

A DIARY EXTENSIONS TO HUONG PHUONG VILLAGE ORPHANAGE WEEK 9

This progress report marks construction at the start of the 9th week of the Huong Phuong village orphanage extensions.

On Tuesday I left for Saigon to visit various woodcarving workshops and formulate cost estimates and specifications for the chapel furniture. At the end of the week I returned to Australia.

CONSTRUCTION PROGRESS

I left the site and at the end of Week 9, people were due to come back to work.

During my last few days in the convent and village, I met the builder/designer and local woodcarver. The woodcarver appeared to give an honest account of possible cost of furniture items but it was all rather vague.

I determined to check out a few more wood carving workshops when I got to Saigon and get some firm quotes.

The building designer was evasive about supplying me with all the drawings. He was “too busy” to meet me with the engineer. I felt that something was missing from the story. Through my interpreter contacted the engineer, who was also “too busy” (playing soccer in the village). I took the Vietnamese approach, intercepting him on the soccer field.

I wanted to check a roof framing detail with the engineer and in passing asked him whether the reinforced concrete frame engineering was “strong”.

He began with an explanation of the foundation conditions and that the footings up to floor level were well built. An earlier inquiry had suggested that he was right: the footings were probably over-designed.

He then went on to say that Ngoc had copied the structural details from another job and that he had been told not to check the structural engineering design above floor level.

So my period in the village ended as it had begun, with a bomb shell. At the start, we had footings hand-excavated, only to be told in the end what everyone knew, that is that the whole area was a massive fill site. Now the engineer was telling us that he had provided structural details to the draftsman. The draftsman had decided that he did not like the structural engineer’s work. He would do the structural engineering himself. He would then prevent the engineer from checking any structure.

I immediately called the client. He said, “But you are from Australia. You have been checking everything.” I said, “I am not a structural engineer and neither are you, your draftsman or the workers. I advise you to get a structural engineer to check all the building structure and make recommendations. If he makes any, you should obey. All work should stop until this has been completed.”

I phoned the client a few days later. “Oh, but the draftsman says that it’s all OK”. I felt like punching both the client and draftsman on the nose, but was in Saigon by then. The belief in Quang Binh Province is that people can put their hand to anything. There seems to be no understanding of the value of professions. Sick people don’t need doctors, structures don’t need engineering. It is important, though, to have a statue blessed by the local spiritual expert. Just as the budget did not matter, the engineering

did not matter.

MEETING WITH CLIENT & DESIGNER

Like the rest of Vietnam's population, Fr Vien, vicar-general of the diocese, was back at his home village for the Tet holiday. So it was a good time to have a meeting on site with Fr Vien, and Sr Huong, representing the client and the building designer/builder, Ngoc.

The usual discussion ensued about what is *dep* (beautiful) and what isn't *dep*. In village terms, *dep* buildings are colourful and ornamented. Additional cost is also by definition *dep*.

First, we toured the building site and I paced out the size of the sanctuary. The height and size of everything in the chapel was deemed to satisfy local cultural needs for a monumental building that would indeed impress local villagers. It would indeed be *dep*.

Then we looked at the revised drawings. The designer had kindly included my previous suggestions regarding providing disabled access. I suggested lengthening the ramps. These would still be too steep to satisfy the Australian National Building Code but are still better than steps. I suspected the ramps were added just before the meeting. He also included exposed roof beams and upper floor wall vents for summer. The idea of exposed structure is rather foreign here. "Architectural integrity" is not a local concept. The general idea is basically to cover up the entire building with façade elements and have them painted and ornamented (*dep*).

When you think about it, the local definition of building beauty is not that surprising. People grow up and live in low-roofed, smoke-blackened, timber framed concrete block shelters. Food is cooked by crouching on a charcoal blackened earthen or cement floor, fanning a wood fire to boil an iron pot. These people are naturally happy to move into new, ornamented houses with high ceilings. The insistence on "new and white" project homes by Asian migrants in Canberra is now better understandable.

After viewing the revised drawings, we moved into the "truth-time" phase of the meeting.

The "budget" did not really exist. It was simply a preliminary best-guess. We should aim for a reasonable building completion and not add any extra cost items.

I suggested to Fr Vien that ornamenting the timber ceiling, with polyurethane coated parquetry-like timber was excessive, unnecessary and unacceptable cost. It would be 5 times the cost of a plain ceiling.

As an alternative, we could introduce plenty of ornamental timber carved fittings as well as stained glass windows, which would make the chapel *dep*. These could be possibly sponsored as individual pieces by donor families in Australia. If I thought that extra costs were being heaped onto the budget at some other end, I would withdraw my proposal and fund-raising support. To drive the point home, I suggested it would be unethical to artificially keep inflating the building budget. This was because we would be basically siphoning money away from the orphanage and from the poor, and heaping it onto a monumental chapel building of no "practical" purpose. (It could of course be argued that communal gathering is the most practical possible activity at Huong Phuong).

We should finish the chapel to a reasonable standard and move quickly onto the building of additional accommodation rooms for the orphanage.

I then presented sample photos of my proposals for carved timber interior church

fittings. Fr Vien agreed that they were indeed *dep* (ornamental). Indeed, this might become the most beautifully fitted out church in Quang Binh province. Obviously a good thing in his view.

I felt that we had achieved general client acceptance of the fitting-out proposal. Support of traditional Vietnamese timber carving craft was something that Australian donors should also be comfortable with.

I then asked for an interim photocopy of the project expenditure books to take with me when I leave in a week's time, and for a final copy at project completion. I was not given one.

TRIP TO SAIGON

One of the sisters drove a borrowed car to Ba don to take me and a French speaking seminarian (Sang) to the bus. Three sisters insisted on waiting for an hour with us until the bus arrived. Suddenly it became difficult to say goodbye. I felt very much at home with the sisters. Completely against local custom, I gave each sister at the convent a hug and smooch on the cheek and did the same at the bus stop. We were a bit embarrassed.

Stepping into the grubby and littered interior of the sleeper bus, everyone observed the strict protocol to remove their shoes so as not to "dirty" the bus floor.

During the 20 hour bus ride I was reminded – again – that the anti-litter campaign (which was so influential in Australia in the 1970s) hadn't quite hit Vietnam.

Rubbish is thrown just about everywhere. There is no visible rubbish removal. So most of the time, every hard surface is constantly covered with litter. It's a habit that develops in early childhood and taken through life. It was a reminder of the contrast with the cleanliness routines of monastic life, where every morning the sisters sweep the grounds and floors.



Bus to Saigon

The broken suspension and bad roads ensured a bone-jarring trip to Saigon. Much of the two days and night felt like the bus was being dropped into every deep pothole.

On arrival at Saigon I was keen to avoid lavish hospitality and asked to stay at a monastery with my English speaking contact, father Phong. He is from a local Saigon family and is proud of the city. There is a lot of life and activity in Saigon. The monastery garden, with its bonsai plants, tame dogs and maintenance routines, was a

quiet retreat from the street.

Morning mass in the modern design of the monastery chapel was instantly recognisable. The small and elderly congregation, simple ceremony and lack of fervent singing was just like mass in Australia. I had stepped through a veil, from the medieval religious world of the village into the 21st century.

Village Vietnam is a culture of food, colour, hospitality, talk and family. Business is not so important. Time is not so important. Chatting to people is more important. I had often told people in the village to stop chatting when I was trying to get a “business” message across. Now I missed the constant chatter.

The village in Quang Binh concentrates on food hospitality, visiting relatives, karaoke, glass clinking (hai, ba, Yo!), and going to church (di le). Work, business and punctuality should not interfere with these primary functions.

The village churches are important for vibrant colour, ornamentation, beautiful song, loud music and communal gathering. In the village, suffering is everyone’s birth-right. Work is hard and medical treatment practically non-existent. Religious life is about outward observance (church-going, signalling respect and observing protocols), in contrast to Australian practice (inner spiritual search, personal volunteering, protection of environment, fairness).

After day or so of “defrosting”, it turned out that the non-English bus group actually had quite a few people who had studied English or were game to try out their English vocabulary on me. At every meal stop, more English speakers crystallised. In the last hour of the trip, I had a good chat with a woman who asked about my trip. She also asked why I was kissing women in the street (the nuns – on the cheek, but taboo in Vietnam) at the bus stop when I left.

Television is boring. There are soapies, badly acted comedies, unconvincing American style song and dance shows and boring government gatherings. In Quang Binh, boring television is a blessing for the people. It means they have even more time to chat, share hospitality and go to church.

Villagers are confused about western people and culture. I don’t blame them. When my wife and I were invited to dinner, the grandmother of the household shyly watched from another room (as is the custom). Later, she explained to the grandchildren that she wanted to see what a western woman was really like: how she dressed, ate, drank and talked.

THREE FRUSTRATIONS

In “Star Trek The Next Generation”, travellers have to follow the “prime directive”. This rule says that travellers into another space and time are allowed to observe, study and report, but not participate in the change of local cultures. They are not to intervene in ways which may accelerate or alter the trajectory of local culture and custom. The “prime directive”, borrowed from the field of anthropology, aims for a policy of non-interference, so as to respect local culture and tradition.

On three occasions I became frustrated with local culture and custom. That frustration brought me close to violating the “prime directive”.

- The lunch hosted for poor people included children suffering from leprosy. I felt uncomfortable with these people being showcased, as if to prove that the convent was a charitable group.
- My client’s insistence on showing respect for the church by going over-budget

was very frustrating.

- Being questioned by officials and being advised by my client to apologise to police was also frustrating.

But no problem – *khong co gi!*

I really have no regrets. In time, people of Quang Binh Province will move past the church building phase and become accustomed to foreigners. Respect for the disadvantaged, which is integrated into Western governance but uncommon in Vietnam, will grow naturally after poverty levels have been reduced.

SAIGON HOSPITALITY AND WOODCARVING WORKSHOPS

On arrival in Saigon, I determined to escape lavish hospitality and requested to stay in the Tu Vien Mai Khoi monastery. My client had given me Fr Phong as a Saigon contact. Fr Phong generously took me around the city, eating at local places and helping me with errands. He had studied chemistry at university and worked for overseas companies as well as helping to promote the Water Maxx water filtration plant sold to Ha Loi. With relief, I noted that he was well educated, smart, and talked good business with no ostentation or false piety.



Fr Phong. A Saigon local boy with good business sense and no ostentation or false piety.

In order to get firm quotes for the chapel contents, I visited woodcarving suppliers and a workshop in Saigon.

I discussed the problems of the expenditure spiral of the orphanage extensions with Fr Phong, a Saigon local and with Fr Luke Tran, a Vietnamese fund-raiser from New Jersey, USA. They both sounded frustrated with the Quang Binh village expenditure phenomenon. Whatever was drawn up, they said, locals would want to add expensive embellishments to it so it would be *dep* - and more expensive than the allocated donations.

The poorer the village community, it seems, the more likely they were to take money from the orphanage for some outward show of lavish church building, to compete with the neighbouring village.

The basic advice was, if local people (which included the client, as he came from the same village) couldn't stick to budget, to take the donation elsewhere, like Cambodia or

Laos. There were plenty of other places that needed money and would respect a donation.

Fr Phong suggested we keep to normal commercial tendering practice for the church contents. I would prepare a specification and people would provide competitive tenders for the items. This was a welcome relief from the “mateship” approach in the village, which usually included a big show of food hospitality and a “movable feast” of anticipated future expense for the project.

I visited several suppliers and prepared a spec, using sketches and photographs from the visit. The woodcarving work is stunning in its skill. The woodcarvers can produce anything in any style or size or level of elaboration. It is simply a matter of customer demand.



Range of impressive woodcarving on display in the showroom.



Hand carving a station of the cross, with the original template in front for comparison.



Wood carvings in storage at various stages of production from rough-outs to polished statues.



Workshop of counterfeit mediaeval statues destined for the European market.



Fr Phong in the showroom, talking products and prices. In the end, we decided to follow standard commercial practice and go to tender.

Fr Phong is a Saigon local boy. He seemed most happy on motorbike, weaving through back alleys of the city while making mobile phone calls and occasionally taking short cuts through head-on traffic. Hair-raising for me. He also meets monthly with a few of his former uni colleagues: genuine people, good mates and no false piety about them. I asked him how he rides after a few drinks: "I don't ride. I fly!"



Former uni colleagues have a small party every month to stay in touch.



A mate concentrates on a mobile phone call

I later found out that Fr Phong's father is bed-ridden and paralysed from a stroke, and that his mother was in hospital. She had mangled her foot in the spokes of a motorbike. His sister is the night carer and he is the day carer. He had sacrificed precious time and energy to accommodate me and I was happy to visit his mother in hospital.

I also had the joy of visiting the young sisters of the order, six of them from the village of Huong Phuong. They are basically a student household, temporarily occupying a cheap rental house. Nine sisters normally live in the household, although some were away on Tet holiday visits to family.

We rode bicycles through Saigon to buy food at the market, which the sisters cooked into a feast. These are smart and hard working girls, who will some day be theologians and medical doctors. Hopefully, the future leaders of their monastic community.



Hospitality from the young sisters in Saigon.



Selecting produce at the local market.



Sang, a French-speaking monk who was my guide and interpreter when I left Ba don until I flew out of Saigon. My school-French from 30 years ago got some revision.



The sisters in Saigon prepare a big lunch in the kitchen of their rental house. They are all from Huong Phuong village.

I had some last frustrating phone conversations with my client and the sisters at Huong

Phuong about the project: the need for a structural engineer's report; about gaps in the drawing documentation; about the spiralling budget. Nobody seemed able to make a decision. They seemed to be in some sort of paralysis, waiting for someone in authority (i.e. someone else in the Qhang Binh Catholic network, the Confucian hierarchy) to tell them what to do next.

I flew out of Saigon the following day.