

Gallery VIIA
Colonial and Institutional Architecture in Vientiane

Words and Photography by Kennie Ting

Where colonial and institutional architecture is concerned, Vientiane resembles its cousin Phnom Penh, with many colonial villas now housing government institutions, and many civic institutions occupying modernist and art deco buildings from the '50s and '60s.

There are two main differences, however. Here, one finds the “crumbling” colonial villas one expects to find in Phnom Penh but aren’t there anymore. Here also, one finds a faster pace of development that has seen many colonial villas demolished and replaced by flashy buildings in the neo-colonial or completely contemporary (read: mall) style.

The bulk of the major civic and government institutions are located along Lane Xang Avenue, which runs between Patuxai at one end, and the Presidential Palace at the other. Off Lane Xang Avenue, particularly along Thanon Setthathirat, Rue de La Mission and around the French Embassy, one finds dozens of dilapidated colonial villas: latter-day Grey Gardens’ that are still inhabited. The environment here is an evocative mix of laidback and lost-in-time. On these back streets, one can still get a feel of how it must have been like during the colonial era.

The highlight of this gallery, however, is at the Lao National Museum. At the gates of this worthy establishment hangs an impressionistic painting of the Pha That Luang, the symbol of the Lao Nation. It is a stirring piece of work recalling Monet’s paintings of Rouen Cathedral. *This*, more than anything else I saw that weekend, reminded me strongly of just how pervasive the French colonial presence once was and still is in the city.

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Fig 1 – L’institut de Langue Francaise, on Lane Xang Avenue



Fig. 2 – Lycée de Vientiane



Fig. 3 – Ministère de la Justice. Note the fallen letters.



Fig. 4 – The United Nations



Fig. 5 – Ministère de l'Agriculture et des Forêts



Fig. 6 – The French Institute for Development.



Fig. 7 – The Presidential Palace



Fig. 8 – Bibliothèque Nationale



Fig. 9 – The General Post Office



Fig. 10 – Nam Ngum 2 Power Company Ltd.



Fig. 11 – That Damm, or Black Stupa.



Fig. 12 – Two Ladies



Fig. 13 – Still Occupied



Fig. 14 – Grey Gardens



Fig. 15 – Education Printing Enterprise State Company.



Fig. 16 – Résidence de France.



Fig. 17 – École de Médecine.



Fig. 18 – Église de Nôtre Dame.



Fig. 19 – Haunted House.



Fig. 20 – Wat Hophrakaew: razed to the ground by the Siamese in 1828; rebuilt by the French colonial authorities in 1942.



Fig. 21 – View towards Hopital Mahosot, from within the Hophrakaew.



Fig. 22 – Kualao Restaurant.



Fig. 23 – Old Rusty.



Fig. 24 – The Lao National Museum.



Fig. 25 – Impressionist painting of the Pha That Luang at the gates of the National Museum.