



Joshua Zukas

Hanoi Cafes: The City's Most Important Cultural Spaces

Vietnam's capital is a hotbed of artistic expression.

By **Joshua Zukas**

Hanoi, the enigmatic 1000-year-old capital of Vietnam, is a city steeped in legend and layered with intrigue. At the city's geographical and spiritual heart is the semi-mythical Lake of the Returned Sword, which divides central Hanoi into the chaotic tangle of lanes and alleyways that constitute the Old Quarter to the north, and the grand, tree-lined boulevards that form the French Quarter to the south.

Architectural reminders of a checkered yet vivid history stand on every corner, including 19th century traditional shophouses, Neo-Gothic cathedrals, Art Deco colonial mansions, and imposing public buildings exhibiting Soviet Brutalism. As other Southeast Asian capitals look increasingly commercial and sometimes worryingly dystopian, Hanoi remains steadfast in maintaining its visual liveliness.

It should be unsurprising that such a visually striking city engulfed in legend and history is also a hotbed of artistic expression. Just steps from the central lake sits Nguyen Quy Duc's Tadioto, one of Hanoi's most well-known art spaces. Located within the same neighborhood as the brightly historic Metropole Hotel and the fluffy Opera House, the dark and obscure interior of Tadioto contrasts powerfully with the grand and almost whimsical structures outside.



Although a self-described “alternative space for the arts,” Tadioto is also an example of the city’s vibrant café culture, one of the more palatable legacies of 20th century French colonialism and one of the city’s defining characteristics. Cafés are vital to Hanoi society, and they provide an important platform for various cultural and artistic activities.

“In a city where it’s difficult to have a gallery economically and politically, a cafe serves the same purpose- a place to view art, a place for artists to meet,” explains Duc. “(Tadioto is) a convenient, romantic place that attracts the creative crowd as well as average people wishing for an escape from daily pressure. Art does the same thing.”

Preserving atmosphere and architecture in a city that is developing as quickly as Hanoi has resulted in high rental charges for desirable locations. Galleries find it difficult to stay afloat in the context of high overheads, so adjoining a café helps supplement the income of the space.

There are also political considerations. Vietnam is a single-party state, and restrictions on freedom of expression can make it difficult to establish venues that may encourage social or political criticism through art. But opening a café is much simpler, and as long as café owners tread carefully, they can still use their spaces as venues for various activities.

“Many must operate under the radar, but if you wish to have proper permission, or avoid potential problems with the authorities, it gets difficult,” says Duc.

If Tadioto is the mysterious dark horse of Hanoi’s art scene, Manzi is its shining white knight. This detached colonial mansion located on a quiet street on the northern tip of the old quarter is the ideal venue for a consistently rotating collection of modern expression. Each time you visit Manzi you are stepping into a living, breathing café cum art space that is constantly evolving.



Manzi also provides an eclectic program of events from experimental music performances to provocative film screenings to talks that may occasionally border on controversial. Tram, one of the co-owners, also recognizes the financial safety provided by regular customers and the relative bureaucratic ease of operating a café versus a space that is purely for art. But Manzi is also working hard to make contemporary art easier to access.

“Education in the arts in Vietnam is not that good and so a lot of Vietnamese people find it difficult to respond to art,” explains Tram. “If this were only a gallery then far fewer people would come, but cafes are accessible to all members of Hanoi society.”

“If people come to the café and like what they see then that’s great. If they hate it, that’s also great. The point is to get people in and to get a reaction.”

Slightly west of the city center and nestled in an attractive neighborhood of post-colonial low-rise apartment buildings is Café Nha San. Set within a towering wooden house built by the Muong ethnic group, Café Nha San was painstakingly moved piece by piece from the countryside south of Hanoi in the 1990s. Nha San was an important center for the arts right up until 2010, at which point it was shut down for its increasingly provocative activities.

Stripped of its capacity as a venue for the arts, the building fell into disuse until reopening in early 2014, but this time as a café only. As if the building itself weren't striking enough, Café Nha San is also adorned with subsidy phase antiques and communist inspired art. Unlike Tadioto and Manzi, Nha San is not able to organize events, but instead this café functions as a work of art in itself.

"I treat everything I make like a piece of art," says Nam, the new owner of Café Nha San. "The space is unique and that provides a big advantage but both the previous owner and I are also in love with this (subsidy phase) theme."

The short-lived but culturally significant subsidy phase, which ran from 1976 to 1986, is enjoying somewhat of a cultural revival in Hanoi, at least in terms of art and design. But Vietnamese people tend to view this period with mixed feelings of nostalgia for a simpler way of life and also a time of tremendous poverty and hardship.

"We don't look at this era favorably, but we can't deny that it has had a big effect on us," says Nam.

The Author

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