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When Restoration Becomes Erasure: Heritage Cementification and the Crisis of Architectural Authenticity

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Abstract
The renovation of many religious sites in contemporary Vietnam reveals a shift from preservation to visual reconstruction, where concrete, industrial finishes, and reproduced ornamentation replace historic materials and spatial rhythms. Drawing on international debates on authenticity and material integrity, this study examines how such interventions unsettle the structural, atmospheric, and symbolic continuities that define heritage architecture. The case of Yên Phú Pagoda illustrates how rebuilding through modern materials generates a post-authentic landscape: the monument remains present, yet its historical substance dissolves. By situating this transformation within broader cultural assumptions about care and renewal, the study argues that sustainable conservation in Vietnam requires reconnecting technical preservation with community meanings, rather than allowing reconstruction to stand in for heritage.

Keywords: Heritage Conservation, Authenticity, Material Integrity, Cementification, Yên Phú Pagoda

1. Introduction

Over the past several decades, architectural heritage conservation in Vietnam has entered a zone of mounting strain. Accelerated modernization, pressure to mobilize private resources, and widespread misreadings of what "restoration" entails have led to interventions that blur the line between preservation and replacement. Instead of safeguarding original materials, craft knowledge, and spatial composition, a considerable number of projects have turned to concrete as a supposedly "durable" solution. This shift has produced an outcome that specialists increasingly warn against: monuments renewed to the point of losing their own histories. Domestic professional commentaries have repeatedly noted this pattern, stressing that the principle of maximizing material authenticity—long taken as a minimal disciplinary standard—routinely falls away in actual restoration practice (Nguyễn HT, 2019) [10]; (Viện Kiến trúc Quốc gia, 2024) [12]. The issue is not limited to the substitution of materials; such alterations sever material memory, technical lineage, and the sacred resonance accumulated over centuries. As Báo Văn Hóa (2025) observed, the authenticity of Vietnamese monuments is eroding even in places presumed to be "protected."

Internationally, authenticity has never been a straightforward category. Gao and Jones (2021) [3] demonstrate that it is continually renegotiated across cultural contexts, extending far beyond the familiar East–West framing. In this sense, authenticity is inseparable from the continuity of materials, construction techniques, setting, and social attachment. Labadi (2010) [5] describes this as a "post-authentic" process, where heritage remains dynamic and open to reinterpretation, yet such reinterpretation must still honor the historical structure of a site. Along similar lines, Nakonieczna and Szczepański (2024) [9] show that replication, redesign, or transformation undertaken without a reflective engagement with materiality and method often leads to a rupture in conservation philosophy, reducing monuments to self-illustrating replicas.

Recent technical studies further caution against indiscriminate substitution of traditional materials. Menningen *et al*. (2022) [7] and Grămescu *et al*. (2025) [4] argue that structural integrity—from mortar composition and stone morphology to framing systems—forms the backbone of historical value.

Concrete, with its industrial rigidity, cannot replace organic or composite materials without causing mechanical and aesthetic distortion. Even for structures originally built with reinforced concrete, Miranda (2022) [8] underscores the need for tightly regulated conservation methods rather than wholesale rebuilding. Similarly, Loke *et al*. (2020) [6] highlight that choices involving cement and modern compounds must be weighed carefully against the properties of the original fabric, or the monument's material "dialogue" collapses. Research on industrial heritage, such as Xiong *et al*. (2023) [14] adds another crucial insight: authenticity cannot be maintained through surface appearance alone; it rests on fidelity to production systems, technical regimes, and the very materials that shaped the site.

In Vietnam, this threshold of endurance becomes even more fragile when "renewal" is interpreted less as a technical obligation than as an expression of devotion or generosity. Nguyễn Q. A. (2020) [11] shows how expansion, vertical extension, cement coating, and architectural re-styling have become systemic practices, especially in rapidly urbanizing areas. These interventions not only dilute architectural value but also detach monuments from the cultural settings that once sustained them.

The convergence of global debates on authenticité, the material crisis in conservation, and misaligned restoration practices in Vietnam foregrounds the central question guiding this article: what unfolds when restoration turns into erasure? Through the case of Vietnamese temples transformed through concrete rebuilding, the study seeks to clarify the mechanisms by which authenticity is worn away and to illuminate their deeper consequences for the memory, aesthetics, and identity of Vietnam's architectural heritage.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Authenticity as a Moving Target

Architectural authenticity has never functioned as a fixed principle. Gao and Jones (2021) [3] demonstrate that familiar binaries such as "spirit-oriented East versus material-oriented West" are largely discursive constructions that obscure the nuanced ways communities define heritage. In their reading, authenticité is not simply the preservation of initial form or original matter; it is an ongoing negotiation among history, technique, and social expectation. Authenticity thus resides not only in what survives, but in how a community chooses to continue living with a monument.

Labadi (2010) [5], approaching the issue from a different angle, introduces the notion of "post-authenticity" to describe shifting conservation norms under conditions of globalization. As heritage becomes entangled with tourism, local branding, and public performance, the boundaries of authenticité grow increasingly delicate. Extending this argument, Nakonieczna and Szczepański (2024) [9] underline how unreflective replication—even when motivated by a desire to "enhance" a site—can slide into a regime of reproducibility that turns a monument into its own simplified duplicate, hollowing out the material and affective depth that once sustained it.

Alongside these debates, recent studies show that authenticité is shaped not only within conservation practice but also in contexts where heritage is consumed as experience. Dai, Zheng and Yan (2021) [2] illustrate how visitors' perceptions of originality directly influence their satisfaction, and may in turn feed back into the strategies adopted by local authorities and host communities. When sites are framed through the tourist gaze, intervention choices—from surface renewal to reconstruction or decorative augmentation—risk drifting away from conservation ethics toward market-driven aesthetics. This perspective widens the analytical frame: authenticity becomes the result of an interplay among preservation standards, tourism economies, and social expectations surrounding a "legible" heritage image.

2.2. Material Integrity and the Ethics of Restoration

If authenticity grounds conservation, then material and structural fabric is where its presence becomes most visible. Menningen *et al*. (2022) [7] show that traditional mortars, stones, bricks, and organic compounds are not mere physical components; they carry embedded craft memory and technical lineage. Replacing them with high-strength industrial materials generates structural discontinuities and disrupts the material dialogue essential for preserving both mechanical integrity and aesthetic coherence.

These concerns are reinforced by Grămescu *et al*. (2025) [4], who demonstrate that the physico-mechanical properties of historic structures emerge through layered temporal formation, making any forceful intervention a source of irreversible distortion. Loke *et al*. (2020) [6] similarly caution that modern cement-based mixtures behave chemically and mechanically in ways fundamentally different from traditional compounds, meaning that quick "beautification" through cement often accelerates decay rather than mitigating it.

Even in cases where a structure was originally built with reinforced concrete, Miranda (2022) [8] emphasizes that restoration demands tightly controlled, minimally invasive methods rather than wholesale reconstruction. This position signals an ethical principle: to restore is not to rebuild, but to care for an historic object with a life of its own. The same ethos appears in Xiong *et al*. (2023) [14], who stress fidelity to original materials and industrial techniques when working with industrial heritage—a field frequently assumed to lie outside the domain of traditional knowledge yet still dependent on its material truth.

2.3. Heritage, Modernisation, and the Vietnamese Context

In Vietnam, questions of materiality and authenticity are often entangled with social values such as devotion, merit-making, or the desire to present religious spaces in a "renewed" and "dignified" form. Nguyễn (2019) [10] notes that many restoration projects adopt a "maximal renewal" approach, replacing entire wooden frameworks with concrete under the rationale of increased durability. Such interventions erase the material traces of time—traces that shape the aesthetic and spiritual depth of older architecture.

A similar concern is raised by the Viện Kiến trúc Quốc gia (2024) [12], which warns against restoration practices detached from material study or historical inquiry, resulting in "pseudo-antique" structures lacking inner resonance. Nguyễn Q. A. (2020) [11] further observes that large-scale expansion, altered massing, and stylistic hybridization have become common across urbanized heritage sites, obscuring traditional architectural language.

Taken together, these dynamics place Vietnam within global debates on authenticité while adding layers shaped by ongoing social, economic, and religious transformation. Heritage here is influenced not only by conservation

technique but by cultural notions of beauty, durability, and sacredness in a rapidly modernizing society.

3. Methodology

This study is designed as a case-based inquiry centred on shifts in material, spatial layout, and architectural language when a traditional religious monument is intervened upon through modern techniques and substances. The research proceeds through three layers of data: a selective review of secondary sources; on-site recording and analysis of material and spatial transformations; and systematic comparison with international standards on authenticité and architectural conservation.

The first step involves a structured review of documents, reports, and commentaries on heritage restoration in Vietnam, including professional essays by architects, technical assessments, and texts documenting the actual course of restoration projects. Vietnamese sources such as Nguyễn (2019) [10], the Viện Kiến trúc Quốc gia (2024) [12], and Nguyễn Q. A. (2020) [11] provide crucial insight into how current practices are drifting away from the principle of originality. These materials help to identify the internal logic of concrete-driven restoration: the priority given to physical durability, the symbolic value of "neatness" and monumentality, and the widespread understanding of restoration as a form of "renewal."

Parallel engagement with international literature situates the case within broader debates on authenticité. The theoretical frame derived from Gao and Jones (2021) [3], Labadi (2010) [5], and Nakonieczna and Szczepański (2024) [9] furnishes comparative criteria for examining how Vietnam's treatment of architectural heritage is recalibrated in a rapidly changing social and religious environment.

Field data were gathered through architectural observation, spatial note-taking, and close reading of surface materials. The focus lies on identifying signs of material substitution—from structural frames and roofing systems to mortars and decorative vocabularies—and on tracing how such changes generate fractures between inherited forms and newly imposed structures.

The analysis is guided by standards of integrity and structural continuity articulated in material-focused studies such as Menningen *et al*. (2022) [7], Grămescu *et al.* (2025) [4], and Loke *et al*. (2020) [6]. These works insist that the historical value of architectural heritage depends on materials and techniques that remain compatible with the original fabric. Drawing on these criteria, the on-site observations make it possible to assess the extent to which concrete frameworks distort or overwrite traditional architectural language.

To clarify the implications of concrete use, field findings are read alongside international research on architectural restoration and comparable cases. Miranda (2022) [8] and Xiong *et al*. (2023) [14] show that even in modern or industrial heritage, interventions involving concrete must be tightly constrained and grounded in respect for original technical knowledge. This underscores a striking paradox in the Vietnamese context: concrete is most extensively applied not to modernist or industrial sites, but to wooden religious architecture.

The comparative procedure does not aim to construct a direct cross-national ranking. Rather, it highlights the disjuncture between prevailing restoration practices in Vietnam and international understandings of authenticité. Studies by Gao and Jones (2021) [3] and Nakonieczna and Szczepański (2024) [9] suggest that authenticity cannot be assessed through reproduced appearance alone; it depends on material continuity, craft knowledge, and the cultural setting in which a structure emerged. These criteria help explain why material substitution, even when it produces a more imposing façade, can profoundly weaken heritage value.

The study does not attempt to reconstruct a full institutional or architectural history of the site. Its concern lies with how alterations in material and structure reshape authenticity and aesthetic perception—two dimensions treated here as central to architectural conservation. No in-depth interviews were conducted; instead, the research relies on detailed document analysis and close examination of the case on site, a strategy consistent with a study oriented toward material fabric and structural integrity.

4. Findings (with Yen Phu Pagoda Case Illustration)

4.1. Material Transformation and the Fragility of Structural Continuity

The wave of concrete-based restoration observed across many Vietnamese heritage sites signals a profound shift in conservation thinking: from safeguarding historic fabric to renewing architecture through industrial materials. Structures originally assembled from timber frames, traditional mortars, and terracotta tiles are increasingly overlaid—or entirely replaced—by reinforced concrete, cement render, and ceramic cladding. These substitutions create a marked rupture between original fabric and newly imposed structure, a rupture that Menningen *et al*. (2022) [7] and Grămescu *et al*. (2025) [4] regard as a breakdown of structural continuity.

Yen Phu Pagoda exemplifies this transformation. During the most recent restoration, the timber trusses and the old roof were dismantled and recast in concrete, while wooden carvings were replaced with industrial mouldings. From a distance, certain surface cues of tradition remain, yet the material continuity—central to authenticité in Gao and Jones's (2021) [3] formulation—has disappeared. The replacement extinguishes the lineage of craftsmanship, the patina of age, and the artisanal knowledge accumulated across generations, all cloaked under a veneer of the "newly old."

As Nakonieczna and Szczepański (2024) [9] argue, this mode of intervention reflects a broader contemporary distortion: reproducing form without preserving material substance, turning heritage into an ever-updating version rather than a conserved entity.

4.2. Spatial Reconfiguration and the Dissolution of Sacred Atmosphere

Material shifts often coincide with spatial restructuring. Many restored sites have undergone floor-plan expansion, increased vertical scale, elongated corridors, and the addition of auxiliary halls. Spatial proportion—rooted in restraint, bodily scale, and the play of natural light—gives way to enlarged volumes, bright illumination, and the reverberant acoustics of concrete. Gao and Jones (2021) [3] suggest that once sacred space is reshaped through modern aesthetic sensibilities, authenticité fades not at the margins but deep within the experiential core.

At Yen Phu Pagoda, the architectural footprint has been reconfigured into a cluster of large blocks with heightened roofs and extended walkways, dissolving the intimate bodily

scale characteristic of village temples. The raised foundation, the diminished courtyard, and the interior rearranged in the style of urban religious complexes all reshape the sensory field: soft daylight is replaced by electric glare, the resonance of concrete overtakes the quieter tones of timber, and the scent of new materials suspends the experience between sacred site and public facility.

Labadi (2010) [5] describes such a condition as a "post-authentic atmosphere," where monuments survive symbolically, yet the lived sacredness anchored in earlier spatial arrangements is displaced entirely.

4.3. Ornament Reproduction and the Rise of Surface Authenticity

Another widespread consequence of concrete-based restoration involves the replication of ornaments and decorative details through casting and industrial painting. Carved wooden elements—once marked by depth, layered texture, and the trace of tools—are increasingly replaced with cement motifs, shallow reliefs, or painted simulations. As surfaces become uniform, polished, and excessively "perfect," the temporal and artisanal dimensions that give heritage its value is erased.

At Yen Phu Pagoda, numerous bas-reliefs and timber details have been converted into cast versions coated with faux-wood or faux-stone finishes. The industrial aesthetic becomes instantly legible: identical "wood grains," mechanically precise carving lines, and the absence of the small irregularities that define traditional craftsmanship. This aligns with Nakonieczna and Szczepański's (2024) [9] caution regarding reproducibility—the drift toward a heritage aesthetic built on illusion, where authenticité is reduced to surface resemblance.

Miranda (2022) [8] further notes that even the conservation of concrete itself requires rigorous preservation techniques. In the case of Yen Phu, the rapid "cement dressing" used to fabricate a pseudo-historic appearance constitutes an architectural shortcut rather than a conservation method consistent with international practice.

Taken together, these transformations point to a shared pattern: heritage is being shifted from a historic entity with its own life-history to a newly fabricated product evoking the past, one in which cultural depth and original sacred resonance gradually recede.

5. Discussion

The transformations observed at Yen Phu Pagoda are not isolated anomalies but manifestations of a broader restoration regime that has taken root across many religious sites in Vietnam: conservation through the replication of form. When traditional materials are replaced with concrete, when carved elements are reproduced by moulds, and when spatial layouts are expanded according to a taste for monumentality, heritage enters the condition that Nakonieczna and Szczepański (2024) [9] call reproducibility—an unreflective capacity for replication that preserves the template while erasing the knowledge that once shaped it. In such a regime, authenticité is maintained less through material continuity than through a visual aesthetic capable of evoking an impression of antiquity.

The case of Yen Phu makes this shift visible at every level: handcrafted irregularities are flattened, temporal marks are erased, and the monument is remade as a finished industrial product. The site still "looks like a pagoda," yet its essence has been recast. Gao and Jones (2021) [3] caution that authenticity cannot be judged by surface resemblance; it must be read through material lineages, technical practices, and the cultural milieu within which a monument was formed. Yen Phu illustrates the cost of ignoring this principle: a monument that is visually impressive yet hollow in substance.

A deeper source of concrete-driven restoration lies in local interpretations of what it means to care for heritage. In many communities, renewal—replacing the old with the new, exchanging timber for concrete, substituting earthen tiles with industrial ones—is understood as an act of devotion and contribution. "Beautifying the pagoda" expresses spiritual commitment rather than technical preservation. Restoration is therefore closely tied to aspirations of rebuilding, dignifying, and increasing symbolic presence, rather than to knowledge of materials or historical continuity.

Domestic literature (Nguyễn, 2019) [10](Nguyễn Q. A., 2020) [11](Viện Kiến trúc Quốc gia, 2024) [12] shows that this pattern recurs across multiple restoration projects. At Yen Phu, those involved believed that raising the foundation, enlarging the plan, and renewing all structural elements constituted a "revival" of the temple. Yet in an international frame, Miranda (2022) [8] and Xiong *et al*. (2023) [14] show that rebuilding is never considered conservation, even for modern or industrial architecture. The mismatch reveals a fundamental tension: community-driven cultural intentions clash with conservation standards grounded in authenticité.

This tension marks a central impasse in Vietnamese heritage preservation: "care" is understood through sincerity and goodwill, while "preservation" demands technical precision and respect for original material. When these two logics fail to converge, heritage is easily drawn into cycles of reconstruction.

Yen Phu, therefore, is not simply a case of misguided restoration; it serves as a marker of a broader landscape of post-authentic conservation in Vietnam. Labadi (2010) [5] uses this term to describe situations in which monuments survive symbolically, yet the material conditions that once sustained sacredness, memory, and aesthetic depth have been replaced. As concrete-based interventions proliferate, heritage does not disappear immediately; it persists, but as an image—an outline of the past lacking material and historical depth.

Seen this way, Yen Phu signals a larger movement: Vietnamese heritage is sliding toward "re-staging the past through modern materials," where form is preserved while substance is absorbed into a contemporary visual grammar. This demands an urgent redefinition of restoration in technical conservation terms, rather than through the aesthetic logic of new religious construction. It also calls for deeper dialogue among communities, traditional artisans, and conservation specialists to devise forms of "care" capable of retaining material knowledge and the memory embedded in place. Without such alignment, many sites will follow the trajectory of Yen Phu: standing firm as new buildings, yet silent as heritage.

6. Conclusion

The transformations at Yen Phu Pagoda reflect a wider shift in Vietnamese architectural conservation: heritage is being renewed at a pace that exceeds its capacity to age. When concrete, ceramic tiles, and cast ornaments become the

dominant language of restoration, authenticity is not merely diminished—it is redefined through an industrial aesthetic of cleanliness, uniformity, and visual precision that stands at odds with the material rhythms of historic structures. International research on integrity and authenticité makes the stakes clear: heritage remains heritage only when its materials, craft techniques, and cultural contexts continue to live within the present structure. Once these elements are replaced by simulation, the monument does not vanish, but becomes a silhouette of itself.

This situation places Vietnam before a critical question: how can restoration return to the ethos of preservation rather than becoming a mode of reconstruction shaped by the visual norms of modernisation? The answer lies not only in technique, but in re-negotiating the meaning of "care" for heritage—from well-intentioned renewal toward the patient stewardship of material continuity. What is needed now is not to make monuments different, but to allow them to continue living through the very materials and spaces that once gave them value.

Without such recalibration, many temples, communal halls, and shrines will follow the path of Yen Phu: standing with the vigour of new construction, yet quiet as old memory. Heritage preservation, in this sense, requires both material attentiveness and humility before history—qualities embedded in traditional architecture, and ones that must now be restored as foundations for the future.

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