line the inside of the perimeter wall to the rear and along the sides of the house (north-east and south-west orientations). The folk saying: "*Trước Cau sau Chuối*" (plant areca palm in front and banana at the back) recommends this arrangement to shade a house from the sun from midday until late afternoon. Many other shade and fruit trees such as green tea, longan, guava and peach are also planted at these orientations. Their fruit and flowers are also very useful when used as offerings for worship (Figure 9).

The owner uses a large area of the garden to grow vegetables, especially potatoes (*Rau Khoai*) as seen in Figure 10. The vegetables form part of the family's daily diet and are also sold for profit. Bonsai and other ornamental trees are arranged in front of *Nha Chinh* to enhance the beauty and value of the house while spice trees and plants are planted to the rear, adjacent to the kitchen area.

A small basin (*Be Can*) and a brick screen (*Binh Phong*) flanked by two bonsai trees are located in the center of the yard in front of the *Nha Chinh* (Figure 11). According to Feng Shui principles and Vietnamese belief, *Be Can* represents the "water mouth", the watercourse that cleans off the dust of life (Dinh 2006) and is a symbol of prosperity. The symbols of the Four



Figure 9. Banana and pomelo from the garden, used as religious offerings



Figure 10. *Rau Khoai* growing in the garden



Figure 11. *Binh Phong* and *Be Can* with two bonsai representing *Ta Thanh Long* and *Huu Bach Ho*

Emblem Animals in the Form School practices of Feng Shui principles – azure dragon, white tiger, red phoenix and black tortoise – can also be seen in the garden of this house (refer back to Figure 4). Red phoenix (*Chu Tuoc*), represented by *Binh Phong*, functions as a shield to protect the house from evil spirits and is a beacon of fortune; black tortoise (*Huyen Vu*) is represented by banana trees with large foliage; and azure dragon (*Ta Thanh Long*) and white tiger (*Huu Bach Ho*), shown left and right respectively, and symbolizing the left and right as well as serving as the two guardians of the houses, are represented by the two bonsai trees shown in Figure 11.⁶ In front of the *Binh Phong*, there is a narrow path 2 m in width and around 18 m in length.

Two rows of Chinese tea bushes (*Che Tau*) run along both sides of the pathway that leads visitors from the gate to the house.

According to surveys of houses in two other studies (Hoàng 1999 and Nguyen et al. 2010a), the layout of this house and garden is typical of its kind and displays the unique architectural characteristics of HTGHs that are not seen in other regions of Vietnam. This makes 9 Ngo Thoi Nham Street a useful example for the study of different fields such as architecture, conservation, landscape and living environment.

2.3 How the house has been altered

Today, few HTGHs have retained their original form because they have been altered in response to factors such as floods, business ventures and population growth (Nguyen 2007a: 98 and Nguyen et al. 2010a: 528). The 9 Ngo Thoi Nham house is not atypical in this respect. Figure 12 and Table 1 illustrate the transformation process of the house recorded through interviews with the owner, Mrs Xuan, and her husband. Mrs Xuan's father bought the land and built the house in 1938 with three *Gian* (chambers), two *Chai* (lean-tos) and a front veranda. In *Nha Chinh*, the three *Gian* originally served as a room for worship, a small library and as a bedroom of the original owner, while the two *Chai* were used as bedrooms by the other family members. The *Chai* on the south-west and north-east orientations – *Chai Dong* (or *Chai tren*) and *Chai Tay* (or *Chai duoi*) – respectively, provided segregated living quarters: the *Chai Dong* being used by the men and boys of the household and *Chai Tay* providing a bedroom and storage space for the women. *Nha Phu* at that time was a temporary

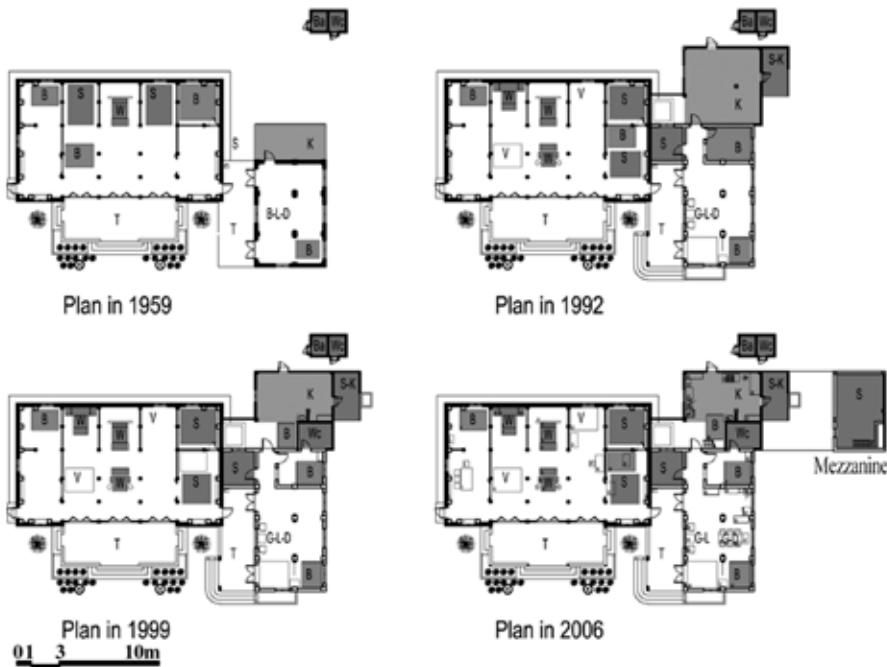


Figure 12. Transformation of the house at 9 Ngo Thi Nham Street (see Figure 4 for legend)

Table 1. Summary of transformation process at 9 Ngo Thoi Nham Street

Time	Alteration	Reason
1938	House built	Living requirement
1959	Rebuilt <i>Nha Phu</i> after selling two sides of the land	Downgrade
1968	Replaced wooden wall of <i>Nha Chinh</i> with brick wall	War
After 1975	Extended <i>Nha Phu</i> to the rear part and sold the rear part	Living requirement
1986	Rebuilt hedge and tiled floor	Living use and typhoon in 1985
1992	Built private toilet	Living requirement
1999	Rebuilt veranda, tiled new roof and built mezzanine	Flood
2006	Divided more than 100 sq m and gave to nephew	Relationship

construction with a thatched roof and makeshift walls made from bamboo lattice. It was rebuilt in 1959 after the original owner sold some of the land on either side of the house. At this time the *Nha Phu* was extended at the back to make room for a new kitchen as well as a new bedroom for the present owner. This was to enable the family to use *Nha Chinh* exclusively for clan worship.⁷

Between 1959 and 1992, the spatial organization of the house did not change much except for the installation of a new private toilet next to the bedroom of the owner. In 1999, a significant flood in Hue prompted the owner to build a mezzanine, accessed from the kitchen area, as a precautionary measure. The veranda in front of *Nha Chinh* was renewed at this time and its roof was retiled. Such repairs are not uncommon in Hue, which is often badly affected by heavy flooding. Devastating floods, such as those that occurred in 1953, 1983 and 1999, have destroyed many of Hue's historic monuments and dwellings (Nguyen 2007a and Tran et al. 2007). Flooding was one of the main factors influencing the transformation of at least 35



Figure 13. Mark of flood level in 2006

of 56 of the Citadel area HTGHs surveyed in this study. At 9 Ngo Thoi Nham Street, the normal flood water level is around 50 cm above the floor level of *Nha Phu* (Figure 13) but, in 1999, the flood waters reached 1.3 m. Flooding can cause wooden structures and walls to decay.

The house has not undergone any major changes since 1999. However, the owner has portioned off more than 100 sq.

m of the land to the rear of the house to provide living space for her nephew and his family. In this instance – and in most cases throughout the house’s history – most of the alterations have taken place in the *Nha Phu*, while the spatial organization in the *Nha Chinh* has not changed much in a physical way. This is quite similar to the transformation process of other HTGHs in the Citadel, based on the field survey of this study (Nguyen et al. 2010b). In terms of function, the original worship space in *Nha Chinh* has been extended at the front (to add an extra altar for Buddhist worship) and in the left *Gian*, where an altar for ancestor worship is now kept. The right *Gian* is not used at present except on ceremony days, when it is used as a service space to prepare offerings and food for guests. *Chai Tay* is now used for personal storage and as a space in which to prepare offerings made during ceremony days. *Chai Dong* now acts as a spare bedroom for relatives and visitors.

In conclusion, the main factors influencing on the transformation process of this house have been the war, flooding, clan worship and changes in living use. *Nha Chinh* serves mainly for clan worship, while the day-to-day family activities take place in *Nha Phu*.

2.4 Living environment and inhabitants’ lifestyle

Mrs Xuan and her husband are currently unemployed. They receive a small income (less than 100,000 VND per month) by selling vegetables and fruit from their garden but the money they make is unstable. They also receive support from their daughter, who gives them about 500,000-1,000,000 VND per month and provides other necessary items, such as medicine. Asking respondents about their incomes is far from easy because money is a delicate subject. For this reason, the researchers could only collect information on the incomes of 22 of the 56 HTGH households surveyed. The monthly income of most of those surveyed is higher than 1,000,000 VND, with an average of 3,080,000 VND. This means that the income of the 9 Ngo Thoi Nham Street household is very low. The owner of this house does not have enough funds to pay for repairs, living costs and land taxes. For example, when the roof of the house started leaking, the owner installed a PVC ceiling to prevent further leaks inside the house, rather than treating the problem causing the leak (Figure 14). Rapid increases in land tax since 2007 place a huge strain on the family because they have no means to increase the small income



Figure 14. PVC ceiling used to protect worship space in *Nha Chinh*

Table 2. Land tax in each period

Year	Tax fee (VND)
2001	2,500,000
2001	2,600,000
2007	4,762,000
2008	4,329,000
2009	5,400,000

they already receive from their land (Table 2). This is the reason why they still owe one year's worth of land tax. Electricity charges – at around 120,000 VND per month – are also a problem.

However, the house has many of modern appliances, such as a refrigerator, radio, television, cell phone and the family also has a motorbike. When interviewed, the owner and her husband said they are quite satisfied with the number of appliances they have in their home. In general, they are mostly satisfied with their living environment and neighborhood, including the air quality, water quality, waste management, landscape and convenience for daily life. Modern equipment is arranged in the *Nha Phu*, while the *Nha Chinh* contains only old wooden furniture, such as beds, cabinets and tables. This implies that the owners prefer to separate the modern and the traditional. They respect the *Nha Chinh* as a space for maintaining traditional values and use the *Nha Phu* as a more modern and practical living space.

Four people live in this house: Mrs Xuan, the owner; Mr Viem, her husband; Ms Huong – the domestic servant – and her young son.⁸ The married couple's relatives live in other provinces or overseas, except for their daughter, who lives in Hue city with her family. When Mr Viem often goes out and Ms Huong is busy with her work, Mrs Xuan complained of the lack of opportunity to talk to relatives and neighbors.

All the members of the household normally get up around 5am and each person performs their own activities (Table 3). The owner prays three times a day for the health and happiness of all family members. Mrs Xuan spends most of the day tending the garden, watching television, relaxing and chatting with other family members if they are home. Mr Viem is currently a member of a volunteer group engaged in charitable works for homeless children in Hue. This work requires him to leave the house every day. When he is home, he likes to relax, watch television, read the newspaper or take care of the garden. Mrs Xuan, as the house's owner, is responsible for praying to the ancestors and taking care of the worship space; Mr Viem is not required to engage in that activity.

Ms Huong does the housework, including cleaning and dusting down the wooden surfaces, tending plants and selling vegetables. She also chats with and takes care of Mrs Xuan. The elderly owner usually stays inside the house and cannot engage in strenuous labor. All the housework falls to Ms Huong, who seems to be overwhelmed. Perhaps as a

Table 3. Family members' daily activities

Time	Mrs Xuan	Mr Viem	Ms Huong (domestic servant)
5-6 am	Get up, freshen up, relax	Get up, freshen up, relax	Get up, freshen up
6-7 am	Pray	Exercise	Prepare for breakfast
7-8 am	Have breakfast, watch television, drink tea, chat with family members	Have breakfast, watch television, drink tea, chat with family members	Have breakfast, watch television, drink tea, chat with family members
8-9 am	Garden	Go to charitable association	Go to market, garden
9-10 am	Watch television, relax, chat with home help		Watch television, relax, do housework chat with owner
10-11 am			Cook lunch, chat with owner
11-12 am	Have lunch, watch television, chat with family members	Have lunch, watch television, chat with family members	Have lunch, watch television, chat with family members
10-1 pm	Drink water, take a nap	Drink water, take a nap	Go to part-time job
1-2 pm			
2-3 pm	Pray	Go to charitable association	
3-4 pm	Garden		Do housework, chat with owner
4-5 pm	Relax, chat with home help		
5-6 pm	Chat with family members, have dinner, watch television	Chat with family members, have dinner, watch television, read newspaper	Chat with family members, have dinner, do housework, watch television
6-7 pm			
7-8 pm	Pray	Watch television, read newspaper	Watch television
8-9 pm	Go to bed		Go to bed
9 pm-5 am		Go to bed	



Figure 15. *Chai Dong* is not used and has fallen into disrepair

consequence of this, some parts of the house have not been conserved and have fallen into disrepair, while other parts are not in use (Figure 15). This suggests there is no one to take care of and conserve the house in the future.

Nha Chinh is used for most activities on important days and celebrations, such as Tet (Vietnamese New Year) and the anniversaries of ancestors' deaths. At Tet, in particular, *Nha Chinh* provides a solemn,

comforting and welcoming space in which the family and their guests can drink tea, eat traditional food, talk and celebrate family life and the importance of home.

The *Nha Chinh* is also used as the place for commemorating the anniversaries of ancestors' deaths. On such days, many relatives from other regions converge on the house because this *Nha Chinh* is used for clan worship as well as ancestor worship. Such family gatherings are opportunities for relatives to confide in one another, catch up with what has been happening in each other's lives, reminisce and remember their origins. This social tradition is particularly strong among the inhabitants of HTGHs.

2.5 Clan pride

Mrs Xuan's pride in her clan was evident throughout the interview. She noted that at least three generations of her ancestors – her father, grandfather and great-grandfather – were court officials during the reign of the Nguyen Dynasty. Many of the house's wooden furnishings, such as a camp bed and an ornately carved wooden cabinet, express the social status of the original owner (Figure 16). In the worship area, many old pictures of the owner's ancestors



Figure 16. Engraved boards, old wooden cabinets and antique ornaments in *Nha Chinh*



Figure 18. Carved board at the place of worship recording family details



Figure 17. Ancestor worship table and photographs of the owner's forebears

are placed on or above the altar; others hang on the wooden partition walls of the *Nha Chinh* (Figure 17), showing how the forebears are held in high esteem.

The worship space is the most important place in the house. Mrs Xuan kneels here each day to pray for the health and happiness of her family.⁹ During prayers, this silent space is filled with smoke from the incense table, creating a peaceful and solemn atmosphere. This ritual space helps the owner to forget the negative things in her life and helps her to feel comfortable and serene.

The *Nha Chinh* is decorated with valuable engraved boards, paintings on wood and antique ornaments (Figure 18). These mementoes include presents from the Nguyen King and, therefore, have a great significance for the family. During important holidays such as Tet, these mementoes are celebrated with pride by the owner. This strong sense of family pride has

been important force behind the family's efforts to preserve their home, despite their difficult circumstances. Although the owner asserts that the house will belong to her daughter when she passes away – and that her daughter has a responsibility to preserve the house because it is the place for worshipping her ancestors and clan – Mrs Xuan remains gloomy about the house's prospects. "I am not sure if my daughter will follow my advice or not," she says. "For now, I do my best to keep the house going. Later, I will let my daughter decide."

2.6 Problems with conservation regulations

As described in the introduction, the Thua Thien Hue People's Committee enacted Decision No. 2434 to protect 150 HTGHs in the years 2006 to 2010. However, this decision was not made until 4 November 2009 so, inevitably, it was going to be hard to implement. The decision stipulates regulations governing the management, protection, responsibility and support budget for a list of 150 garden houses. For example, each selected house can receive up to 100 million VND in financial support from the conservation fund for restoration and preservation. In addition, each house can also receive up to 5 million VND to improve its garden. In return, the owner of each selected house has to agree to allow tourists to visit the house. The homeowner receives 25 per cent of the ticket price to put towards further conservation and restoration.

According to our interviews, 21 of the 56 HTGHs we surveyed were invited to join the list of the 150 garden houses selected by the government for protection. However, the owners of 17 houses refused to do so. Their reasons included not wanting to depend on the government, having enough money to conserve the house themselves and difficulties in registering the house because it belonged to a clan (meaning any decisions regarding its future had to be taken with the agreement of a number of family members). Mrs Xuan, the owner of 9 Ngo Thoi Nham Street, refused to join the list for three main reasons. First, she did not want to depend on the government. She was concerned that by joining the list she would share ownership of the house with the government and would have to stop whatever she was doing to welcome tourists into her home. This would adversely affect her lifestyle and put the family's routine at the mercy of tour agencies.

Second, Mrs Xuan claimed that, in the past, she had sometimes prepared tea and fruit for tourists but had not received any financial support from the tour agencies that organized the visit. Other HTGH owners complained of similar experiences. Mrs Xuan spoke about a television station and a group of national and local government officials that visited the house in 2000 to ask her to open up her house to tourists as part of the first Hue Festival. The owner and her family spent a lot of time preparing for the visit. The government officials looked all over her home, admired it and talked about finding further support for the house. However, the owner has yet to receive any such support.

Third, with regard to Decision No. 2434, Mrs Xuan thought the support budget allocated to each house was not enough for conservation purposes, only covering the cost of small items such as replacement roof tiles or timbers to reinforce some parts of the wooden structure. Instead, the owner suggests that the government should support HTGHs through special subsidies, such as land tax reduction. At present, the land tax assessment for HTGHs is the same as for other single-family homes. If the local government recognizes HTGHs as integral cultural assets in Hue, she believes it should waive or reduce the land tax imposed on these houses. This small action might encourage the people living in them to conserve and restore their homes.

3. Conclusion

The house at 9 Ngo Thoi Nham Street typifies the HTGH and, as such, lends itself perfectly to the discussion of issues such as spatial organization, transformation, living environment, lifestyle and conservation regulation. It will provide a useful reference for the further study of the conservation of HTGHs and how they are being adapted for modern use. The following is a summary of the survey findings.

1) *Architectural characteristics of the house.* These can be divided into four parts: *Nha Chinh* (main house), *Nha Phu* (sub-house), the garden and other composition elements. The latest complete documentation (October 2012) records all the elements of the 9 Ngo Thoi Nham Street house in measurements, drawings, photos and 3D modelling. This documentation will be useful to any other study of HTGHs in general and any further examination of the restoration and conservation of - and living conditions within - the case-study house.

2) *Layout of the house.* This maintains all the characteristics of an HTGH: *Nha Chinh*, *Nha Phu*, gate, fence, alley, *Binh Phong*, *Be Can*, symbols of *Ta Thanh Long* and *Huu Bach Ho* and garden. This arrangement is designed to help the occupants achieve wealth and prosperity as well as avoid evil spirits. The trees are arranged in the garden according to a Hue custom that ensures the house is shaded from the sun. According to the survey, *Binh Phong*, *Be Can* and symbols of *Ta Thanh Long* and *Huu Bach Ho* are important to the spirit of the owner and are a unique characteristic of HTGHs. These elements should, therefore, be conserved and maintained.

3) *Transformation process.* The war, floods, clan worship and changes in lifestyle have all influenced the transformation process of 9 Ngo Thoi Nham Street. Their impacts have effected most change in *Nha Phu*, while *Nha Chinh* has maintained its original form. In terms of functional use, *Nha Chinh* is a space for worship, while *Nha Phu* is a family living space. This indicates that the owner understands the need to conserve *Nha Chinh*, the most valuable part of the house. Meanwhile, *Nha Phu* can be adapted to the needs of modern life. However, the modification of *Nha Phu* for practical purposes should not adversely influence the harmonious beauty of the arrangement between *Nha Chinh* and *Nha Phu*.

4) *Lifestyle and contemporary use.* Almost all activities on important days such as Tet and the anniversaries of ancestors' deaths take place in *Nha Chinh*. These festivities are an opportunity for relatives to reaffirm and strengthen social ties, retell old stories and remember their origins – making them a good way to maintain the traditional culture

of Hue people. This house provides a good example of how other HTGHs can be used today. *Nha Phu* should be used as a family living space for family members, while, in *Nha Chinh*, the rear space of *Gian* can be the worship area and the front space can function as a living room and guestroom for visitors during important days. The *Chai* of *Nha Chinh* can be used as a storage area, a guest bedroom or for other functions.

5) *Income and other constraints.* The income in this household is derived from selling fruit and vegetables from the garden (generating about 100,000 VND per month) and support from relatives (500,000-1 million VND per month). This makes it difficult for the family to cover their living costs. This lack of funds, combined with the advanced age of the owner and dispersal of the family, mean the future prospects for the house are a major challenge, not only for the owner but also for the government.

6) *Importance of clan pride.* The family members are proud to be of noble descent – their ancestors were high-ranking court officials during the period of the Nguyen Dynasty. It is out of family pride that Mrs Xuan is mindful to conserve her home and preserve its valuable historic contents.

7) *Problems with current conservation regulations.* The legislation governing HTGHs has not been effective because the funds available for each HTGH are not enough to cover conservation and special compensation for these houses has yet to be provided. The time lag between the setting out of the regulations and their implementation is another barrier to sustainable conservation and the adaptation of HTGHs to modern use. To combat these issues, there needs to be a bottom-up as well as a top-down approach to enable the local government to take account of the views of the owners of these houses.

Efforts to promote HTGHs as tourist attractions are commendable. This trend helps more people understand the cultural value of these houses and the profits generated by tourism can be used to pay for their upkeep. This is mentioned in Principle 1 of the International Cultural Tourism Charter, adopted by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), which recognizes domestic and international tourism as among the “foremost vehicles for cultural exchange” (ICOMOS 1999). Hue’s local government has much to learn from the experiences of conservation-based tourism in other regions of Vietnam, such as the ancient town of Hoi An in Quang Nam province, as well as in foreign countries, such as the conservation of Gassho-style houses in Shirakawa-go, Gifu Prefecture, Japan (Showa Women’s University 2003; Kuroda 2010). These successful examples suggest that the government should give HTGHs special treatment – such as waivers or reductions in land tax – and take great care in dividing tourism-generated profits between the government, tour operators and homeowners.

The owners of HTGHs should understand that they, and not external providers, should be mainly responsible for conserving their homes because a house's inhabitants will know best which parts need restoration. In addition, homeowners could come together to establish an association for the protection of HTGHs. The association members would meet regularly to share their knowledge and discuss issues of conservation, preservation and renovation. The association would also represent the interests of HTGH owners and defend their legal rights. According to our interviews, most HTGH owners welcomed the idea of a conservation association and believed it should be free of government involvement.

Notes

¹Trần (2005: 21) counted 318 traditional houses in Hue city in 2004, 105 of them in the Citadel area. However, among these, several are not really traditional houses even though the elements and designs on the façade are similar to those of traditional houses. In addition, there are other types of traditional houses, such as old colonial French. In 2008, at least 91 HTGHs were observed in the Citadel area (Nguyen 2007a). Our study found that seven HTGHs in the Citadel area were destroyed and/or converted into new housing types.

²My definition of HTGHs is quite different to Hue traditional houses and Hue garden houses. Although the spatial organization of Hue garden houses is similar to that of HTGHs, the *Nha Chinh* of a Hue garden house includes various modern types of house in addition to the *Ruong* and *Roi* style houses found in HTGHs. Hence, Hue garden houses include HTGHs and houses with gardens. Hue traditional houses include of all traditional houses in Hue, such as *Ruong* houses, *Roi* houses, deformation of *Ruong* houses and *Roi* houses, HTGHs and old French houses.

³Trần (2005) described the physical characteristics and spatial organization of Hue's popular traditional houses, *Ruong* and *Roi*, which are the main house in HTGHs of this study. Then, he classified those houses into four basic types based on the timber structure and number of *Gian* (chambers). Finally, he provided a rough distribution map of existing traditional houses in Thua Thien Hue Province.

Nguyễn (2001) focused on gardens in Hue, including garden temples and garden houses. His study discussed spatial organization and planting systems. He also classified the arrangement between *Nha Chinh* (main house) and *Nha Phu* (sub-house) of garden houses according to Chinese letters such as Đinh (丁), Công (工), Nhật (一) and Khau (口). The finding of this study helps to understand the arrangement among garden *Nha Chinh* and *Nha Phu*.

The master thesis of Hoàng (1999) provided three typical layout types of garden houses based on the illustration of four samples (the term "garden house" here includes traditional and modern garden houses). This thesis also mentioned how the beliefs of Hue people are reflected in their homes.

⁴According to the field survey of HTGHs in the Citadel area, many antiques, such as boards engraved with Chinese characters and valuable old furniture, were lost during the Vietnam War (1945-1975), when most inhabitants evacuated to other regions for safety. However, most of the mementoes in 9 Ngo Thoi Nham Street have been maintained, thanks largely to the bravery of Mr Viem, the husband of the present owner, who decided to stay in the house during the war.

⁵Nguyen et al. (2010a) show that the type of arrangement between *Nha Chinh* and *Nha Phu* in this house can be seen in 66.1 per cent of the 91 HTGHs surveyed by the authors between 2005 and 2008 in the Citadel area.

⁶Based on the survey of 84 HTGHs, 17 houses have *Binh Phong*, *Be Can* and symbols of *Ta Thanh Long* and *Huu Bach Ho*. Ten houses do not have any of these elements.

⁷Ancestor worship is different from clan worship. Most family homes in Vietnam have a space set aside for ancestor worship. However, only one family in each clan keeps a space in their home for clan worship. The eldest brother in the clan line is responsible for organizing and observing all the ceremonies necessary for clan worship.

⁸The child of the home help was too young to be interviewed.

⁹Owners of 52 of the 56 HTGHs surveyed stated that the worship space was the most important place in the house. This indicates that homeowners are maintaining the worship space for contemporary use.

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Nguyen Ngoc Tung is a lecturer at the Department of Architecture, Hue College of Sciences, Hue University. He obtained a bachelor’s degree in architecture from Hanoi National University of Civil Engineering, Vietnam (2003), then an MEng in architecture from Chiang Mai University, Thailand (2008), and a PhD in global environmental management from Kyoto University (2012). His current study interests are sustainable conservation and the contemporary use of Hue traditional garden houses.

Hirohide Kobayashi is an associate professor at the Graduate School of Global Environmental Studies, Kyoto University. He received an MEng in architecture from Kyoto University and worked as a qualified architect before returning to Kyoto University in 2004. He received a PhD in global environmental studies from Kyoto University in 2007. His research interests include natural disasters and human settlement, and he is currently conducting field surveys in mountainous and lagoon villages in flood-prone areas of central Vietnam.

Masami Kobayashi is a professor at the Graduate School of Global Environmental Studies, Kyoto University, Japan. He obtained a bachelor’s degree in civil engineering, then an MEng and PhD in architecture from Kyoto University, before embarking on his academic and professional career at the same institution, teaching urban design. He worked for the United Nations from 1999 to 2002 as a coordinator of disaster management planning. His environmental and sustainable architectural designs are built on knowledge learned from field experience of natural disasters and human settlement issues.