

# Remembering Within a Sacred Space in Vientiane

by Rafael Martinez<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Taking as a subject the Unknown Soldier's Monument in Vientiane, I aim to explore dimensions of the past in modern-day Lao PDR. The goal is twofold. First, by analyzing the mix of common communist features with Buddhist shapes, I propose to examine the monument as a public, iconographic assertion of the current regime's legitimacy. The second goal is to link the regime's assertion of legitimacy to the particular space in which the monument was built. In addition to selecting clear Buddhist patterns, the Lao government chose to construct the monument within what is arguably the most sacred space in the country. In the 1990s, despite the debacle of communism, the Lao regime decided not only to continue to abide by this ideology, but also to renovate the external expression of its communist position by combining it with elements of the local culture (e.g., Theravada Buddhism) within sacred spaces.

Keywords: *Ban* That Luang; collective memory; monument; sacred space; Theravada Buddhism; Vientiane

## Introduction

On January 20, 1994, National Army Day, high-profile authorities formally inaugurated the Unknown Soldier's Monument in Vientiane, the capital of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). Located in the village (*ban*) of That Luang,<sup>2</sup> the monument was meant to memorialize the Pathet Lao who died during the Thirty-Year Struggle (1945–1975).<sup>3</sup> The monument was initially located at the intersection of Nongbone Street and Kaysone Phomvihane Avenue. However, redevelopment works held in the *ban* That Luang area in August 2008, necessitated the dismantling of the

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<sup>2</sup> In the 1990s, it was estimated that Vientiane city encompassed almost 1,500 square kilometers of wetlands, of which That Luang was the largest. At the time, such wetlands provided the city and its inhabitants with fisheries and flood control. See: P. Gerrard, *Integrating Wetland Ecosystem Values into Urban Planning: The Case of That Luang Marsh, Vientiane, Lao PDR* (Vientiane: IUCN – The World Conservation Union Asia Regional Environmental Economics Programme and WWF Lao Country Office, 2004), 6.

<sup>3</sup> The communist movement Pathet Lao (Country or Land of the Lao) uses this term “to describe the period of revolutionary warfare from 1945, when the revolutionary Left in Laos took up arms against the French, until 1974, when the Kingdom of Laos was replaced by the Lao People's Democratic Republic” See: M. Stuart-Fox, *Historical Dictionary of Laos* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2008), 346.

monument and its relocation South west of the National Assembly, where it was re-unveiled on January 20, 2009 (see appendix B: figure 5).

Much like those of the National Assembly, the architectural and decorative elements of the Unknown Soldier's Monument in Vientiane are characterized by what might be considered the "traditional style" in Lao PDR. That is to say, both the National Assembly and the Unknown Soldier's Monument use superimposed platforms and nature-inspired decoration (see appendix B: figure 4; appendix D: figures 4 and 5). Nevertheless, unlike the geometrical rigidity of the National Assembly, and very much in opposition to the style commonly used to build monuments of this genre,<sup>4</sup> the Unknown Soldier's Monument in Vientiane was built on the basis of what is clearly a Lao Theravada Buddhist design.

The monument consists of seven superimposed quadrangular platforms that decrease in size as they ascend. The uppermost platform is crowned by a cube-shaped base on which rests an empty structure called a *stupa* (reliquary), inside of which might be placed the mortal remains of a soldier. The stupa is topped by a five-pointed golden star. The external façades of the platforms forming the monument are also decorated. The upper-level platforms are adorned with lotus-like petals, and the mid-level platforms feature flower-like panels crowned by plaster *Bodhi* tree leaves that frame an anthropomorphic Buddhist-style representation (see appendix C: figure 1). Finally, the ground level platform is covered with bas-reliefs representing historic Lao PDR episodes (see appendix B: figure 3). Exactly in the middle of this lower level is embedded another five-pointed golden star, the center of which is a cauldron where the flame that symbolizes the memory of the Unknown Soldier continues to burn (see appendix C: figure 3). With the exception of the upper-most level, where the stupa is located, visitors can walk along the different levels of the monument and view its surrounding environment, which is dominated by the National Assembly, as well as the seat of the Lao PDR Buddhist Patriarch, and, in particular, the golden stupa of That Luang – arguably the most sacred monument in the whole of Lao PDR (see appendix D: figures 7 and 8).

This article aims to respond to the following questions: *Why did the Lao PDR regime, given its communist affiliation, order the construction of a civic monument based on a design almost entirely Buddhist in style and appearance? Why has the Lao PDR government of the past two decades steadily undertaken the construction of official (secular) facilities within what is possibly the most sacred space in the country?*

I argue that the hybridization of Buddhist-influenced architectural design and decoration with communist iconography, as evidenced by the Unknown Soldier's Monument – a building conceived to host and represent secular rites – derives from a quest for legitimacy by the Lao state. This quest has intensified since the fall of communism in Europe. Further, I suggest that in order to achieve legitimacy, the Lao PDR government has undertaken its own strategic "insertion into the past" via the adoption of sacred spaces such as ban That Luang (see appendix G).

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<sup>4</sup> In different parts of the world, the unknown soldiers' monuments tend to be designed based on an abstract architectural line. Cf. M. Evans and K. Lunn, *War and Memory in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Berg Publishers, 1997).

In order to substantiate this position, in this article I discuss material manifestations of collective memory (monuments) within the sacred space of ban That Luang. On the basis of theoretical and historical analysis, I examine two cases: the Unknown Soldier's Monument and the That Luang or Great Stupa. I observe these monuments from three perspectives: *shape* (the form of the monument); *space* (how this monument affects the space where it is located); and what I call *metaspace* (how the space surrounding the monument affects a larger, namely national, context).

The article is divided into four sections. In the first, I discuss the theoretical and symbolic relevance of secular and religious monuments. In this section, on the basis of an *ad hoc* theoretical framework, I present the synergetic relationship between *shape* (form), *space*, and *metaspace*. I argue that the relationship between these elements has been possible thanks to how the collective memory has been historically manifested within ban That Luang. In the second section, I discuss the relevance of Buddhist stupas to collective memory. Then, by observing the historical use of the space surrounding That Luang, I discuss the idea of space within ban That Luang and suggest that, by undertaking the construction of official facilities within this space in the past two decades, the Lao government has reoriented its position, transforming itself from guest to host of That Luang's sacred space. In order to demonstrate this point in the final section, I examine first the issue of the legitimacy of *metaspace* in Lao PDR. The last half of this section is a return to the point of departure: the Unknown Soldier's Monument. Designed in a Lao Theravada Buddhist style, the monument, besides functioning as a stage for civic ceremonies, serves educational/ideological purposes. Nevertheless, unlike Buddhist monuments where education is achieved by means of the *decodification* of abstract elements embedded in the building's bas-reliefs, the Unknown Soldier's Monument offers a simplified (and causal) version of national history, allowing the visitor to understand and connect the Lao PDR regime to the nation's past, thereby granting legitimacy to the regime's rule.

## I. Monuments and the Spectrum of Spatial Power

"Monuments are ... only possible in periods in which a unifying consciousness and unifying culture exist"<sup>5</sup>

In his quintessential work on space, Henri Lefebvre explains that human beings do not merely inherit space from their ancestors; rather, space is something produced and reproduced. Thus, space is not just an "empty area."<sup>6</sup> It is:

a setting in that it is the obvious base upon which all activity must occur, but it is more than that. Architecture, human densities, locational relations are a force in structuring what can be done in space itself. Space contains more than we ordinarily appreciate. A space is thus neither merely a medium nor a list of ingredients, but an interlinkage of geographic form, built

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<sup>5</sup> Sert, Léger, and Giedon as cited By Siegfried Giedon. Siegfried Giedon, *Architecture, you and me: The diary of a development*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 48.

<sup>6</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 1.

environment, symbolic meanings, and routines of life. Ways of being and physical landscapes are of a piece, albeit one filled with tensions and competing versions of what a space should be.<sup>7</sup>

An example of the spatial tensions referred to by Lefebvre takes place when establishing a boundary between what Mircea Eliade called *the sacred* and *the profane*.<sup>8</sup> Generally speaking, secular (profane) spaces are those “whose primary characteristics are not essentially religious in nature.”<sup>9</sup> Unlike the secular, the sacred space is one “whose primary characteristics are defined in explicitly religious terms by the people who recognize and use the space, either materially or symbolically.”<sup>10</sup> In order to effectively use sacred spaces, that is to say, to reproduce the sacredness, people require a material seat or places within space. These places can be natural (caves, forests, grottos, etc.), but places can also be built expressly for religious purposes, such as temples, monasteries, or monuments.

In its most basic sense, according to Alois Riegl, “a monument is a work of man erected for the specific purpose of keeping particular human deeds or destinies (or a complex accumulation thereof) alive and present in the consciousness of future generations.”<sup>11</sup> Although there could exist a wide range of motivations to build monuments, the common feature among all of them is that they consist of spatial representations of collective memory. Young noted that, “by creating common spaces for memory, monuments propagate the illusion of common memory.”<sup>12</sup> According to Halbwachs, memory is collective because “it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, memory permits people to interpret the past and, in so doing, grants it meaning and values, which then become a part of a people’s collective identity. One way to link collective memory to monuments is by means of their forms or shapes. As spatial representations of memory, monuments possess particular features that make them stand out in space.

From a semiotic perspective, monuments “have signs of their ideological functions written all over them: they signify their function as use.”<sup>14</sup> These signs could be expressed in the size of various structural features, such as windows, doors, columns,

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<sup>7</sup> Harvey Molotch, “The Space of Lefebvre,” review of *The Production of Space* by Henri Lefebvre, *Theory and Society* 22, no. 6 (1993), 888.

<sup>8</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1959), 14.

<sup>9</sup> R. Stump, *The Geography of Religion: Faith, Place, and Space* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 24.

<sup>10</sup> Stump, *Geography of Religion*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Alois Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Essence and Its Development,” in *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, eds. Nicholas Stanley Price, Mansfield Kirby Talley, and Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1996), 69.

<sup>12</sup> James E. Young, “Memory/Monument” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 237.

<sup>13</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 38.

<sup>14</sup> Michael O’Toole, *The Language of Displayed Art* (Cranbury: Fairleigh University Press, 1994), 85.

or even the span of roofs. On the iconographic plane, religious monuments and politically motivated monuments use symbols that facilitate not only the identification of the subject of remembrance but also the identification of the one convening such remembrance. From the point of view of semiotics, the distinction between religious and political monuments is associated with their respective degree of abstraction. For instance, political monuments tend to privilege the use of statues in order to remember heroic deeds, whereas religious monuments tend to use abstract symbols (e.g., crosses and crescents). This distinction between religious and political monuments might be linked to their respective “target population.” Whereas religious monuments seek to strengthen the idea of a *metaethnic* (beyond ethnicity) religious community, political monuments seek to strengthen the idea of a community beyond religious and ethnic identification. Thus, with the rise of nationalism, political monuments started to incorporate expressions of collective memory, enabling people to connect with one another and thereby link themselves to people they do not know. That is to say, monuments became instruments for the construction of imagined communities.<sup>15</sup>

As has already been mentioned, the boundaries between the sacred and the profane are difficult to establish. To different extents, nationalist monuments become sacred, whereas religious monuments are, in certain ways, “secularized” in order to deal with the complex cohabitation resulting from strong national ideologies (which could even be religious). Despite this, it would hardly be possible to consider the space occupied by nationalist monuments as “sacred.” As Young writes:

[T]he sacredness of the monument’s space derives from a public’s willing complicity in the monument’s essential illusion. That is, monuments depend on the public for their very lives: as long as the public shares a regime’s desire for permanence or its formal self-idealizations, it suspends disbelief in the monument’s own impermanence and this makes the regime’s monument its own sacred space.<sup>16</sup>

*How valid is this statement for Vientiane, the capital of Lao PDR?* I propose to observe the case of a particular sacred space: ban That Luang. In the past two decades, the Lao PDR regime has undertaken the construction of a number of secular buildings within this sacred space. In this context, I wonder: *how deep is the insertion of the profane into the sacred in ban That Luang? What makes That Luang sacred? How might this sacred appeal have lured the secular Lao PDR regime?* In the following sections I shall respond to these questions by examining the interaction of *shape* (spatial representations of collective memory) and *space* in ban That Luang. Finally, I will discuss how this space containing representations of memory (*metaspace*) influences a broader context in Lao PDR.

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<sup>15</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Young, “Memory/Monument,” 244.

## II. Buddhist Monuments and the Power of their Shape

Buddhism originated more than 2,500 years ago in the northeastern part of what is now India. Some years after its founding, Buddhism spread, covering great expanses of south, southeast, and eastern Asia. Historically, a crucial factor enabling the global diffusion of Buddhism was the role of King Ashoka (304–232 BC). In addition to being a brilliant military leader and ruler, after embracing Buddhism, Ashoka committed himself to spreading the message of Gautama Buddha to different parts of the world. He sought to spread Buddhism by sponsoring the Buddhist *sangha* and by constructing stupas. However, stupas were more than just an expression of Ashoka's piety; they were also material referents that served to indicate the presence of Buddhism within some spaces.

The word stupa comes from Pali (*thúpa*), derived from the root *stúp* ("to heap").<sup>17</sup> Stupa is generally translated as "reliquary," owing to its funerary connection. In pre-Buddhist times, the ashes of the dead were retrieved from the funeral pyre and placed inside these containers. According to Mitra, stupas may be grouped into four categories: *saririka* (containing corporeal relics not only of the Buddha but also his disciples); *paribhogika* (containing objects used by the Buddha); *uddesika* (memorial), and votive.<sup>18</sup> The first stupas that Ashoka had constructed throughout South and Southeast Asia would be categorized as *saririka*, for they are said to have contained relics of Gautama Buddha.

Consistent with the increasing number of Buddhist converts, stupas were not only spatial manifestations of Buddhism, they were also places that attracted visitors who congregated at these places in order to conduct symbolic rituals in remembrance of the Buddha. Memorial or votive stupas, therefore, became what Pierre Nora calls *mémoire réelle* (true memory). According to Nora, *true memory* can be passed on by oral history, ritual acts, or ceremonies. Unlike what Nora designates *lieux de mémoire* (realms of memory) – museums, archives, cemeteries, shrines, and memorials<sup>19</sup> – true memory derives from cultural manifestations, not from something man-made.

A particular feature characterizing Buddhist stupas is associated with the symbolism of their shape. Reynolds notes that "the monument (stupa) concretizes metaphysical principles and generates multivalent meanings in ways that can be articulated with literary texts and other architectural forms."<sup>20</sup> Though Reynolds ascribes meanings attributed to stupas as multivalent, with respect to their form, we could summarize the importance of stupas by focusing on two main uses. First, as "spatial references,"<sup>21</sup> stupas serve as geographical points which believers identify

<sup>17</sup> Debala Mitra, *Buddhist Monuments* (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1971), 21.

<sup>18</sup> Mitra, "Buddhist monuments," 21.

<sup>19</sup> Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire I: La république* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), xxiv.

<sup>20</sup> Craig Reynolds. Preface to *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, by Adrian Snodgrass (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1985), i.

<sup>21</sup> Sadalla et al. argue that landmarks, as spatial references, are "points that serve as the basis for the spatial location of other (nonreference) points" Edward K. Sadalla, W. Jeffrey Burroughs and Lorin J. Staplin, "Reference points in spatial cognition" *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Learning and Memory* 6, no. 5 (1980), 516.

within space as places where they can practice their religion and meet with their peers. Second, as educational sites, stupas' use could be observed from a twofold perspective: From the abstract, that is, through the *decodification* of symbols embedded in stupas; and from a material perspective, for instance, through the *reading* of bas-reliefs embedded in the pedestal of the stupa.<sup>22</sup> By these two means, believers are able to learn more about their faith while simultaneously strengthening their bond with other believers.

An additional aspect associated with Buddhist monuments, unlike those reviewed above, is related to the *profane*. For instance, the importance of these monuments transformed the places hosting them into important commercial hubs. In this way, in just a few years, these places became important from a political perspective to rulers who sought to control these monuments and to dominate the spaces surrounding them. The goal was not only to gain profane (economic) advantage, but also to establish legitimacy derived from their custody of sacredness.

### III. Ban That Luang and the Negotiation of its Space within Vientiane

Ban That Luang (or That Luang village) is an urban area located in the Sisattanak district in northeastern Vientiane. It constitutes an urban space containing permanent and temporary structures designed for the performance of both secular and spiritual activities.

On the spiritual side, That Luang village houses *wats* or monasteries, which have two basic functions: education and ritual performance. The Luang Neua and the That Luang Tai are the most important of these monasteries. Apart from That Luang Neua – the residence of the Buddhist Supreme Patriarch of Lao PDR (*Pha Sangkhalat*), where major works have recently been undertaken – these *wats*, together with the That Luang or Great Stupa, are the oldest constructions in the area (see appendix D: figures 1 and 6).

The historical origin of the Great Stupa, also known as *Phra Chedi Lokacûlâmani*,<sup>23</sup> has not yet been clearly identified. However, a popular story dates the *That's* construction to the third century BCE, and, as the story has it, That Luang is now located at the site where Ashoka ordered the construction of a stupa containing one of the Buddha's relics. After moving the capital of the kingdom of Lan Xang (1560) from Luang Prabang to Vientiane, King Setthathirath<sup>24</sup> undertook the construction of several Buddhist buildings.<sup>25</sup> Although Ashoka is acknowledged as the builder of the original

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<sup>22</sup> An example of this kind of temple is Candi Borobudur in Central Java, Indonesia. Besides a profuse representation of Buddha images covered by stupas, the walls of this temple are covered with bas-reliefs portraying historical passages of Gautama Buddha's life and teachings. Bas-reliefs in Borobudur, however, are not limited to religious purposes. Some levels of the monument also depict aspects of political and everyday life during the time of Sailendra's dynasty (c. 8<sup>th</sup> CE).

<sup>23</sup> In Pali this means "the majestic reliquary, precious summit of the world."

<sup>24</sup> King Setthathirath was ruler of Lan Xang's kingdom between 1548 and 1571. In 1560 he moved the capital of the kingdom to Vientiane where, in 1566, That Luang was built.

<sup>25</sup> In 1565, Setthathirath ordered the construction of another important temple for housing the Jewel Buddha (Emerald Buddha or *Phra Keo*).

stupa, its foundational stele indicates that That Luang acquired its shape under the rule of King Setthathirath (see appendix A).<sup>26</sup>

The monument of That Luang comprises three levels. The wall surrounding the lower two is topped by battlements. Thirty small stupas symbolizing the Buddhist virtues (*palami*) surround the first one (see appendix A: figure 5). At the top level, ringed by lotus petals, rises the *That* (see appendix A: figures 1–3).

The Lao term *that* is translated as “a monument containing a corporal relic.” As in other parts of the Buddhist world, in Lao PDR, the importance of *thats* is based on both doctrinal and semiotic issues. At the doctrinal level, “the *thats* are not just symbols or the [physical] support of a cult. They are also places where are exerted particular and complex forces coming from relics, consecration rites, the essence acting as doctrine canon (*dhamma*) and the local protective forces (god or genie) as well.”<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, at the semiotic level, the importance of *thats* derives not only from their architectural representations of the Buddha, it also derives from summarizing and expressing the idea of unity. This unity is symbolically achieved by means of “decodifying” That Luang’s architecture. That Luang pilgrims *materially* decodify the idea of unity by circumvallating the temple and, from an *abstract* perspective, by contemplating and understanding the meaning of the symbols embedded in the temple’s architecture.

The importance of architecture and the decodification of some of the symbols embedded in it has already been discussed by some scholars.<sup>28</sup> Referring, for instance, to the case of Borobudur in Central Java, Miksic proposed the existence of a linkage between enlightenment and the temple’s design. Used as a *device* to “accelerate spiritual progress,”

Borobudur’s structure required pilgrims to walk ten times around the monument in order to view the reliefs in sequence, all the while gradually moving upward, thus symbolically retracing the steps of bodhisattvas who had attained enlightenment by successfully passing through the ten stages of existence.<sup>29</sup>

The religious importance of That Luang is not concentrated solely in the monument; it also extends to its surrounding space. At the beginning of every year, between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> day of the Buddhist calendar, *boun That Luang*, the most important religious festival in the whole of Lao PDR, takes place. For three days, ritual activities – such as processions (*prasat pheung*), offerings (*takbat*), and traditional games (*tikhee*) – bring Lao together around religious buildings such as That Luang. Venerating the Buddha or giving alms to the monks, as well as worshiping the guardian

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<sup>26</sup> Its current appearance dates back to the 1930s when French archaeologists undertook a second major restoration.

<sup>27</sup> F. Engelmann, *Le That Luang de Vientiane : symbole de la nation Lao*. (Vientiane: Éditions du Vientiane Times, 1995), 12-13.

<sup>28</sup> For a fuller discussion of the linkage between architecture and enlightenment in Buddhism, with particular reference to South Asia, see D.P. Leidy. and R.A.F. Thurman, *Mandala: The architecture of Enlightenment* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997).

<sup>29</sup> J. Miksic, *Borobudur: Golden Tales of the Buddhas* (Jakarta: Periplus Editions, 1996), 48.

spirit of Vientiane (*lak muang*)<sup>30</sup> or surrounding the stupa (*pradaksina*),<sup>31</sup> Vientianers and Lao people from all over the country get together in That Luang.<sup>32</sup>

Lao government officials stand out at these ceremonies. By paying homage to the *tripitaka* (Buddhist canons), by addressing a prayer to the That Luang, or by accepting the Five Precepts of Buddhism,<sup>33</sup> the highest ranking Lao authorities carry out an essential role in boun That Luang. According to some scholars, essential Lao-Buddhist constructions related to power “were [traditionally] reiterated in a series of annual ceremonies.”<sup>34</sup> However, the presence of the Lao government in ban That Luang has not been restricted to the performance of yearly religious activities by high-ranking officials. The space surrounding That Luang’s monument has become a temporary venue hosting activities such as exhibitions, trade fairs, markets, and music concerts sponsored by the state. In fact, the organization of secular events in That Luang has coincided with an increasingly permanent presence of the Lao government within this space.

In the past two decades, the central Lao government has ordered construction of a number of official buildings in That Luang village, just a few meters from the monument. However, two buildings of particular interest to this study were built within That Luang’s space during the 1990s. The first, the National Assembly (Hongkad Souvannavong, architect), was inaugurated in 1990. The building departed from the predominantly Soviet-inspired style previously used for official buildings, privileging an innovative design based on a geometrical interpretation of traditional and local decorative motifs. The second building is the Unknown Soldier’s Monument, originally unveiled in 1994. The relevance of this particular construction resides in the fact that it synthesizes two apparently conflicting natures. Designed as a Buddhist stupa, the Unknown Soldier’s Monument was conceived to stage secular rituals pertaining to nationhood.

Containing both secular and religious buildings and periodically staging both secular and religious activities, ban That Luang, since the 1990s, has become *the* symbol used by the Lao government to represent the nation (see appendix D: figure 3). In the final section of this article, observing ban That Luang’s space, I propose to identify some historical facts that may have facilitated the transformation of That Luang into a national symbol in recent times. In this section, too, observing the Unknown Soldier’s Monument as an official building located within ban That Luang, I examine and discuss

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<sup>30</sup> The city’s foundational stele is located at the monastery of Si Muang, in Vientiane’s city center. Among Tai cultures, in order to commemorate the creation of a city, temples housing phallic sculptures containing the guardian of the city were built (Lak Muang).

<sup>31</sup> In Pali: “advancing towards the south”: a Buddhist rite consisting of walking around an image, a place, or even around a whole region considered sacred. While performing this rite, the individual draws a circle of virtues.

<sup>32</sup> M. Zago, *Rites et cérémonies en milieu Bouddhiste Lao*. (Roma: Università Gregoriana Editrice, 1972) 326-336.

<sup>33</sup> Basic principles accepted by main Buddhist sects including Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism: *To abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxication.*

<sup>34</sup> Martin Stuart-Fox, “Marxism and Theravada Buddhism: The Legitimation of Political Authority in Laos,” *Pacific Affairs* 56, no.3 (1983), 429.

the official motivations behind the regime's attempt to insert its image into this urban space (see appendix G).

#### **IV. The Unknown Soldier's Monument: Memorializing Lao PDR's Past from the *Metaspace***

##### **Legitimacy and power in Lao PDR**

Before the 1990s, the national image in Lao PDR was characterized by its use of communist symbols, such as the hammer and sickle. However, in 1991, the Lao government suppressed not only these symbols but also expunged the word "socialism" from the original emblem, inserting the new inscription, "*Peace, Independence, Democracy, Unity, Prosperity*" and a new iconographic element – the That Luang<sup>35</sup> (see appendix D: figure 3).

Transformed into a national symbol, ban That Luang no longer derives its importance exclusively from hosting the most sacred Buddhist monument in the whole of Lao PDR. As a national symbol, ban That Luang has in fact become a *metaspace* that symbolically contains both the country and people of Lao PDR. I argue that the monument's importance as a *metaspace* resides in the fact that it provides legitimacy to the Lao regime following the fall of communism in Europe in the 1990s. Further, I argue that the legitimacy of this *metaspace* derives from the particular spatial practices that the place has historically hosted, which the state "sponsors" by inserting itself physically within this space. Next, in explanation of this argument, I present an overview of the issue of legitimacy in Lao PDR and its connection with the ban That Luang space.

Discussing the issue of legitimacy as it relates to the Lan Xang kingdom (historical background of the Lao modern state), Stuart-Fox writes:

[L]egitimation of power rested on the legitimation of kingship. Such legitimation comprised two elements: one was descent of the royal line from Khun Borom, mythical ancestor of the Lao people, and the other was provided by Buddhism. The king had the right to officiate at the rituals essential to maintain the prosperity and security of the kingdom. In carrying out those duties, the king established his right to rule in the eyes of the people. But in addition Lao Buddhists accepted the king's legitimate right to rule because they believed he had the necessary merit. The king added to his merit by giving generously to the *Sangha* and endowing temples.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> According to Article 90, Chapter 10 of the Lao National Constitution: "The National Emblem of the Lao People's Democratic Republic is a circle depicting in the bottom part one-half of a cog wheel and red ribbon with inscriptions [of the words] 'Lao People's Democratic Republic,' and [flanked by] crescent-shaped stalks of fully ripened rice at both sides and red ribbons bearing the inscription 'Peace, Independence, Democracy, Unity, Prosperity'. A picture of That Luang Pagoda is located between the tips of the stalks of rice. A road, a paddy field, a forest, and a hydroelectric dam are depicted in the middle of the circle." (Art. 10: Lao National Constitution).

Source: [http://www.na.gov.la/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=36&Itemid=61&lang=en](http://www.na.gov.la/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=36&Itemid=61&lang=en) .

<sup>36</sup> Martin Stuart-Fox, *Historical Dictionary of Laos* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2008), 196-7.

Many centuries later, after seizing power, the communists in Lao PDR sought to legitimate their own rule, claiming “to exercise a dictatorship of the proletariat on behalf of all working Lao.” However, “as the ideological appeal of Marxism–Leninism waned, the regime turned increasingly to nationalism and religion as a means of legitimizing its monopoly hold on power.”<sup>37</sup>

As Stuart-Fox confirms, since the 1990s the state of Lao PDR has undertaken a number of measures which have resulted in an increasing mix of secular and religious features within the framework of its ideological redesign. Owing to this religious association, the Lao government achieves legitimacy, for religion represents a bond linking citizens beyond their ethnic backgrounds. In the past two decades, one way the state has achieved this proximity to religion has been by participating in religious festivals. However, a crucial aspect in this linkage has been the spatial insertion of itself within the sacred space of That Luang.

In this context, perhaps wishing to emulate practices of rulers of the Lan Xang kingdom, the government in Lao PDR has in recent times not only inserted itself into That Luang’s space but has also built a Buddhist-like monument within this space: the Unknown Soldier’s Monument. The importance of this monument is linked not only to the space where it has been built but also to the particular features associated with its Buddhist design. Thanks to these particular features, the state is able to *create* a referent for collective memory among its citizens.

These features are intended to enact secular rituals, by means of which the state achieves legitimacy by framing its image within a *past tense* iconographic narrative.

### The Unknown Soldier’s Monument

The emergence of nation-states brought with it a series of secular rituals performed by their governments on a regular basis. The connection of these rituals with a *remote past* or *tradition* has become a strategy used by nation-state governments to deal with different issues linked to the legitimacy of their rule. One example of these secular rituals is the remembrance of the Unknown Soldier.<sup>38</sup>

Pierre Nora defined the *lieux de mémoire* (realms of memory) as “places where memory crystallizes and seeks refuge.”<sup>39</sup> According to Nora, realms of memory are born and live from the feeling that spontaneous memory does not exist. That is to say, “it is necessary to *create* archives, to celebrate anniversaries, to organize celebrations, to deliver funeral orations, to notarize certificates, since such processes are not natural.”<sup>40</sup> Further elaborating on his concept, Nora argues that realms of memory are places in three senses: material, symbolic, and functional.<sup>41</sup> Referring to Nora’s characteristics of realms of memory, semiologist David Scott explains:

<sup>37</sup> Stuart-Fox, *Historical Dictionary of Laos*, 197.

<sup>38</sup> E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 4.

<sup>39</sup> Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire*, xvii.

<sup>40</sup> Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire*, xxiv. [Italics added]

<sup>41</sup> Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire*, xxxiv.

They are material in the sense that they are objects, places or events in the real world that can be seen, heard, felt, or touched; they are symbolic in that they represent or stand for meanings of cultural, social, political, or historical import. Finally, they are functional in that they impact on the mental conceptions – memory, association, experience – of their perceiver or receiver.<sup>42</sup>

Much like Buddhist monuments, the Unknown Soldier's Monument in Vientiane is characterized by two particular features: its shape and the space where it is located. Placed just a few meters from the Great Stupa or That Luang, and built in clear Lao Theravada Buddhist style, it is no wonder that casual or foreign visitors mistake the Unknown Soldier's Monument for another sacred building. However, these characteristics have specific purposes that are understood by framing Nora's conceptions of memory within a semiotic perspective.

From a semiotic perspective, the choice of a stupa for the Unknown Soldier's Monument is connected to an ancient tradition. In pre-Buddhist times, when ascetics died, their bodies were seated on the ground and covered with earth. Inspired by this pre-Buddhist tradition, rulers like Ashoka ordered the construction of stupas containing relics of Gautama Buddha throughout different parts of South and Southeast Asia in an effort to spread Buddhism. Historically, therefore, a stupa – as well as the entire place (monument) where it was located – was likely to be regarded as sacred and thus become a pilgrimage destination and a site of devotional practice.<sup>43</sup> It should be noted, however, that consistent with the spread of Buddhism, the practice of storing the ashes from the funeral pyre inside a stupa was, over time, extended to ordinary people as well. In any case, by means of a stupa, the believer was able to connect his or her faith to a particular place within space by, figuratively speaking, conferring a more “tangible” form on an abstract representation of the Buddha.

From Nora's point of view, the choice of a *stupa* is connected with the physical nature of the monument. The Unknown Soldier's Monument can be touched (*material*); it symbolizes an anonymous national hero (*symbolic*). Moreover, it is *functional*, for it “impact[s] on the mental conceptions – memory, association, experience.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, the Unknown Soldier's Monument is a *realm of memory* because it does not evoke a spontaneous enactment of memory. The lack of a spontaneous evocation of memory resides in the fact that an individual is expected to identify an anonymous target (Unknown Soldier) during his or her evocation.

Memory in stupa-shaped monuments is characterized by the evocation of a recognizable target, meaning that, despite the abstraction, when seeing a stupa an individual is indeed “seeing” the shape of Buddha by means of what Sturken calls a *cultural memory*. According to Sturken, cultural memory is a “memory that is shared outside the avenues of formal historical discourse yet is entangled with cultural

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<sup>42</sup> David Scott, “The Semiotics of the *lieux de mémoire*: The Postage Stamp as a Site of Cultural Memory” *Semiotica* 142, no. 1 (2002), 108.

<sup>43</sup> J. Miksic, *Borobudur: Golden Tales of the Buddhas*, 5, 97.

<sup>44</sup> Scott, “Semiotics,” 108.

products and imbued with cultural meaning.”<sup>45</sup> Despite the failure to connect the monument to a particular target, the final choice of using a stupa to represent a secular (Unknown Soldier) monument could also be explained by the fact that “[C]ultural memory is not concerned with factual representation of the past, but rather must be seen as one among many strategies for the production and maintenance of identity of a people.”<sup>46</sup>

On the basis of what we have observed, the importance of cultural memory could explain why the Lao government used a Buddhist architectural design to shape a secular structure in the Unknown Soldier’s Monument in Lao PDR. Although, through cultural memory, the Lao state has not been able to connect Lao citizens with a secular symbol, another facet of this same form of memory might have provided the state with a successful outcome. I contend that the success of the Unknown Soldier’s Monument in Vientiane lies, in fact, in its *being a Buddhist monument without being a Buddhist monument*. That is to say, the accomplishment of the Unknown Soldier’s Monument lies in the fact that, without being a Buddhist monument, it is using the semiotic advantages of one.

Observed in detail, what stands out is that the monument’s shape is not exactly a Buddhist one. The Unknown Soldier’s Monument, unlike Buddhist monuments, is characterized by an oversimplification of its architectural lines (compare appendices B and A). Distinguished by their highly elaborate architectural semiotics, Buddhist monuments, besides being conceived as sites of remembrance of the Buddha, are also intended to serve educational purposes. By means of the *decodification* of abstract elements embedded in the building (e.g., columns and designs), the individual learns about the symbolic meaning of a particular building and, by doing so, strengthens his or her faith, as well as the bond with other believers (see appendix A: figures 2 and 4). Despite architectural differences, the Unknown Soldier’s Monument still relies on an iconographic resource used in some Buddhist monuments: bas-reliefs (see appendix B: figure 3).

Covering the ground-level platform, a number of these bas-reliefs describe national historical passages. Interestingly, however, because they lack a clear beginning and end, the bas-reliefs may create some confusion about the precise chronological order of Lao PDR’s history. Referring to problems associated with Lao historiography, Michel Lorillard notes,

The absence of [chronological] markers in the memories of a number of the peoples who share the Lao territories places them in history’s shadow, or even excludes them altogether. This is the case for practically all the ethnic minorities in Laos before the nineteenth century, but it is also the case for the Lao themselves before the 1300s.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> M. Sturken, *Tangled memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS epidemic, and the politics of remembering*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>46</sup> Hawley, *Remains of War*, 160.

<sup>47</sup> Michel Lorillard, “Lao History Revisited: Paradoxes and Problems in Current Research,” *South East Asia Research* 14, no. 3 (2006), 394.

The selection of historic passages may also pose a problem for the visitor, particularly from a chronological perspective. As in the architectural lines, the bas-reliefs on the monument arguably portray a rather oversimplified version of national history (see appendix E: figure 4). This oversimplification is characterized, for instance, by the iconographic stress on an almost imperceptible difference between the ethnic groups officially recognized (see appendix E: figure 5), but particularly by its causal expression of national history, which allows the visitor to understand and connect the Lao PDR regime to the nation's past (see appendix F: figure 3).

## Conclusions

In recent times, legitimacy has become a subject of anxiety for modern states. One way for a state to ensure its legitimacy is by preserving unity among the people it governs. Bringing people together around specific symbols is a means widely used by states to generate this sense of unity.

Before the 1975 Revolution, Buddhism and the monarchy were the basic symbols of the Lao state. Once in control of the government, the communists appealed to secular (international) symbols in order to bring the population together. Within the almost 240,000 square kilometers of Lao PDR, the communist regime officially identifies 49 different ethnic groups. Despite their number – and cultural complexities – all these ethnic groups are considered Lao (the nation's ethnic majority) and classified within a geographic-based category: *Lao Lum*, *Lao Theung*, and *Lao Soung* (Lowland Lao, Midland Lao, and Highland Lao, respectively).

Before the fall of communism in Europe, legitimacy had not been a dilemma for the Lao state. During this time, as in other communist countries, people were seen as the proletariat, and national governments represented the leadership guiding them towards their class emancipation. However, after the fall of European communism, Lao PDR was faced with the lack of both economic and ideological support; consequently, it undertook a complex program aimed at solidifying its legitimacy in the eyes of its people. In order to achieve this goal, the state focused on the creation of an idea of national community through which the people – looking beyond their specific and local ethnic identities – could consider themselves collectively as Lao.

With this goal in mind, the Lao state conceived the Unknown Soldier's Monument in Vientiane as a secular shrine capable of gathering the people of Laos – regardless of their different ethnic backgrounds – in order to share in the memory of the loss of loved ones during the Pathet Lao Revolution (1945-1975). By choosing a stupa to represent the Unknown Soldier, as is the case in other Buddhist funerary monuments, the Laotian government provided mourners of soldiers with a spatial “target” for their remembrance. By means of this target, mourners would not only remember their loved ones but would also participate in a (secular) ritual created by the state.

Unlike at conventional Buddhist monuments, however, by focusing their remembrance on the target of the Unknown Soldier, stupa mourners would not be conferring a more “tangible” form on an abstract representation of the Buddha; rather, they would confer a more “tangible” form on an abstract representation of a soldier who had not returned from the front. The anonymity of the mourned soldiers, I posit,

allows the state to insert its own image in the memory of Lao citizens while, perhaps more importantly, creating an idea of community. Referring to monuments aimed at memorializing war, Geoffrey White notes,

Warfare and the identity building that accompanies both its prosecution and its memorialization are intimately intertwined with the individual body and the body politic alike. War memorials encompass more than mere commemoration of an event. Especially in national contexts, memorials consecrate the sacrifice of individual bodies to the nation, while ‘their histories instantiate the collective, national “we”’.<sup>48</sup>

Today, despite the government’s efforts to bring Lao citizens together around the Unknown Soldier’s Monument stupa – unlike the That Luang stupa – the monument is largely ignored by visitors of ban That Luang. This phenomenon could be explained in Nora’s terms. Passed on through oral history, ritual acts, and ceremonies, That Luang represents what Nora calls *true memory*. In contrast, the Unknown Soldier’s Monument represents a *realm of memory* since it derives from a cultural manifestation, in this case, a stage to perform a secular ritual which aims at providing the state with the role of the nation’s unity guarantor. Although the Unknown Soldier’s Monument stupa has flawed appeal among ban That Luang visitors, it has a successful face, too.

The success of the Unknown Soldier’s Monument in Vientiane resides in its linkage to cultural memory, exemplified by a particular form of architecture, with space. This linkage took place in two different ways : First, by linking it to a Buddhist-like form and locating it within a sacred space; and second, by fetishizing the space containing this Buddhist-like form and placing it within a *metaspatial* or national context (see appendix F: figure 1).

Appealing to a cultural memory, therefore, the state in Lao PDR sought to produce and to maintain the identity of Lao citizens. However, a decisive movement from the Lao regime in its quest for legitimacy has been, in fact, perpetuating gaps in Lao historiography and, by doing so, inserting its image directly (e.g., space) or indirectly (e.g., bas-reliefs) into the nation’s past (see appendix F: figures 2 and 3).

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<sup>48</sup> Geoffrey M. White, “Museum/memorial/shrine: National narrative in national spaces.” *Museum Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (1997), 11.

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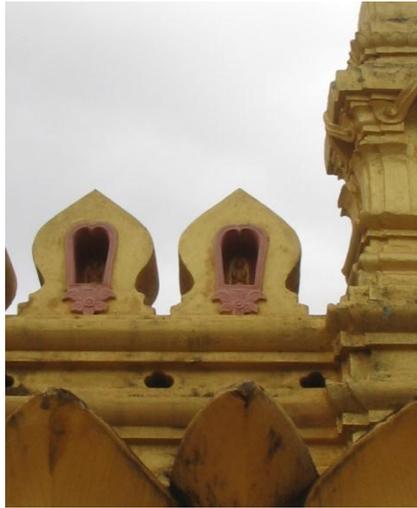
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## Appendix A. That Luang (Great Stupa)



A-1. That (stupa)



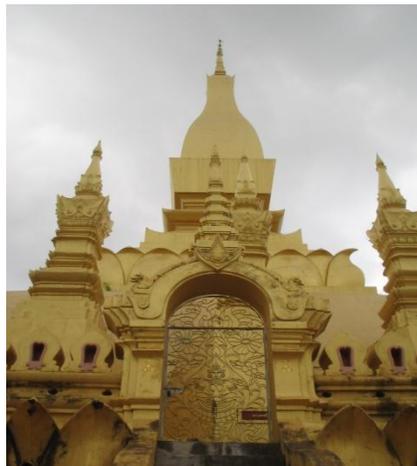
A-2. Decodification of symbols



A-3. That (stupa)



A-4. Architectural symbols

A-5. *Palami* (virtue towers)

A-6. That Luang (Great Stupa)

## Appendix B. The Unknown Soldier's Monument



B-1. That(stupa)



B-2. That (stupa)



B-3. Bas-reliefs



B-4. The Unknown Soldier's Monument



B-5. The Unknown Soldier's Monument  
(the National Assembly, in front)

### Appendix C. Unknown Soldier's Monument, details



C-1. Plaster *bodhi* tree leaf (decoration)



C-2. That (stupa)



C-3. Cauldron

## Appendix D. Ban That Luang (That Luang village), spatial elements



D-1. That Luang (1566)



D-2. National Assembly (1990)



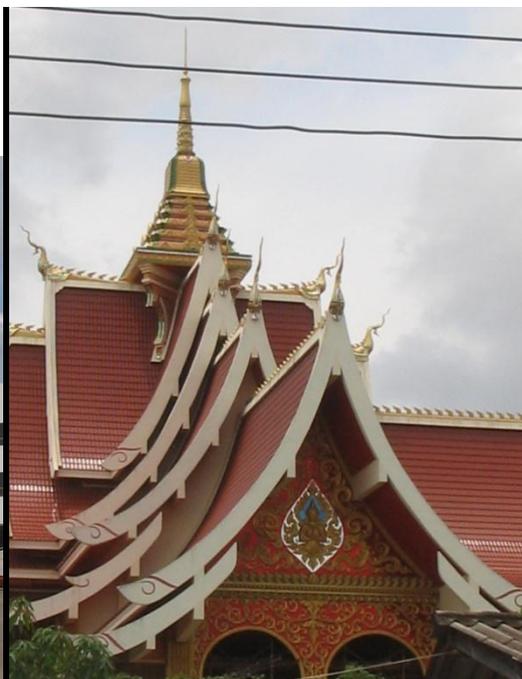
D-3. National emblem (1991)



D-4. The Unknown Soldier's Monument (1994)



D-5. National Assembly



D-6. Lao PDR Buddhist Patriarch's seat



D-7. (Left) Unknown Soldier's Monument; (Center) Lao PDR Buddhist Patriarch's seat; (Right) That Luang



D-8. (Left) National Assembly; (Right) Lao PDR Buddhist Patriarch's seat

### Appendix E. Bas-reliefs, details



E-1. Arrival of Buddhism in Laos



E-2. Buddhism in Laos



E-3. Setthathirath I: ruler of Lan Xang and builder of That Luang



E-4 (Left) Colonialism; (Center) Communism (Kaysone); (Right) Spread of Communism (Pathet Lao)



E-5. (*Metaethnic*) Laotian unity



E-6. Present Laos



E-7. Future Laos

## Appendix F. Conclusions



F-1. Architectural oversimplification



F-2. Historical oversimplification



F-3. Incorporation into the past: bas-reliefs (That Luang) Unknown Soldier's Monument

### Appendix G. Ban That Luang area (2011)

Source: Google Maps

