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Title: Dien Bien Phu: creating a memorial site

Biography

1980 MA degree in English Literature at Newnham College, Cambridge. 1998 doctorate in architectural history at Université de Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne: *Bath et son patrimoine architectural: étude critique de sa protection au vingtième siècle*, published in 2000 under the title *Patrimoine et identité: Bath 1900-1960* by Presses Universitaires de Rennes. Since 2001, I have been maître de conférences at Université de Paris Nanterre. My research field is urbanism and protection of historic architecture in South East Asia, particularly in Laos, and I also teach at Xi’an University of Architecture and Technology in China.

Abstract

The battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 was the decisive event in the liberation of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. This paper analyses the post-1954 growth of Dien Bien Phu and the progressive creation of heritage sites.

Because of the American war, inaccessibility of the site and lack of funds, formal heritage planning did not really begin until the 1980s, but the development of the town is not only as a *lieu de mémoire*. Dien Bien Phu is now the provincial capital and a centre of administration. The provincial government is seeking to promote the tourism industry, and at the same time provide a dignified setting for the annual memorial ceremony. These three planning objectives are not easy to reconcile, at a site which still has difficult access and is also outside the main tourist circuit in north Vietnam (Hanoi, Sapa, Ha Long Bay).

The problem in the construction of a heritage environment here is that after the battle there was almost no tangible heritage left, apart from trenches, bunkers and military materiel, most of which was recycled. The early reconstruction was clearly on an *ad hoc* basis and did not conform to an urban ‘plan’. The valley returned to rice-farming, as it had been before 1954, largely carried out by small villages inhabited by Tai ethnic minority. The natural topography of the valley remains the most impressive feature of Dien Bien Phu.

Military ‘objects’ have been reconstructed, such as the French military bridge over the Nam Rom River, or Colonel de Castries’ bunker. These are more or less *in situ*, but the dominant heritage creation is the Victory Monument at the top of D1 Hill (2004). The construction has radically changed the appearance of the site: altering a genuine site to create a ‘theatre stage’ for ceremonial. The most recent addition to Dien Bien Phu is the museum, opened in May 2014 as part of the 60th anniversary commemoration.

Dien Bien Phu marked the end of colonial domination of Vietnam. This raises a potential conflict: how to reconcile a western model of memorial-making (which is not an indigenous Vietnamese tradition) with creating a site designed to celebrate the independence of Vietnam. We examine why it seems unlikely to become a popular tourist destination for non-Vietnamese visitors: a relatively unattractive urban environment and sites of limited specialist interest, with no organised ‘tourist trail’. Heritage is expressed as a series of separate sites punctuating the landscape, which risks diminishing the significance of the valley as a whole.