



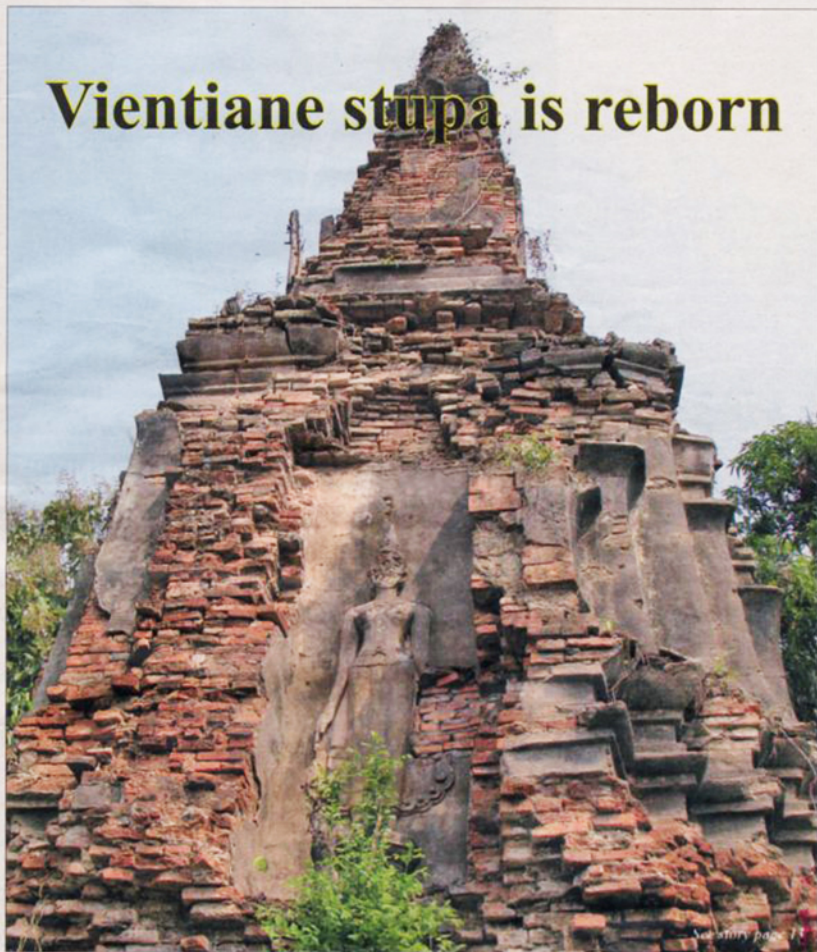
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This is what Nak stupa, located in Vientiane, looked like before it was restored by the Ministry of Information and Culture and the Australian Embassy to Laos.

—Photo Mr Grack



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Vientiane stupa is reborn

PHONESAVANH SANGSOMBOUN

A stupa in Vientiane is being reborn as a place where local residents can worship once again. Nak stupa is located 4km from the city centre, just 100 metres away from busy Thadeua Road.

It is set amongst beautiful trees, close to Nak temple and the houses of local people in Thaphalanxay village, Sisattanak district.

Despite its picturesque surroundings, the stupa had fallen into disrepair.

The Buddha images which were carved into the four sides of the stupa had aged badly and parts of their faces, feet and hands had broken off.

The highest point of the 15m tall stupa was also damaged and its foundations were crumbling.

This is the state that it was in when the Australian Embassy to Laos began to build its new embassy building just metres from the stupa.

The Ministry of Information and Culture's National Heritage Department was concerned the stupa would be further damaged by construction taking place so close by, so the embassy said it would fund the stupa's restoration.

French architect, Mr Francois Greck, was contracted to start the restoration work in May and worked closely with the ministry and an NGO in Bangkok.

Surveys of two similar stupas, one in Vientiane and one in Nong Khai, Thailand, assisted Mr Greck to restore the stupa to its original condition.

As well as focusing on the structure itself, the original colour of the stupa had to be identified so it could be matched as closely as possible.

This was done using yellow ochre from Khuya village in Luang Prabang province, and red pigment from a mine in Xangnam village in the same province.

"For the gold parts we decided to use bronze powder instead of gold as it gives the same effect as gold and we want to avoid vandalism," Mr Greck said.

The origins of the stupa are not clear, but it is believed to have been built in the 16th century.

During the restoration, workers found a cavity inside the stupa which measured about two metres by two metres, but it was empty.

"We presume there was originally something valuable inside the hole and these items were stolen," Mr Greck said.

National Heritage Department Director General, Mr Thongsasayavongkhamdy, said the stupa was an important part of Lao history that needed to be preserved.

"When building significant places like this, Buddhist believers would put valuable items under or inside a stupa to make the place more sacred," he said.

"Stupas are not always built as part of burial ceremonies."

Ms Pheng Syhalak, 54, has lived in Thaphalanxay village close to the stupa her whole life.

She said the stupa was important for local villagers because it was a sacred building which they believed could offer them protection.

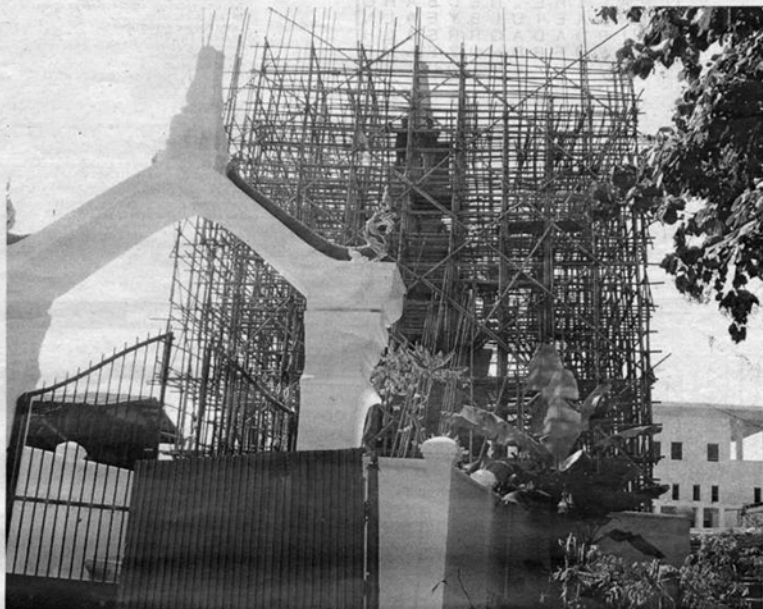
"We believe the stupa can protect us from bad things and whenever we travel we have to ask for safety and luck for our trip," she said.

"Before this work was done the stupa was crumbling and overgrown with weeds and bamboo trees. Now it is so much more beautiful and we are able to worship there comfortably."

Scaffolding still surrounds the stupa, but restoration work is almost complete.

The broken Buddhas have been repaired, the brickwork and exterior upgraded and a beautiful lotus placed atop the stupa.

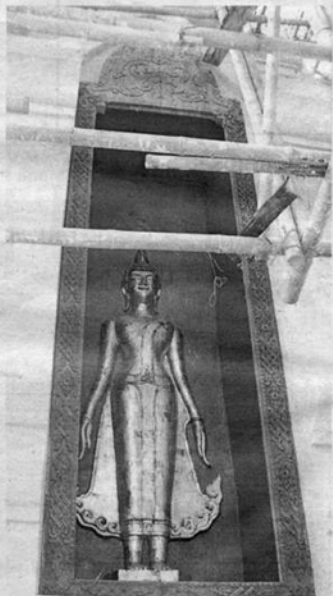
When the scaffolding comes down the stupa can start its new lease on life.



Renovations are almost complete at the stupa.



The stupa is located about 100 metres from a busy road.



Buddha images are carved on the four sides of the stupa.