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# The Profane and the Sacred in the Architectural Art of Theravāda Buddhism among the Kinh (1938–2025)

## Cái Phàm và Cái Thiêng trong Nghệ thuật Kiến trúc Phật giáo Theravāda của Người Kinh (1938–2025)

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### **Abstract**

This article investigates the interplay between the profane and the sacred in the architectural art of Theravāda Buddhism among the Kinh in Vietnam from 1938 to 2025. The study pursues three objectives: (1) to examine the historical formation and socio-religious integration of Theravāda Buddhism within the Kinh community following its introduction from Cambodia in 1938; (2) to analyze the manifestation and transformation of sacred elements in the architectural forms of Theravāda temples constructed and used by the Kinh; and (3) to explore how the relationship between the profane and the sacred is expressed through construction materials, building techniques, spatial organization, and religious artistic symbolism. The research employs a qualitative-dominant, interdisciplinary methodology based on documentary analysis, field surveys, architectural observation, and in-depth interviews conducted over a twelve-month period in 2024. Informants included temple abbots, monks, lay Buddhists, artisans, and local participants engaged in temple activities. Data were interpreted through descriptive and content analyses to identify historical continuities, cultural adaptations, and symbolic meanings embedded in architectural practice.

The findings reveal that Theravāda Buddhism among the Kinh has been localized through distinctive architectural adaptations that integrate core Theravāda religious values with Vietnamese cultural sensibilities. Sacredness is

articulated not only through ritual spaces, symbolic zoning, orientation, and iconographic programs, but also through materials, structural techniques, and landscape planning shaped by everyday social realities. The study demonstrates that temple architecture serves as a dynamic site where the sacred ideal of liberation and the profane conditions of communal life intersect, negotiate, and mutually shape one another. Consequently, the architectural art of Kinh Theravāda Buddhism reflects both continuity with the wider Theravāda world and the emergence of a distinctive Vietnamese Theravāda identity in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Profane and sacred; Theravāda Buddhism; Temple architecture; Kinh community; Buddhist art

## **Introduction**

Theravāda Buddhism among the Kinh in Vietnam represents a significant development in the modern history of Vietnamese Buddhism. Although Theravāda Buddhism had long been associated primarily with Khmer communities in southern Vietnam, the Kinh Theravāda tradition emerged more distinctly in 1938 and gradually established itself as a recognizable current within Vietnamese religious life. Historical studies indicate that this development was linked to wider movements of Buddhist renewal, cross-cultural contact, and institutional formation in twentieth-century Vietnam. From its early foundations in southern Vietnam, Kinh Theravāda expanded its influence through monastic organization, doctrinal study, religious practice, and lay participation, thereby contributing to the diversification of Buddhism in Vietnam beyond the dominant Mahāyāna framework (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021; Sinh, 2022).

Over time, Theravāda Buddhism among the Kinh became increasingly integrated into Vietnamese society not only as a religious tradition but also as a cultural and social force. Scholarship on Buddhism in Vietnam shows that Buddhist institutions have historically played important roles in ethical cultivation, communal solidarity, education, and cultural continuity. Within this broader landscape, the Kinh Theravāda community contributed to national religious development and later helped establish the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha in 1981, reflecting both sectarian identity and institutional integration within the national Buddhist framework (Chinnak & Phrakru Sarakijkosol, 2016; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021). This development demonstrates that Kinh Theravāda should

not be viewed as a marginal import, but as part of the evolving structure of modern Vietnamese Buddhism.

Despite its historical and social significance, scholarly studies on the architectural expression of Theravāda Buddhism among the Kinh remain relatively limited. Most existing research has focused on historical development, organizational change, or religious revival, while less attention has been given to the architectural forms through which Theravāda identity is materially expressed. Yet temple architecture is not merely a functional enclosure for ritual activity. As studies of Vietnamese temple art suggest, the temple is simultaneously a sacred environment, an artistic synthesis, and a cultural space shaped by collective values, aesthetic sensibilities, and lived religious experience (Ngan & Hai, 2023). From the perspective of the study of religion, sacred space is distinguished from ordinary space through symbolic ordering, orientation, hierarchy, and ritual centrality, making architecture an important medium through which the relationship between the sacred and the profane is materialized (Eliade, 1959).

This article, therefore, examines the profane and the sacred in the architectural art of Theravāda Buddhism among the Kinh in Vietnam from 1938 to 2025. It argues that temple architecture should be understood as a lived religious environment in which spiritual ideals, historical circumstances, material conditions, and communal realities converge. By focusing on spatial organization, religious symbolism, and architectural and artistic elements, the study seeks to clarify how Kinh Theravāda temples embody both continuity with the wider Theravāda world and a distinctive process of localization within Vietnamese society.

## **Research Objectives**

1. To examine the historical formation and development of Theravāda Buddhism among the Kinh community and its socio-religious integration within Vietnamese society.
2. To analyze the manifestation and transformation of sacred elements in the architectural structures of Theravāda temples, particularly through spatial organization, religious symbolism, and architectural artistic elements.
3. To explore the interaction between the sacred and the profane in temple architecture as reflected in construction materials, building techniques, and

artistic expressions, thereby revealing the relationship between spiritual ideals and social realities within the Kinh community.

## **Literature Review**

Research on Vietnamese Buddhist architecture has attracted the attention of many scholars, particularly in the fields of history, art, and religious culture. These studies provide an important foundation for identifying the characteristics, stylistic features, and symbolic meanings of Vietnamese temple architecture.

Tran Lam Bien (1996), in *Vietnamese Pagodas*, presents the formation and development of Vietnamese temple architecture through different historical periods. The author analyzes spatial layouts, symbolic systems, and the role of temples in the cultural and religious life of the Vietnamese people. Chu Quang Tru (1999), in *Vietnamese Pagodas – Centers of Cultural Exchange and National Heritage Development*, emphasizes the function of temples as centers of cultural interaction, reflecting the integration of Buddhism with traditional Vietnamese cultural elements. Pham Thanh Canh (2010), in *Vietnamese Fine Arts*, provides a general overview of Vietnamese religious art and architecture, analyzing artistic forms, decorative motifs, and symbolic elements in temple architecture.

Studies focusing on religious architecture in southern Vietnam have also contributed significantly to understanding regional diversity. Nguyen Quang Tuan, Huynh Lua, and Tran Hong Lien (1993), in *Pagodas in Ho Chi Minh City*, as well as Pham Anh Dung (2013), in *Communal House and Pagoda Architecture in Southern Vietnam*, highlight the regional characteristics of religious architecture and the cultural interactions among different communities in the urban and cultural spaces of southern Vietnam. More recently, Ly (2023) examined architectural guidelines for Theravāda Buddhist temples of the Khmer community in the Mekong Delta, emphasizing spatial planning, symbolic decorative systems, and the influence of regional Theravāda architectural traditions.

Despite these significant contributions to the study of Vietnamese Buddhist architecture, most existing research primarily focuses on Mahāyāna Buddhism or Theravāda Buddhism among the Khmer community in southern Vietnam. Meanwhile, Theravāda Buddhism among the Kinh community, which emerged

in 1938 and developed within a distinct historical and social context, has not yet been systematically examined. In particular, there remains a lack of studies analyzing how the concepts of the “sacred” and the “profane” are expressed in the architecture of Kinh Theravāda temples and how architecture interacts with ritual practices and community life. This academic gap is a key motivation for the present study.

This research contributes to the field of Buddhist and religious architectural studies in Vietnam by examining the historical formation and socio-religious integration of Theravāda Buddhism within the Kinh community from 1938 to the present (Gioi Duc, 2021), while also analyzing the manifestation of sacred and profane elements in temple architecture (Thien Hau, 2017). Through field surveys, architectural analysis, and in-depth interviews, the study demonstrates that.

Theravāda temple architecture among the Kinh reflects both historical–social contexts and the construction of spiritual spaces within community life. The research also clarifies the process of integrating traditional Vietnamese architectural aesthetics with regional Theravāda architectural influences, contributing to the formation of a distinctive Theravāda architectural identity among the Kinh people. In doing so, the study provides new materials for the field of Vietnamese Buddhist architecture and expands scholarly discussions on the relationship between religious architecture, social life, and spiritual experience in contemporary Buddhist contexts.

## **Conceptual Framework**

This study adopts Mircea Eliade's theoretical perspective on the distinction between the sacred and the profane in religious space. According to this perspective, religious architecture should not be understood merely as a physical structure; rather, it functions as a symbolic system through which human beings establish connections between everyday reality and the transcendent dimension of the sacred (Eliade, 1959).

Within this framework, the architecture of Theravāda Buddhist temples of the Kinh community is understood as a sacred space in which manifestations of the sacred, often described as *hierophany*, are expressed through architectural forms and religious artistic elements. Spatial layout, Buddhist symbols, the

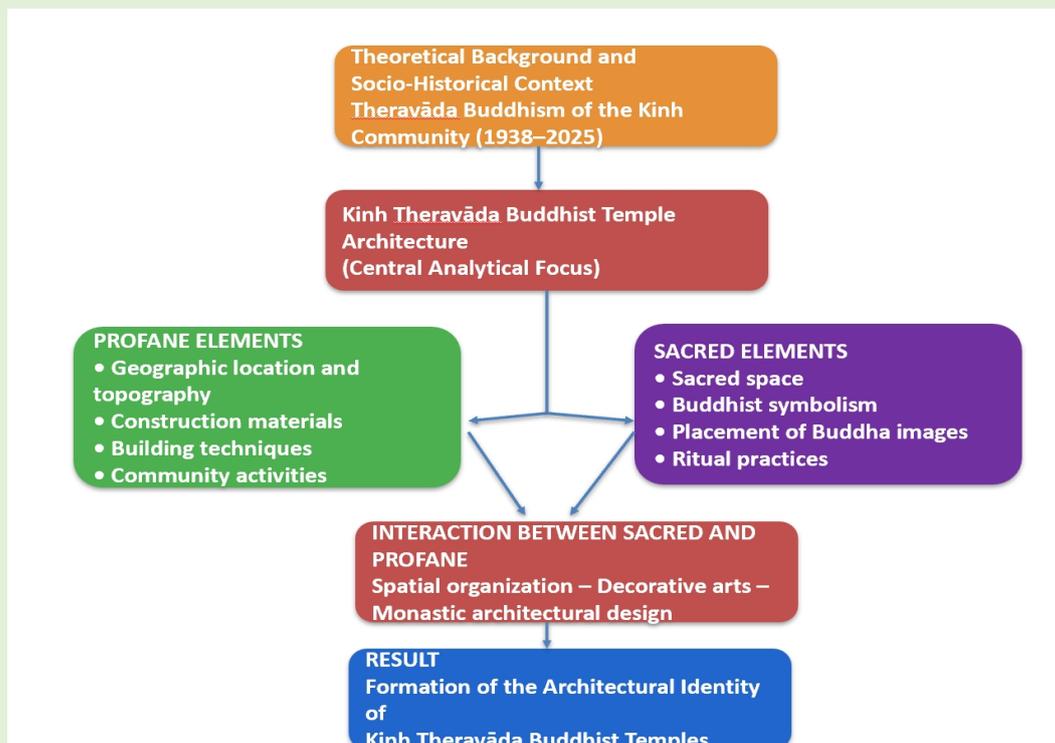
placement of Buddha images, and ritual practices all contribute to the process of sacralizing the temple environment.

At the same time, the material and practical aspects of temple construction, such as building materials, construction techniques, and community activities, reflect the profane dimension of architectural space. The interaction between these sacred and profane dimensions shapes the cultural, religious, and social meanings of Theravāda temple architecture within the everyday life of the Kinh community.

## Research Methodology

### Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the interaction between the sacred and the profane in the architectural art of Theravāda Buddhist temples established by the Kinh community in Vietnam. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to interpret architectural form not only as a physical structure but also as a lived religious, cultural, and social space. This design allows for an in-depth understanding of how symbolic meanings, ritual functions, and material conditions are embedded in temple architecture across historical and contemporary contexts.



**Figure 1:** Research framework of the study

## **Research Sites and Participants**

The research was conducted at selected Theravāda Buddhist temples of the Kinh community in southern Vietnam, where this tradition first emerged and developed most prominently. Site selection was based on three criteria: (1) historical significance in the formation and development of Kinh Theravāda Buddhism, (2) representation of different stages of architectural development, and (3) the presence of architectural features reflecting interaction with broader Theravāda traditions. A total of 50 participants were included in the study, comprising 15 monastics (abbots and resident monks) and 35 lay Buddhists who regularly engaged in temple activities.

## **Data Collection**

Data collection was carried out over a twelve-month period in 2024. Primary data were gathered through on-site observation, architectural surveys, photographic documentation, and semi-structured in-depth interviews. Observations focused on architectural typology, spatial organization, symbolic elements, construction materials, decorative features, and the functional use of temple spaces. Interviews were conducted with monastics, lay practitioners, and local community members in order to obtain multiple perspectives on the religious and social meanings of temple architecture. Secondary data were collected from academic books, scholarly articles, archival records, and prior studies on Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam, Buddhist architecture, and religious culture.

## **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using descriptive analysis and qualitative content analysis. The analytical framework centered on two interrelated dimensions. The first dimension concerned the profane, including geographical setting, construction materials, building techniques, and the everyday social use of temple space. The second dimension concerned the sacred, including spatial hierarchy, religious symbolism, Buddha images, ritual arrangements, and artistic expressions. The analysis focused on how these two dimensions intersect to shape the distinct architectural identity of Kinh Theravāda temples from 1938 to 2025.

## **Trustworthiness and Ethics**

The credibility of the study was strengthened through triangulation of field observations, interview data, and documentary sources. Dependability was supported by systematic procedures for recording, coding, and securely storing data. Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the research process. Participants were informed of the study's objectives; participation was voluntary; confidentiality was maintained; and all fieldwork activities were conducted in accordance with temple regulations and religious customs.

## **Research Findings**

**Objective 1:** The findings indicate that the formation and development of Theravāda Buddhism among the Kinh community in Vietnam reflects a continuous interaction between historical circumstances, movements of religious revival, and the establishment of religious architectural institutions.

The study reveals that the emergence of Theravāda Buddhism among the Kinh people was closely associated with the complex historical transformations of Vietnam. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, under the influence of Western colonial expansion, particularly following the Patenôtre Treaty and the establishment of French Indochina, many Buddhist institutions experienced decline or were dismantled, as colonial policies favored the construction of Western religious establishments (Nguyen Lang, 1992).

Within this context, Theravāda Buddhism among the Kinh began to revive in 1938 with the establishment of Buu Quang Pagoda, which is widely regarded as the first Theravāda temple founded by the Kinh community in Vietnam. The temple was established through the initiative of Nguyen Van Hieu together with a group of lay Buddhist supporters, including Le Van Giang (Thien Hau, 2017). This event marked an important turning point in the re-establishment and subsequent development of Theravāda Buddhist traditions among the Kinh population.

Subsequently, several significant temples were founded, including Giac Quang Pagoda (1945), Ky Vien Pagoda (1952), Bửu Long Pagoda (1942), and Tang Quang Pagoda (1956). These temples played an important role in expanding the network of Theravāda monastic institutions in southern and central Vietnam (Thien Hau, 2017). In addition to serving as places of monastic training, they also

functioned as cultural and religious centers for the Theravāda Buddhist community.

After 1975, and particularly following the establishment of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, Theravāda temples continued to expand across several provinces, such as Dong Nai Province, Ba Ria–Vung Tau Province, and Thua Thien Hue Province. These areas offer expansive geographic settings and natural environments conducive to monastic life and meditation practice. By 2025, Theravāda temples founded by the Kinh community had expanded widely throughout Vietnam and had also established affiliated centers abroad (Gioi Duc, 2021; Thien Minh, 2017).

Overall, this developmental process reflects a close relationship among historical conditions, the community's spiritual needs, and the formation of religious architectural spaces. Theravāda temples thus function not only as places of religious practice but also as important cultural institutions that preserve Buddhist traditions and express the distinctive identity of Theravāda Buddhism among the Kinh people.

**Table 1:** Historical Formation of Kinh Theravāda Buddhist Temples in Vietnam

Period	Historical Context	Key Development	Representative Temples
1938–1954	Colonial repression	Initial revival of Kinh Theravāda Buddhism	Buu Quang Pagoda
1954–1975	Political division and religious tension	Expansion of Theravāda monastic centers	Giac Quang, Kỳ Viên
1975–2000	National reunification	Organizational consolidation of Theravāda Sangha	Tang Quang
2000–2025	Global integration	Rapid expansion and international connections	Buu Long and overseas temples

**Objective 2:** The research findings indicate that the sacred characteristics of Theravāda Buddhist architecture among the Kinh people are expressed through spatial organization, symbolic elements, and architectural design closely associated with ritual practices.

The study reveals that sacred aspects within Kinh Theravāda temple architecture are articulated through spatial structures, religious symbolism, and architectural arrangements that support ritual activities.

Within the overall temple complex, the ordination hall (vihāra) serves as the sacred center of the compound. This space houses the statue of the Buddha and, in some cases, sacred relics, while also functioning as the principal setting for religious activities such as chanting, meditation, ordination ceremonies, and other communal practices (Ngo, 2013). In many Theravāda temples, the main hall is oriented toward the east, symbolizing the light of enlightenment and spiritual awakening (Harvey, 2013).

In addition, symbolic elements such as lotus ponds, Bodhi trees, the Dharma wheel, and dominant colors, including gold and red, contribute to the sacred atmosphere of the temple environment. These elements are not merely decorative; rather, they embody important symbolic meanings within Buddhist philosophy and cosmology (Zimmer, 1946; Harvey, 2013).

Architectural influences from Theravāda Buddhist countries such as Myanmar and Thailand are also visible in the presence of stupas, roof structures, and certain ornamental motifs (Fisher, 1993). Nevertheless, many temples continue to maintain aesthetic characteristics associated with Vietnamese architectural traditions, resulting in a distinctive synthesis of local cultural forms and broader regional Theravāda architectural influences (Ngo, 2013).

Overall, the architecture of Kinh Theravāda temples demonstrates a coherent system of religious symbolism in which spatial arrangements and architectural forms are deliberately structured to facilitate religious practice and meditative activities (Fisher, 1993; Harvey, 2013).

**Table 2:** Sacred Architectural Characteristics of Kinh Theravāda Temples

Architectural Element	Sacred Meaning	Architectural Expression
Main hall (Chánh điện)	Spiritual center	Space for rituals and meditation
East orientation	Symbol of enlightenment	The main hall often faces east
Lotus pond and Bodhi tree	Purity and enlightenment	Landscape elements in temple grounds
Stupas and Dharma wheels	Buddhist symbolism	Decorative and ritual structures

**Objective 3:** The research findings indicate that the architecture of Theravāda temples built by the Kinh people reflects a dynamic relationship between profane and sacred elements, particularly in the spatial organization and functional arrangement of the temple complex. From the perspective of religious space, the distinction between the sacred and the profane is not only expressed through belief systems but also materialized in spatial structures and architectural symbolism (Eliade, 1959).

The results suggest that Kinh Theravāda temple architecture clearly demonstrates the interdependent relationship between these two dimensions. Rather than functioning as opposing categories, the profane and the sacred complement each other within the spatial composition of the temple environment (Harvey, 2013).

Architectural structures that support community life, such as lecture halls, kitchens, monks' residences, gardens, and ponds, represent the everyday dimension of Buddhist communal life. These spaces facilitate social interaction, communal activities, and the engagement between monastics and lay practitioners (Ngo, 2013).

In contrast, sacred spaces such as the main ordination hall and relic shrines are arranged hierarchically. These areas are often constructed on raised platforms and decorated with Buddhist symbolic motifs, emphasizing their spiritual significance. This spatial hierarchy establishes a symbolic progression within the temple complex, guiding visitors from the outer gates and courtyards toward the sacred center represented by the main hall (Fisher, 1993).

In-depth interviews with monastic practitioners further reveal that temple architecture is understood as a space of spiritual transformation. It represents a transitional environment in which individuals symbolically move from the profane sphere of everyday life toward the sacred realm of religious practice and enlightenment. This interpretation aligns with theoretical perspectives suggesting that religious architecture functions as a symbolic system mediating the relationship between the ordinary world and the transcendent dimension of the sacred (Eliade, 1959).

Therefore, Theravāda temple architecture should not be understood merely as a physical structure. Rather, it constitutes a symbolic environment that represents the spiritual journey from worldly existence toward liberation.

**Table 3:** Interaction between the Mundane and the Sacred in Temple Architecture

Mundane Aspect	Sacred Aspect	Architectural Mediation
Community facilities	Main shrine and relic spaces	Spatial zoning
Local materials	Elevated sacred platforms	Symbolic hierarchy
Social interaction	Ritual practice	Processional spatial sequence
Cultural identity	Transcendent symbolism	Integrated localization

### **Research Findings (Synthesis)**

The findings indicate that Theravāda Buddhism within the Kinh community in Vietnam has evolved since 1938 through historical adaptation and socio-religious integration. Several representative temples, including Buu Quang Temple, Giac Quang Temple, Ky Vien (Jetavana) Temple, Buu Long Temple, and Tang Quang Temple, illustrate the gradual formation, consolidation, and expansion of the Theravāda tradition among the Kinh people.

Within temple architecture, sacred elements are expressed through spatial axes, hierarchical organization, religious symbolism, and the ritual centrality of the main ordination hall. These components structure the temple environment in ways that emphasize its spiritual significance and ritual function. At the same time, profane elements, such as building materials, communal facilities, and social activities, demonstrate the temple's integration with the everyday life of the surrounding community.

The interaction between these two dimensions contributes to the formation of Theravāda temple architecture as a transitional space. In this sense, the temple serves as an intermediary environment in which individuals symbolically move from the secular sphere of daily life toward spiritual practice and religious transformation.

### **Overview of the Sacred and Profane Characteristics in Representative Architectural Structures**

The research findings indicate that the sacred characteristics of Theravāda Buddhist temple architecture within the Kinh community are expressed through several architectural dimensions, including site selection, spatial organization, architectural form, construction techniques, and the arrangement of religious

symbols. Field observations and architectural analysis suggest that the development of these temples reflects a continuous negotiation between spiritual ideals and practical conditions such as land availability, natural environment, and social context.

The selection of a location and the surrounding landscape play a significant role in shaping the sacred atmosphere of monastic environments. Many Theravāda monasteries are situated on the outskirts of urban areas or within relatively quiet natural settings. Such locations allow convenient access for lay practitioners while also preserving the tranquility required for meditation practice. According to the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, an ideal monastic residence should not be too distant from or too close to urban settlements; rather, it should be quiet and conducive to the contemplative life of monastics (Vietnamese Tripitaka Translation Committee, 2016). Consequently, many monasteries are established near forests, mountains, streams, or even cemeteries, settings that encourage contemplation of impermanence and detachment from worldly concerns.

The spatial organization of temples varies depending on land availability and historical development. Smaller temples located within residential areas often display limited spatial arrangements and less cohesive architectural layouts. In contrast, larger monastic complexes such as Bửu Long Temple or Huyền Không Sơn Thượng Monastery tend to integrate architectural structures into the surrounding natural landscape. In many cases, however, temple complexes have developed gradually over time rather than through comprehensive architectural planning. This incremental development reflects both practical constraints and the Theravāda emphasis on simplicity and impermanence.

Within the architectural complex, the main ordination hall typically serves as the spiritual and ritual center of the temple compound. The hall is often oriented toward the east, symbolizing enlightenment and the light of the rising sun. Architectural forms vary considerably depending on economic resources and the vision of temple founders. Architectural influences from Theravāda Buddhist countries such as Myanmar and Thailand are evident in certain stupas, roof structures, and decorative motifs, although many temples retain elements characteristic of Vietnamese cultural aesthetics (Thien Hau, 2017).

Building materials and construction techniques have also evolved over time. Early temples were often constructed from temporary materials such as thatch, wood, and simple brick. Later renovations and expansions introduced

reinforced concrete, steel frameworks, and modern roofing materials in order to improve durability and structural safety. Despite these material transformations, architectural decoration generally remains relatively modest, reflecting the Theravāda emphasis on spiritual cultivation rather than monumental architectural display.

The arrangement of religious images in the main hall typically emphasizes the Buddha's central position. The principal image of the Buddha, usually representing Śākyamuni Buddha, is placed at the highest point of the altar. Additional figures may include the venerable Sīvalī or symbolic representations associated with important events in the life of the Buddha. Compared with Khmer Theravāda temples, Kinh Theravāda monasteries generally feature more restrained decorative styles and fewer statues, reflecting an emphasis on simplicity and meditative practice (Thien Hau, 2017).

**Table 4:** Architectural Characteristics of Theravāda Buddhist Temples of the Kinh Community

Architectural Aspect	Key Characteristics	Significance
Location and Topography	Commonly situated near forests, mountains, or quiet suburban areas	Creates a tranquil environment conducive to meditation practice
Spatial Organization	Layouts range from small temples within residential areas to large monastic complexes	Reflects gradual development shaped by land availability and historical circumstances
Monastic Architecture	The main hall functions as the spiritual center and is often oriented toward the east	Symbolizes enlightenment and spiritual orientation
Building Materials	Transition from traditional materials such as wood and thatch to brick, steel, and reinforced concrete	Demonstrates adaptation to modern requirements for durability and structural stability
Arrangement of Sacred Images	The central Buddha image occupies the highest position on the altar, with a limited number of accompanying symbols	Emphasizes the central role of the Buddha and the simplicity characteristic of the Theravāda tradition

Overall, the architectural characteristics of Kinh Theravāda temples reveal a dynamic interaction between sacred symbolism and practical realities. Site

selection, spatial organization, construction methods, and symbolic arrangements together create a religious environment that supports meditation, ritual practice, and community activities.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study support the first objective by demonstrating that the historical formation of Theravāda Buddhism among the Kinh community in Vietnam was not a simple transfer of an external tradition, but a gradual process of localization, institutional consolidation, and socio-religious integration. Historical scholarship notes that Kinh Theravāda was established in Vietnam in 1938 and developed within the broader context of twentieth-century Buddhist revival, reform, and organizational restructuring. In this context, the Kinh reception of Theravāda Buddhism was shaped by transregional contact, especially with Cambodia and the wider Theravāda world, and was also absorbed into the religious and cultural fabric of Vietnamese society (Chinnak & Phrakru Sarakijkosol, 2016; Sinh, 2022). The present findings reinforce this interpretation by showing that temple construction became a principal medium through which Theravāda identity was made visible, socially accessible, and culturally meaningful within the Kinh community.

The second objective is supported by the finding that sacredness in Kinh Theravāda temple architecture is expressed through spatial hierarchy, symbolic order, and selective artistic restraint. The principal Buddha image is consistently placed in the most elevated and central position, thereby establishing a visual and ritual axis that distinguishes sacred space from ordinary activity. Likewise, the division between ritual, residential, and communal zones indicates that the temple is designed not merely as a physical structure, but as a cosmologically ordered environment that guides religious perception and practice. This corresponds to the broader theoretical view that sacred space is constituted through differentiation, centering, and symbolic orientation rather than through ornament alone (Eliade, 1959). At the same time, the study shows that sacred forms are not static: they are reinterpreted in light of Vietnamese aesthetic preferences, local landscape conditions, and regional building traditions. In this respect, Kinh Theravāda architecture reflects both fidelity to Theravāda symbolic principles and adaptation to Vietnamese cultural forms (Ly, 2023; Ngan & Hai, 2023).

The third objective is likewise confirmed by the evidence that the interaction between the sacred and the profane is most visible in the material and

technical dimensions of temple construction. Early temples built with wood, bamboo, palm leaves, and other modest materials reflected economic limitation, local craftsmanship, and the practical conditions of newly established communities. The later adoption of reinforced concrete, steel, and more durable construction systems did not diminish sacred meaning; rather, it revealed how sacred architecture is continually negotiated amid changing social realities. The profane, in this sense, should not be interpreted as the opposite of the sacred, but as the sphere of everyday necessity through which sacred aspiration must be materially realized. Construction materials, budget constraints, land availability, environmental factors, and labor conditions all shape how the sacred becomes visible in built form (Ly, 2023).

A further important implication of the findings is that the simplicity of many Kinh Theravāda temples should not be read as architectural incompleteness. Rather, such simplicity reflects a religious orientation in which temple space primarily supports meditation, ethical cultivation, merit-making, and communal participation. This interpretation is consistent with broader studies of Vietnamese temple architecture, which emphasize that the temple is both a sacred site and a cultural space embedded in the rhythms of local life, memory, and artistic expression (Ngan & Hai, 2023). Therefore, the sacred and the profane in Kinh Theravāda architecture are not mutually exclusive categories; they are interdependent dimensions of a lived religious world in which spiritual ideals are embodied through social practice, historical circumstance, and artistic adaptation.

The discussion shows that Kinh Theravāda temple architecture from 1938 to 2025 should be understood as a dynamic and localized religious expression. It preserves core Theravāda values while adapting to Vietnamese cultural sensibilities, thereby revealing that architecture functions as both a spiritual instrument and a social document. Through this interaction, temple architecture becomes a concrete record of how the Kinh community has interpreted, embodied, and sustained Theravāda Buddhism within the historical realities of Vietnamese society (Chinnak & Phrakru Sarakijkosol, 2016; Ly, 2023; Sinh, 2022).

Overall, the findings suggest that the architecture of Theravāda temples of the Kinh community should not be understood merely as physical structures. Instead, these temples serve as cultural and religious spaces where spiritual ideals, historical circumstances, and everyday social life converge and interact.

## **Conclusion**

This study has shown that the architectural art of Theravāda Buddhism among the Kinh in Vietnam from 1938 to 2025 embodies a sustained interaction between the profane and the sacred. Temple architecture does not emerge solely from doctrinal ideals or aesthetic preferences, but from an ongoing process of negotiation among religious meaning, historical circumstance, cultural inheritance, environmental setting, and practical social needs. In this sense, the sacred is not isolated from ordinary life; rather, it is materialized through architectural forms that are deeply embedded in the lived experiences of the Kinh Buddhist community.

The findings indicate that Kinh Theravāda temples have developed through a dual process of inheritance and adaptation. On the one hand, they preserve important features of the wider Theravāda tradition, including spatial orientation, ritual hierarchy, symbolic zoning, and the centrality of the temple as a place of spiritual cultivation. On the other hand, they incorporate Vietnamese artistic sensibilities, local construction methods, and community-based functional demands. This has led to the emergence of an architectural identity that is neither a mere imitation of Cambodian, Thai, or other Theravāda models nor a continuation of earlier Vietnamese Buddhist forms in their original shape, but a localized expression of Theravāda Buddhism within the Kinh cultural world.

A significant contribution of this study is the demonstration that simplicity, functional clarity, and structural practicality are not signs of architectural incompleteness but meaningful indicators of a religious worldview centered on Dhamma practice and liberation. Decorative forms, sculptural elements, and spatial arrangements often remain closely connected to everyday community life, thereby illustrating how sacred meaning is continually shaped within profane conditions. Historical disruptions, including war, colonialism, and socio-political transitions, may have constrained architectural development in certain periods, yet they also contributed to creative processes of reinterpretation and adaptation.

Overall, the study affirms that the architectural art of Theravāda Buddhism among the Kinh represents a living cultural and religious phenomenon in which sacred aspirations and worldly realities are held in productive tension. Future research may deepen this field by undertaking comparative studies with other Buddhist architectural traditions in Vietnam, examining the relationship between temple space and ritual performance, and exploring more closely the symbolic

meanings of form, color, and material culture in Theravāda architectural expression.

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