

Ha Noi can prop up old homes or let them fall - Features - VietNam News

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Oldie but a goodie: A French-style house on Phung Hung Street in Ha Noi.

Restoring dangerously dilapidated French-style houses in Ha Noi isn't a simple task. And it's further convoluted by the amount of money that's needed and residents' lack of knowledge about how to preserve their history. **Ha Nguyen** reports.

Heated discussions are on and concerns expressed on how to preserve French-styled villas, after one such 110-year-old structure collapsed in central Ha Noi, killing two people and injuring six others.

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To repair and preserve these buildings one needs not only a large amount of money but also strict co-operation from locals and authorities, according to Ngo Doan Duc of the Viet Nam Architecture Association.

There are many such villas located in Ha Noi's Ba Dinh, Hoan Kiem and Hai Ba Trung districts.

"We have to carefully check not only these old villas but also old houses in the Old Quarter because they are being downgraded at an alarming rate," Duc said.

Implementing steps to preserve them, however, is not easy because it needs a team who should know the art of restoration well.

"First we have to start a concrete programme while educating locals about restoration and then urge them to join in," Duc said.



Downtrodden: A French-style villa in Quan Su Street that is home to 10 households. — VNS Photos Doan Tung

He said preservationists had to make clear each house's age and status so as to have a plan to repair and upgrade it on time.

A State management in-charge should have all the information and be given the responsibility to help locals deal with any problem which arises in the preservation work, to ensure safety and protect the heritage, he said.

Architect Dao Ngoc Nghiem, deputy chairman of the Association of Ha Noi's Planning and Urban Development, said Viet Nam still did not have a concrete policy to encourage people to preserve and restore these houses compared with European countries such as Sweden and Italy.

Over the past 20 years, Ha Noi had only classified French villas but did not have a long-term solutions to protect them, Nghiem said.

"For example, a villa can last at least one hundred years. Relevant agencies in charge should check whether it is 98 or 99 years old to have a concrete solution for its preservation."

"We have to do so to ensure safety and preserve its heritage," he said.

"Many villas in Ha Noi have rich culture heritage and are owned by individuals, so to protect and preserve them, the Government should have a policy to encourage them to join the preservation efforts," Nghiem said.



Their own hands: People have tried to repair the old houses on Hang Ma Street.

The collapse of the 110-year-old house at Tran Hung Dao Street in Ha Noi's Hoan Kiem District was a result of the lack of such a policy, he said.

"Governments in Italy and Germany have funded residents who wish to repair and restore their old houses, or they have a policy to buy them and move the residents to other places, and turn these properties into national heritage sites.

"Italy has many hundreds of architectural heritage sites, but experts have classified and chosen 40 special ones to inject money for protection and preservation, " Nghiem said.

Meanwhile, Viet Nam had a long list to be preserved including 1,200 French villas and 900 ancient houses in Ha Noi's Old Quarter, he said.

"From where should we get the money to deal with them?" Nghiem asked.

Asked whether the French-style villas in Ha Noi, which are more than 100 years old, have lost their use now, Nghiem quoted French experts as saying that almost all of these houses had lost their utility.

Despite all that, due to the paucity of shelters, locals have continued living in such downgraded or unmethodically enlarged an area to live in.

"Viet Nam has completed classification of such houses which show clearly that they need to be preserved and renovated so that relevant agencies can popularise these among local residents and make them understand the kind of houses they are living in, so that they can seek the right solutions," Nghiem said.



Sudden: The recent house collapse on Tran Hung Dao Street.

Architect Tran Huy Anh, from the Viet Nam Architecture Association, said the recent collapse showed that the management of Ha Noi's old structures is inadequate.

For a heritage house, the agency in charge does not have the right to directly interfere in the architecture. Meanwhile, those units or individuals using these houses do not have the right or capacity to repair it and also do not understand rules of restoration, Anh said.

"I think users living in an old villa should be the first persons responsible to manage and keep a watch on their living quarters, and warn the relevant agencies when the time comes to deal with them," he said.

"I know many such villas which are in a dangerous state, but if we have suitable solutions they could be made safe," Anh added.

Architect Hoang Dao Kinh warned that old buildings should not be damaged because of their value with regard to aesthetics, landscape, culture and history.

French experts have sent a written warning to Viet Nam which states that many of the French-styled villas built in Ha Noi and HCM City have outlived their utility.

"They have reminded us to repair and restore the buildings and we have done that at the more than 100-year old Chau Van Liem secondary school, a French styled building in the Cuu Long (Mekong) Delta province of Can Tho," Kinh said, and added that the school, after being renovated, could exist for another 100 years.

Asked about the solutions to deal with this problem, Kinh said that the most urgent issue now is that all French-styled buildings in Ha Noi, HCM City or any localities in Viet Nam should be carefully checked.

These need to be preserved or restored, and users should prepare a document to propose these changes to agencies in charge. Those seriously downgraded should receive emergency reparation, Kinh said.

Architect Nguyen Quoc Thong of the Viet Nam Architect Association agreed with Kinh saying that authorities and users should be responsible for preserving the buildings, adding, "We

should not damage an outdated mansion, but we need to restore it."



Clean as a whistle: The library at Chu Van An High School near West Lake was restored recently with State funds.

Architect Emmanuel Cerise, director of the project to develop the Ha Noi urban areas, said Ha Noi authorities should organise training courses to increase the capacity of the team of architects, preservationists and urban managers.

Cadres from the Ha Noi Department of Planning and Architecture and relevant agencies of a district should be the first team to be trained on how to manage or supervise an ancient structure.

"We are ready to support Ha Noi in training such cadres to become professionals and deal with the problem. We could also link up with leading universities on preservation to help the relevant agencies to manage French-styled buildings in the capital," Cerise said.

He said France had a large and powerful team of architects restoring ancient structures and thanks to them a 100-year-old skilled heritage preservation management network with their capacity and professionalism, had been brought into play.

"I hope that with the help of France, Viet Nam can deal effectively with the problem," Cerise added.

Ha Noi Mayor Nguyen The Thao held an emergency meeting to deal with the collapse of the villa at 107, Tran Hung Dao.

He told relevant agencies to restore the building while assigning the Department of Construction to co-operate with districts to check all downgraded villas, housing constructions and apartments so as to suggest solutions to him as soon as possible.

It aims to ensure safety for local residents and heritage buildings in the city. — VNS