



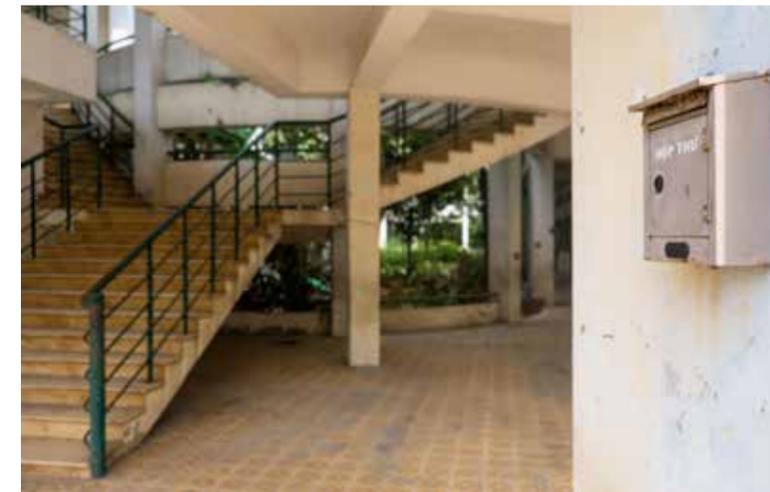
INSIDER

HCMC

# The Sinking School

It's abandoned. It's sinking. And it's even been called *truong ma* or ghost school. **Thomas Barrett** investigates District 6's homage to architecture gone wrong. Photos by **Bao Zoan**

“With the safety of the pupils under threat, [they were] relocated... to a nearby school in 2010. Locals have since redubbed Phu Dinh as ‘the ghost school’”



It's often said that your school days are the best of your life, and for Phu Dinh elementary school in District 6, its best days are certainly behind them.

The school was built at a cost of around US\$880,000 or VND20 billion in 2004, but after just a few years of use, disaster struck and the school structure started to suffer from subsidence. It was sinking.

### The Blame Game

With the safety of the pupils under threat, District 6's People's Committee relocated the students to a nearby school in 2010. Locals

have since redubbed Phu Dinh as "the ghost school", as it continues to remain an expensive headstone in the area.

A report was drawn up by the People's Committee, which placed blame and responsibility on Binh Phu Design Consultancy Company, Cong An Service Company Limited, and the Ho Chi Minh City Architecture Consultancy Company. They also shouldered some of the blame themselves, saying: "The regulator, like us, is also responsible for some errors."

A programme to shore up the land under the school was drawn

up, with the VND6.5 billion it would cost to fix the problem divided up between the responsible parties. It was hoped that the school could reopen in 2015, but in 2017 the school remains in a state of rack and ruin.

### Reminders

At 6,600 m<sup>2</sup>, the school covers a large space of land and dominates the area. The complex is made up of four concrete rows, each three storeys high holding around 30 classrooms. There's a generous outdoor space for children to play, but nature has long taken it over,

with the only sign of human life being some burning embers from a fire that somebody has recently started in one of the metal bins. Evidence of subsidence is clearly visible, with the steps to the main building no longer connecting.

The uniformity of the Vietnamese school classroom has been disrupted, with tables and chairs strewn about and covered with dust. Portraits of Ho Chi Minh still look on, together with his five lessons for students, as well as alphabets, numbers and other learning aids.

Severe water leakage has

damaged one of the classrooms, with the floor literally sinking towards the centre of the room. Perilously, it's on the second floor. It looks like a battle that gravity is winning, drip by drip.

A glimpse into the ambition of the school is also on the second floor, as an empty language lab stands with 40 different booths for students, where they would have practiced foreign languages. Next door is a computer room, which still has several, almost comically large, monitors by today's standards. Less than 10 years old, they lie like a technological time capsule.

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**“There are other fascinating little mementos of the school, such as a boy’s gym kit and a piece of paper with the result of a health check — saying a boy needs two fillings and one tooth removed”**

There’s the main hall on the third floor which still has a plinth for speeches, and nearby is a bronze bust of Uncle Ho in need of a polish. There are other fascinating little mementos of the school, such as a boy’s gym kit and a piece of paper with the result of a health check — saying a boy needs two fillings and one tooth removed. There’s a birthday card for a teacher which some kids have signed.

### Emotions

Since its closure the school has proved to be an emotive subject, with Facebook commenters lamenting an all too familiar story in Vietnam.

“The design just didn’t work. The ground and foundations are sloping and the building is based on a standard design that just doesn’t fit. It’s like they’ve tried to build a load of parallels and squares and mould them into a building, but

the moulding just doesn’t work and instead you only have the lines and squares,” said one person.

Another wondered why so much of the equipment is still there.

“Looking at the scene is actually quite painful, not because of a project that has failed and that has not been able to overcome these failures. But because of all the objects — chairs, whiteboards, computers — that have been left behind while schools in the poor mountain areas of Vietnam don’t even have enough metal to get built.”

“It’s also painful because this was a state-of-the-art government project that has left behind a school that resembles the picture of children in Grade 1, a picture that looks like a bowl of rice porridge mixed with a bit of rice that has been left for years to go mouldy,” says one.

And one person questioned how

a return could be made on the vast investment.

“City land is very valuable. So, if you’re not going to have a school here you should knock the place down and rent it out. At least then you can get back some of the wasted investment. If you leave the building as it is then in 100 years the ruins will become a tourist attraction.”

### Schools Out

So what lessons are to be learnt from Phu Dinh? The classroom still has maths calculations and grammar rules on the wall. One that teaches the affirmative simple present stands out with delicious irony: “They go to school every day,” it reads.

Perhaps time to update that one to the simple past.

*If you’d like to check out the school for yourself, it’s at 150 Vanh Dai, Q6, HCMC* 