

Architecture of Happiness: The Work of Hoang Thuc Hao

Nirmal Kishnani and Alakesh Dutta

National University of Singapore; National University of Singapore

ABSTRACT—Hoang Thuc Hao's projects, particularly the community buildings, ask what it means to be in Vietnam, what the transformative growth of recent years has meant to everyday lives. He is preoccupied with climatic response, local craft and materials, the relationship between indoors and outdoors. He too seeks meaning, combining old and new, albeit not in the city but in rural Vietnam. Embedded within Hao's reading of the zeitgeist, there is a position on the environment. Hao offers an implicit nod to the sustainability movement that has mushroomed in Vietnam since the 2010s. However, his worldview is rooted in the phenomenological, which contrasts with other green architects, who rely mostly on technological solutions.

Hoang Thuc Hao (b. 1971) is a Vietnamese architect who has been celebrated for his projects for disadvantaged communities, his use of traditional and local materials, and his awareness of climate change. During the early stages of his practice, Hoang noticed that while rapid urbanisation paralleled the growth in the economy, rural communities, which earlier were doing well, have often suffered owing to rapid urbanisation and urban migration. He opened his own practice, 1+1>2 Architecture in 2004 and has since dedicated much of his career towards advancing rural societies.

To frame the work of Hoang Thuc Hao, it is useful to revisit Regionalism, a discourse that preceded his career by some four decades, and which did not, in its heyday, have a champion in Vietnam. Vietnamese architects Tran Dinh Quyen and Nguyen Van Hoa imparted regional influences to the largely modernist styles of the period, particularly in Southern Vietnam. They were, however, not as well-known as other regionalists of the period (Loan and Lan 2017). Regionalist masters in Asia are remembered for their approach to site, climate and materiality (Tzonis et al. 2001). These imperatives, in their hands, gave rise to meaning; and new meaning, as a semantic force, was necessary to forge identity. This reimagining of architecture would, for some, also be a preface to rethinking the city which was changing, spurred on by new political and economic realities.

In Hao, we see a kindred ideology. His projects, particularly the community buildings, ask what it means to be in Vietnam, what the transformative growth of recent years has meant to everyday lives. He is preoccupied with certain form-drivers: passive design, local craft and materials, edge conditions between indoors and outdoors. He too seeks meaning, combining old and new, albeit not in the city but in rural Vietnam. The pull of the city is to be resisted, and the way to resist, says Hao, is to restore and

regenerate the countryside. He is drawn to small communities, giving form to what might be described as a *New Vietnamese Vernacular*.

Embedded within Hao's reading of the zeitgeist, there is a position on the environment. This is not unlike, say, Ken Yeang (Malaysia) and Tay Kheng Soon (Singapore) who, in the 1980s, were drawn to building performance as a direct response to the energy crises of the 1970s (Soon 1996; Yeang 1996). Hao adopts a similar stance, an implicit nod to the Green building movement that has mushroomed since the 2010s. His take on Greening is rooted in the phenomenological, and offers a perspective that is unique in an industry reliant on certification checklists.

Hao's visual style is an amalgam of traditional techniques and materials, served up with a twist. On the surface, his buildings read like an ode to the past. On examination, they reveal a Modernist sensibility: clean lines, sharp geometries, the mannered tectonics of material and space. It is this stylistic ambiguity and the stories he tells of life in rural Vietnam that explain his success on the global stage and popularity in Vietnam.

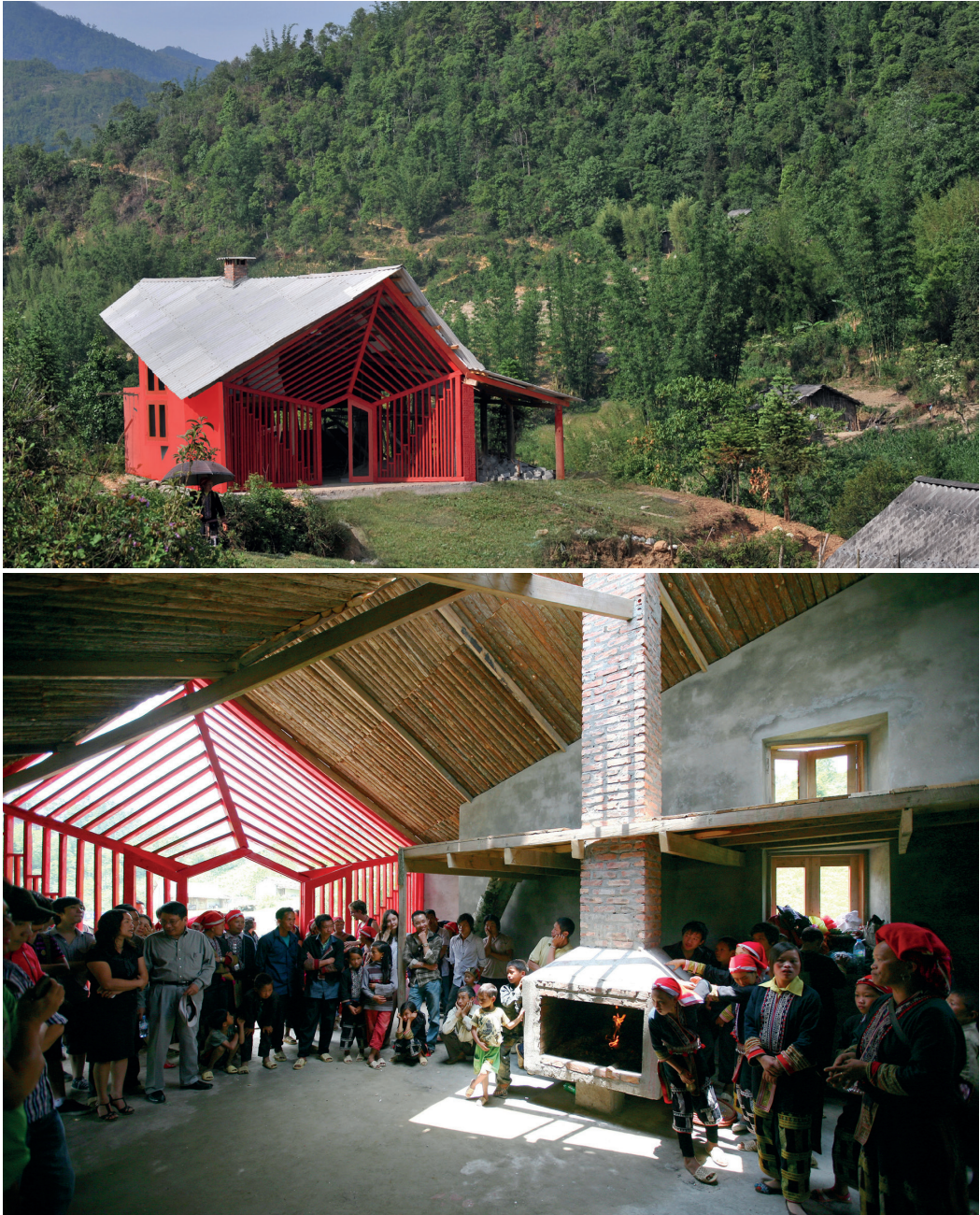
Architect as activist and agent of change

Rural communities in Asia compete with cities. Since 1986, the year of national economic reform in Vietnam known as *doi moi*, large numbers of people migrated from the countryside to cities to work in factories. In official estimates, some 100,000 people move to Hanoi and some 130,000 to Ho Chi Minh City every year (www.thanhniennews.com). In the process, many were disconnected from their roots, traditions, culture, and social networks. Those who stayed back struggled to cope with changes to both the physical and social structures of their communities, one falling into disrepair, the other fragmented.



Figures 1. Hoang Thuc Hao (third from right) bringing together stakeholders (photo: <https://tiasang.com.vn>)

Most of Hao's community projects are a direct response to this erosion of rural life. Each starts by bringing together stakeholders and aggregating resources. Fellow practitioners, non-governmental agencies, social organisations, and educational



Figures 2, 3. Ta Phin Community House (photos 1+1>2 Architects)

institutions are roped in to brainstorm ideas. The resulting architecture reflects the collaborative processes that produce it.

This principle of participatory design is common to much of Hao's practice, wherein he becomes a conduit for dialogue, and process shapes programme and spatial outcomes. In the Ta Phin Community House in Sa Pa District (Figures 2, 3), for instance, the aspirations of locals were identified through active engagement of various community associations. The building, by consensus, showcases traditional skills and products in an exhibition room, library, communication centre and training spaces.

The most exemplary of Hao's community-led projects is the Earth Village in Nam Dam, a minority area located in Vietnam's northernmost province (Figure 4). In 1992, the villagers began to relocate to the nearby foothills where they could access roads and amenities. Since 2013, Hao, began collaborating with Caritas Switzerland (Vietnam) to lend his design skills to improve the quality of construction, to build and create various prototypes of homestays. These houses made it possible for owners to host tourists, thereby creating a new income stream. As of 2021, twenty-five households have adopted Hao's model.



Figure 4. Earth Village (photo: Son Vu / 1+1>2 Architects)

In collaboration with other stakeholders, Hao has been working in the Quan Ba District (where the Earth Village is located) to preserve and improve rammed-earth (Figure 5) and clay construction in the area, which he deployed in the structures he designed and built for the Earth Village. Here, the goal has been to upskill craftsmanship through the act of construction.

Architect as maker of form and meaning

In the best of Hao's work, the roof is often the defining element. This preoccupation with the *parasol* echoes the early projects of Tay Kheng Soon (1997), who spoke of it as a signature of tropicity: denoting climate, altering skyline, connecting to the past.

Hao's roofs reveal structure and revel in materiality. Volumes confer meaning, from the very public (without roof) to the private (low headroom). It is in the in-between, the semi-public, where Hao is at his best, crafting playful spaces that foster social exchange and that moderate the climate.

The roof takes many forms, from the whimsical compositions of the Da Hop



Figure 5. Rammed earth construction, Earth Village (photo: Son Vu / 1+1>2 Architects)



Figure 6. Da Hop School (photo: Hiroyuki Oki / 1+1>2 Architects)

School (Figure 6) to the studied curves of Tomodachi Retreat, also known as “Jackfruit Village” (Figures 7, 8). What is striking about these complex geometries is that they rely on rudimentary construction techniques and often sit atop a remarkably simple and orthogonal floor plan.

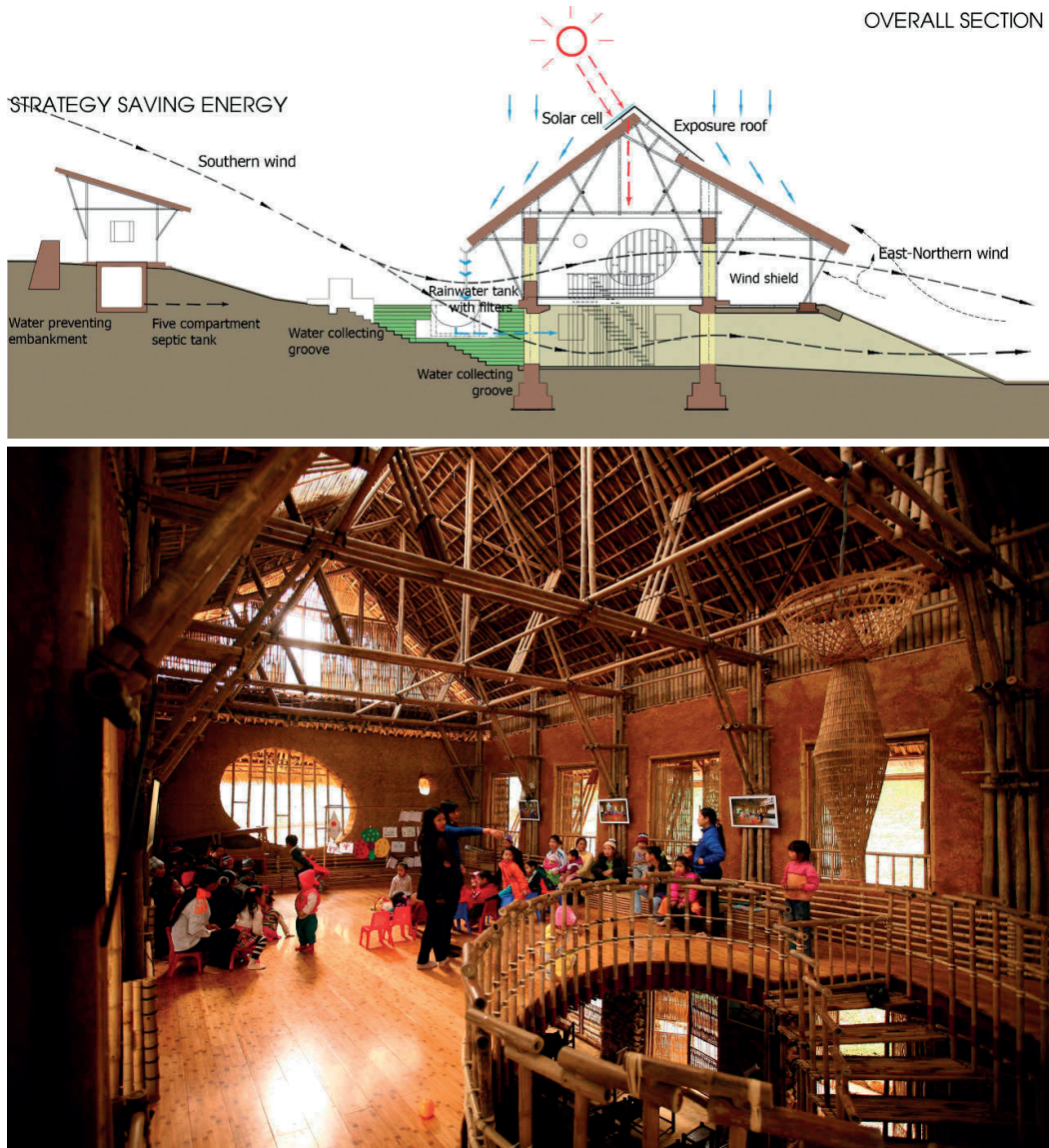


Figure 7. Tomodachi Retreat, Jackfruit Village (photo: Son Vu / 1+1>2 Architects)



Figure 8. Adobe brick and thatched roof at Jackfruit Village (photo: 1+1>2 Architects)

In all his works, Hao makes a case for climate response. This is seen as notations in drawings, indicating directionality of light and shade, or the flows of air and water. These principles of passive design are sometimes backed with computer modelling of performance (Figures 9, 10).



Figures 9, 10. Suoi Re Multifunctional Community House (photos: (photo: 1+1>2 Architects)

In a Hao building, there are encounters with courtyards and verandas, elements found in traditional architecture. His courtyard, however, is more than a mere void. He interprets it as a series of non-linear contiguous spaces that interfaces in new ways with the volumes around it. This creates edge conditions not seen before, where Hao walks the line between the familiar and the experimental, between measured comfort and delight. In the Cam Thanh Community House (Figure 11), for instance, this soft



Figure 11. Cam Thanh Community House (photo: 1+1>2 Architects)



Figure 12. Natural stone and bamboo construction at Suoi Re Community House (photo: 1+1>2 Architects)

boundary between the inside and outside offers a symphony of shade and light and sustains a connection between the constructed and the natural.

The porosity of the envelope is matched by the flexibility of the interior, designed as unobstructed spaces with few partitions and barriers. The floors of the Suoi Re Multifunctional Community House, for instance, are sometimes deployed as kindergarten, library or community space, depending on the time of day and need (Figure 12). Here, Hao also showcases his deft handling of local materials. He is a master of

the low-impact – rammed earth, natural stone, adobe bricks, timber, bamboo, thatched roofs – assembled in ways that test the limits of traditional know-how (Figures 8, 12).

Upscaling of ideas and actions

Hao's reputation has risen in the last decade and, as a result, he has received multiple commissions for ambitious projects in Vietnamese cities. The question he faces is what, if anything, to carry over from his experiences in the countryside to an urban intervention that is bigger, taller and has less access to nature. In the Dream Residences (Figure 13), for instance, Hao embellishes the upper floors of this multi-unit development in Hanoi with vegetated terraces (Figure 14), which sets it apart from other buildings in the neighbourhood. Here, vegetation is a thermal and psychological buffer, something that was not necessary in a rural setting.



Figure 13, 14. Vegetation to counter urban density at Dream Residences, Hanoi (photo: 1+1>2 Architects)

. The most divergent, perhaps enigmatic, of Hao's urban offerings is the Bat Trang Pottery Museum (Figure 15), a bold tectonic experiment inspired by the industry it showcases. The complexity of its form, curving simultaneously in section *and* plan, is not something for which Hao is known. Nor has he, in the past, taken on the task of fashioning an urban icon. And whereas in earlier projects, Hao might have worked alongside craftsmen and village elders in a consultative manner, the stakeholders here are specialists and client committees, which puts him in the role of auteur, as arbiter of taste and public good.



Figure 15. Bat Trang Pottery Museum (photo: 1+1>2 Architects)

Bat Trang is one of many urban projects undertaken by Hao. It is clear from this and others on the drawing board that he is actively thinking of the city, even though this has not yet produced a position on urbanism. He has, however, penned a position on architecture.

Hao's manifesto, *Architecture of Happiness*, expresses core principles that, he says, are guardrails in his work (Hao and Nguyen 2016; Hao 2021). It stipulates three responsibilities of a designer. S/he must *give*, becoming as an agent of change in societal and professional contexts; understand *how* construction is, at heart, an act of creating social space and comfort; and learn to *serve* users of a building and other stakeholders.

The egalitarianism at play here will undoubtedly resonate with Asian audiences for whom the world has bifurcated into city versus countryside, rich versus poor. As a playbook for the drawing board, however, it poses a challenge. Many architects and city planners in the region grapple with unregulated density, impatience in profit-taking and short-termism in policy that, combined, feel like a Gordian knot.

There is no doubt that Hoang Thuc Hao is, and will continue to be, one of the most significant voices on the design scene in Vietnam. What he says and does – how he bridges the rural and urban, how he elucidates happiness, how he formulates a position

on the city – will be important to his country and to the many other Asian architects who are on the same path.



Figure 16. Hoang Thuc Hao (photo Trannam 4890 via Wikipedia Creative Commons)

References

- Hao, Hoang Thuc and Quang Minh Nguyen. 2016. “*Architecture of Happiness—A Treatise.*” 2016. *FuturArc*, 51 (Nov–Dec).
- Hao, Hoang Thuc. 2021. “The philosophy of ‘The Happy Architectures’”. TED talk, 25 February. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YB64lYaAggM> |
- Loan, Pham Thuy, and Truong Ngoc Lan. 2017 “Modern Architecture in Vietnam or Vietnamese Modern Architecture,” *Docomo Journal*, 57; <https://docomomojournal.com/index.php/journal/article/view/300>
- Soon, Tay Kheng. 1996. “Rethinking the City in the Tropics: The Tropical City Concept.” In Tzonis et al., *Tropical Architecture*.
- Soon, Tay Kheng. 1997. “The Architectural Aesthetics of Tropicality.” In Tay Kheng Soon et al., *Line, Edge and Shade: The Search for a Design Language in Tropical Asia*, Singapore: Page One.
- Tzonis, Alexander, Liane Lefaivre and Bruno Stagno (eds). 2001. *Tropical Architecture: Critical Regionalism in the Age of Globalization*. Chichester: Wiley-Academic.
- Yeang, Ken Yeang. 1996. *The Skyscraper Bioclimatically Considered: A Design Primer*. London: Academy Editions.