



DESIGN

## Modernist revival

An architectural style enjoys a resurgence in Ho Chi Minh City from an unlikely source

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IMAGES: HIRSHUTAI D&C

Vietnam has no shortage of epochal architecture, but one major era is often forgotten: the modernist period. That is starting to change with last year's opening of The Cocoa Project in Ho Chi Minh City's District 3. How can a chocolatier and café revive an architectural style, you might ask? Well, by thoughtfully restoring the 70-year-old building that houses it.

Vietnamese modernism, which flourished in the mid-twentieth century, is related to the broader post-World War II modernist movement. But it was also distinct, as local architects adapted the style's functional, economical and minimalist design philosophy for a

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tropical climate. These "bioclimatic" design decisions include wall gaps to boost ventilation, louvres to shield windows from the sun and exterior buffer zones to repel heat.

The house that now hosts The Cocoa Project was originally fashioned with a shady front garden to separate it from the road in front, as well as huge lightwells that both cool the building and shower the interiors in natural light. But the previous tenant – a furniture shop – killed off the garden, obscured the design features and blocked lightwells to maximise floor space.

T3 Architects, a Ho Chi Minh City-based firm specialising in sustainability, rescued these modernist features and, as a result, made the building more energy-efficient. "In terms of producing a green building," says T3 co-founder Charles Gallavardin, "renovation is almost always better than building something new."

"T3 has illuminated existing Vietnamese heritage and shown there is value in what people already have here," says Khanh Linh Le, The Cocoa Project's co-founder and general manager. "This reflects our approach to chocolate: a good-quality product doesn't need to be imported or luxury."

## Tickle your tastebuds at The Cocoa Project

Along with crisp design and artisanal coffees, The Cocoa Project serves up chocolate treats with local flavours to devour on the spot or take away as perishable souvenirs. Celebrating Vietnam's most iconic nut, the cashew nuts covered in dark chocolate are wildly popular and make for excellent snacking. For

something with zest, try the chilli-spiced peanuts coated in white chocolate – an ideal beer snack – or the milk chocolate tablets infused with mac khen, a spice mixture from Vietnam's northern mountains traditionally paired with grilled meat.

