

Laura Victoir and Victor Zatsépine (eds), Harbin to Hanoi: The Colonial Built Environment in Asia, 1840 to 1940

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DOI

[10.4000/abe.3071](https://doi.org/10.4000/abe.3071)

Publication date

2016

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

ABE Journal

Citation (APA)

van Roosmalen, P. (2016). Laura Victoir and Victor Zatsépine (eds), Harbin to Hanoi: The Colonial Built Environment in Asia, 1840 to 1940. *ABE Journal*, 2016(9-10), 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.4000/abe.3071>

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ABE Journal

Architecture beyond Europe

9-10 | 2016 :

Dynamic Vernacular

Comptes rendus de lecture

Laura Victoir and Victor Zatssepine (eds), *Harbin to Hanoi: The Colonial Built Environment in Asia, 1840 to 1940*

Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013

PAULINE K. M. VAN ROOSMALEN

Entrées d'index

Index de mots-clés : environnement construit, architecture, planification urbaine, histoire

Index by keyword : built environment, architecture, planning, history

Indice de palabras clave : medio edificado, arquitectura, planificación urbana, historia

Schlagwortindex : Gebaute Umwelt, Architektur, Planung, Geschichte

Parole chiave : ambiente edificato, architettura, progettazione, storia

Index géographique : Asie de l'Est

Index chronologique : XIXe siècle, XXe siècle

Texte intégral

- ¹ In 2013 Hong Kong University Press published *Harbin to Hanoi: The Colonial Built Environment in Asia, 1840 to 1940*. This book is the outcome of an international workshop hosted at the University of Hong Kong in June 2010, and is the third publication in KHU Press' series "Global Connections" that aims to explore "the dynamics of change" through analysing and discussing "the movement of ideas, people, technologies, capital and goods across national and regional borders". Considering its title, introduction and the titles of its chapters, the book suggests that architecture and planning are its primary object of research.
- ² Since its first publication in 2012, the Global Connections series has produced books on contemporary graphic narratives that depict Asian Americans and Asians;

Abrahamic cultures in predominantly Muslim, Christian, Jewish or secular societies; encounters between China and the United States from the 1780s until 1899; Sino-European relations; fashion and modern advertising in China; and feminism and women's movements in Hong Kong after 1997. To date, *Harbin to Hanoi* is the only book in the series that deals with aspects of the built environment.

- 3 *Harbin to Hanoi's* editors, Laura Victoir and Victor Zatsépine, set out to study and advance the virtually absent multidisciplinary dialogue and analysis of the "multiple experiences of colonial powers" in East Asia (p. 1). To achieve this, Victoir and Zatsépine have brought together work by historians on British, French, Russian, German, and Japanese "imperialism, colonial practice, and built forms" (p. 1) in Manchuria, China and Northern Indochina (Vietnam) between 1840 and 1940. By taking the reader on a geographical journey from Harbin to Hanoi via Changchun, Tianjin, Qingdao (previously Tsingtao or Tsingtau), Shanghai and Hong Kong, the book contains eleven essays that collectively discuss the book's three main themes: the interaction between colonial powers, the adaptations and accommodations made between different sides in the process of colonization, and the uncertainties of colonial and semi-colonial regimes.
- 4 The individual chapters discuss a variety of projects related to the development of architecture and planning. Victor Zatsépine begins with a detailed account of how the construction of railways by and from Imperial Russia influenced the development of the Russian colonial towns Harbin, Port Arthur (Lüshunkou) and Dalny (Dalian) in Manchuria from 1896 until 1930. The second and third chapter analyse developments in Manchukuo, the "puppet state" seized by Japan in 1931, until World War II. While Bill Sewell describes Japanese influences on the stylistic development of contemporary architecture in Manchukuo's capital Changchun, David Tucker sketches Manchukuo's simultaneous negotiations with Western governments and businesses and the involvement of French construction firm Brossard Mopin in Changchun's town plan and buildings.
- 5 After Manchuria and Manchukuo, chapters 5 through 9 are about China. The first two chapters recount the administrative and physical development of foreign concessions in Tianjin and Qingdao. In chapter five, Zhang Chang and Liu Yue analyse the heterogeneous influences of Austro-Hungarian, Belgian, German, British, French, German, Italian, Japanese and Russian authorities on the development of Tianjin. In the subsequent chapter on Qingdao, Klaus Mühlhahn describes how the German presence ordered and defined Qingdao socially and physically. Moving away from a focus on only the foreign concessions, Cole Roskam explores how real and imaged notions of uncertainty and danger influenced the lay-out and the architecture of the concessions and other parts of Shanghai in the mid-nineteenth century in chapter seven. In chapters eight and nine, Alex Bremner and Peter Cunich shift the attention to Hong Kong and two buildings: the Supreme Court and the University of Hong Kong. In Bremner and Cunich's chapters, the making of both buildings demonstrate the many trials and tribulations involved in commissioning, funding, designing and executing institutes and ideologies from Europe to what in many respects was a non-European environment.
- 6 The last three chapters discuss projects in French Indochina's capital Hanoi. In chapter 10, Lisa Drummond analyses contemporary newspapers to expose the thoughts and aspirations of French inhabitants regarding Hanoi's urban fabric. In the following chapter, Laura Victoir describes how medical findings about the cause of diseases and tropical hygiene informed the way the Hanoi administration handled the city's public health and housing. In the third and last chapter on Hanoi, Danielle Labbé, Caroline Herbelin and Quang-Vinh Dao examine how French trained Vietnamese architects in the first half of the twentieth century were instrumental in the development of a new, hybrid housing typology to meet the demands of the evolving Vietnamese middle-class.
- 7 Thanks to the authors' varied disciplinary, methodological, and linguistic proficiencies (architecture, planning, architectural history, history, philosophy, human geography; British, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Russian), the book adopts a welcomed multi-disciplinary approach. The result is a kaleidoscopic perspective on and

account of the varied political, economic, cultural, ideological, technical, climatic, and topographical circumstances that shaped the commission, design and execution of buildings and town plans in three East Asia countries from 1840 until 1940.

8 The geographical arrangement of the chapters, rather than the thematic arrangement of the papers at the 2010-workshop, is interesting but also a little “easy”. The interesting aspect is that it helps to think outside traditional disciplinary boxes. As the chapters’ titles are the only clue to go by, and most titles refer to a building or planning project in a particular city, the reader starts fairly neutral. This all works fine, until a few chapters into the book one notices that most of the authors treat the built environment more as a secondary rather than primary topic. It is at this point that the reader starts to feel the need for more guidance through the book—particularly when one is expecting to engage with a book that deals with buildings and town planning as tools on their own merits, not merely as tools to analyse and illustrate political and economic developments.

9 The feeling that the book is not exactly what one expects is based on its title and introduction, namely a book about the built environment, is confirmed by the limited descriptions and analyses of buildings and town plans, the lack of references between images and several chapters, and the questionable relevance and quality of a fair number of images and captions. For anybody interested in the history of buildings and town plans, these “flaws” hint at a different professional “gaze”. For anybody interested in architecture and planning or, if you will, the built environment, text and images are intrinsically connected. As this connection in at least half the chapters seems fairly loose—one chapter has no images at all—the book raises the suspicion that the built environment is more a means to an end rather than an end in itself. This perhaps should have been made clear at the beginning of the book, starting with the title?

10 If Victoir and Zatsepine edited this multidisciplinary and transnational compilation of studies on the built environment because “colonial built forms” need to be framed in historical circumstances and human activities in order to avoid becoming “silent symbols of a colonial past, mere skeletons without flesh and soul, devoid of the stories of human drama behind them” (p. 275–6), the book is original, rich, and inspirational. If they aimed at compiling a book on architecture and planning in East Asia though, the book is less convincing. This by no means diminishes the book’s relevance, it only questions the editors’ ambition, and consequently the book’s objective and title.

11 A final observation concerns Victoir and Zatsepine’s interpretation of the term “colonial”. Considering the ongoing political sensitivities regarding many countries’ colonial past, the differences in the ways European countries and Japan ruled parts of East Asia, and the fact that most of China’s coast “was never formally colonized”, their use of “colonial” to indicate the “unequal treaties and power dynamics” between foreigners and locals (p. 7), although accurate in general terms, to my mind does not completely do justice to the intricacies of foreign rule in East Asia.

12 Overall though, the book brings together an interesting selection of fundamental, in-depth, detailed and highly informative studies. The “variety of colonial projects” (p. 3) presented makes *Harbin to Hanoi* an noteworthy read for anybody interested in “the uneasy relationship between imperial powers and Asian societies” in East Asia between 1840 and 1940 (p. 276).

Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

Pauline K. M. van Roosmalen, « Laura Victoir and Victor Zatsepine (eds), *Harbin to Hanoi: The Colonial Built Environment in Asia, 1840 to 1940* », *ABE Journal* [En ligne], 9-10 | 2016, mis en ligne le 28 décembre 2016, consulté le 19 janvier 2017. URL : <http://abe.revues.org/3071>

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Droits d'auteur



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