

**Identification**

<i>Nomination</i>	The Town of Luang Prabang
<i>Location</i>	Luang Prabang Province
<i>State Party</i>	Laos
<i>Date</i>	21 October 1994

**Justification by State Party**

In the years between 1915 and 1925 a new concept, that of urbanization, was introduced into the traditional Lao morphology of Luang Prabang. It now bears witness to major cultural exchanges between three communities - the Lao, the Vietnamese, and the French. The rich architectural fabric of the city is expressed through its mixture of styles and materials, which must be preserved at a time when urban development has a tendency towards demolition and the replacement of older buildings with new ones in discordant styles.

The inventarization associated with the Heritage Protection Zone project has identified a progression of styles and materials from traditional Lao wooden architecture to the colonial styles from France, Vietnam, and China. The historical town lying on either side of the Promenade de la Péninsule demonstrates how the present urban agglomeration derives from a series of older villages.

**Category of property**

In terms of the categories of property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, Luang Prabang is a *group of buildings*.

**History and Description***History*

Luang Prabang Province lies in the heart of the mountainous region of northern Laos. The town of Luang Prabang is situated on a peninsula formed by the Mekong river and its tributaries, the Nam Khane and the Hual Hop, in a clay basin surrounded by the limestone hills that dominate the landscape.

According to legend, the Buddha smiled when he rested here for a day during his travels, prophesying that it would one day be the site of a rich and powerful capital city. Another legend attributes the choice of the site to two hermits, attracted by its natural beauty, who gave it the name of Xieng Dong (or perhaps Xieng Thong, commemorating the name of the flamboyant tree that was the centre of their implantation). It was inhabited first by hybrid beings who became the protectors of the city when they died, and then by human beings, the first of them the Khas, a group coming together from various regions. They were driven out by the Lao, who came down from the north, following their legendary leader Khun Lo, who renamed the city Muang Java, in tribute to the Kha leader whom he had defeated, Khun Java. This legendary account of the city's foundation is borne out by archaeological and toponymic evidence for the settlement of the region.

A stele from Sukhothai attests to its being known under this name at the end of the 13th century AD. A few decades later it became the capital of the powerful kingdom of Lan Xang ("One Million Elephants"), whose wealth and influence can be attributed to the location of its capital at a crossroads on the Silk Route, as well as the centre of Buddhism in the region. It remained the capital of the kingdom until 1560, when this title passed to Vientiane, which was located further from the threatening Burmese armies. It was at this time that it received a new name, Luang Prabang, the name of the famous Buddha image brought earlier from Cambodia. It should

be stressed that neither of the "towns" in Laos, Luang Prabang or Vientiane, conformed with the European urban concept: they were essentially defended royal administrative complexes with adjacent temples and monasteries. Around these clustered a number of distinct village communities, supplying their needs but not integrated into a single administrative entity. It was the villages that acted as commercial centres, not the town as such, which did not have the large mercantile communities to be found at that time in Thailand or Cambodia.

On the death of king Sourigna Vongsa at the end of the 17th century a serious political crisis ensued. The Lan Xang kingdom was divided first into two independent realms, those of Vientiane and Luang Prabang, and then into three, with the creation of the kingdom of Champassak. The Luang Prabang rulers became puppets of the Thai power, especially after 1828, when the Vientiane kingdom disappeared with the complete destruction of the town by the Thai army and the deportation of its inhabitants. Luang Prabang itself suffered gravely from the attacks of the famous *Pavillons Noirs* (Black Flags), who subjected it to sack and pillage from 1887 until the arrival of the French in 1893. Its reconstruction and restoration as a religious and royal capital was the work of King Sisavang Vong, aided in this heavy task by his successive viceroys Chao Maha Oupahat Boun Khong and Prince Phetsarath. Luang Prabang retained its role as the Royal capital until 1946, when Vientiane took over as administrative centre.

During the French protectorate, which was created on 3 October 1893 following the signing of the Franco-Siamese Treaty, Laos was not a homogeneous political entity: the Lan Xang Kingdom was no more than a memory. However, although the country was divided into many small kingdoms and principalities, a nation was forged which transcended the feudal structure that persisted. Towns in the western sense developed, alongside the timeless rural organization of the villages, which was opposed to this intrusion. Luang Prabang provided the nucleus: round its Royal residence were grouped the houses of the nobility and the cult centres (temples and monasteries). It did not attract public buildings like Vientiane, which was chosen by the French for their capital, but on the other hand its commercial potential attracted many French businessmen.

#### *Description*

The political and religious centre of the town is the peninsula, with its Royal and noble residences and religious foundations. This is defined by a defensive wall built from one river bank to the other, sealing off the peninsula at its base. The majority of the buildings are, following tradition, built of wood (apart from the temples, which are in stone). The colonial element of the town is characterized by one- or two-storey terraced houses built in brick; they often have balconies and other decorative features in wood.

The commercial buildings tend to be grouped along the bank of the Mekong, and are interspersed with private houses. The temples and royal residences line one side of the Avenue Pavie, which runs the length of the peninsula, the other side being occupied by intermingled traditional and colonial houses. The administrative buildings are to be found for the most part at the crossroads with the Rue Garnier.

The *monasteries*, which are a major feature of the townscape of Luang Prabang, generally consist of three elements: the cult buildings (shrine (*vihara*), chapel, library, stupa (*thab*), stone posts), ancillary cult buildings, and buildings for inhabitants or visitors (monastic communal buildings, cells, refectory, etc). Most of the *vihara* are orientated towards the north-east. Lao monasteries are classified into three groups - simple shrines, shrines with peripheral galleries, and shrines with encircling ambulatories. Most of those in Luang Prabang are of the first type, with three aisles and a single porch. Their interior furnishings comprise a pedestal or throne for the main Buddha image, a pulpit, a terrace, and a lamp. Most are elaborately decorated with carved motifs but the wall paintings are relatively simple. The Luang Prabang chapels are simple structures for housing images; they may be open or walled. The libraries are also simple structures, usually raised on piles. The monastic buildings are in some cases very elegant. Like the libraries, they are usually raised structures with carved roof supports and other features. There are several masonry buildings which are recent constructions but which preserve the style and form of the wooden prototypes. The *thats* of Luang Prabang are noteworthy for their exuberance and diversity.

Traditional Lao wooden *houses* are basically divided into two spaces: the private rooms and the public terrace. They are usually raised on wooden piles, giving a space beneath for working and for shelter for both men and animals. No nails are used in their construction, nor is any form of bracing employed. Walling may be of planks or plaited bamboo on a wooden frame. Certain buildings are constructed in a form of half-timbering, with panels of bamboo wattling plastered with a mixture of sand, rice-straw, vegetable oils, and chopped water-buffalo hide. A developed form of this house makes use of brick, following the French introduction of this material, but conserving the general layout and appearance of the traditional house. Finally, there are the administrative

buildings, which more or less successfully blend traditional elements with European materials, techniques, and uses.

## **Management and Protection**

### *Legal status*

Ownership of the components of the nominated site is distributed among the Government of the Democratic People's Government of Laos, the Province of Luang Prabang, the Lao Buddhist Federation (FBL), and the Luang Prabang Provincial Committee of the FBL.

The nomination corresponds with the Heritage Protection Zone (*Zone de Protection du Patrimoine - ZPP*), defined by the Institut des Études Techniques Urbaines and the Direction des Musées et de l'Archéologie and confirmed by decree in late 1994. Protection of religious monuments and buildings is covered by Decree No 1375:1978 of the Ministry of National Education and Sports and is the responsibility of the national and provincial administrations of the FBL. Decree No 139:1990 of the Ministry of Information and Culture assigns the responsibilities for protecting the heritage to the Ministry at national level, the Service de l'Information et de la Culture at regional level, and the district or village administration.

Decree No 834:1993 of the Ministry of Information and Culture declares all Lao historic and colonial buildings to be an integral part of the national heritage. Article 103 of the Penal Code makes it a punishable offence to destroy any part of the cultural, historic, artistic, and literary heritage.

### *Management*

At national level the responsible agencies are the Cabinet of the Prime Minister and the Direction des Musées et de l'Archéologie.

The local authorities of Luang Prabang, with the assistance of the services of the Ministry of Construction (IETU), have prepared an urban plan for the town and defined a Heritage Protection Zone (ZPP). Following a detailed inventory of the historic monuments in the town, the IETU team and the Direction des Musées et de l'Archéologie have produced regulations for the preservation and protection of the historic town.

## **Conservation and Authenticity**

### *Conservation history*

The monuments have always been maintained according to local traditions. Since 1991 the *vats* have been the objects of international aid projects for restoration. The restoration techniques need to be improved by exclusive use being made of traditional materials (local wood, brick, tile, and ceramics). It is intended to set up local establishments to produce these: at the present time, this is the case only for the bilateral cooperation project with Sweden on the Royal Palace. The main causes of damage to domestic buildings are humidity due to poor drainage and deterioration of roof coverings.

The following projects have been initiated or completed in the past four years:

- 1991-94: Restoration of the Luang Prabang Museum (former Royal Palace) - cooperative project jointly with Government of Sweden.
- 1992: Restoration of Phou Si stupa - public donations.
- 1993: Restoration of Vat Longkhoun - Fondation de la Maison Indochine-France.
- 1993-94: Construction of building for Pra Bang - Government and private funds.
- 1993: Conservation of Than Ting grotto - Australian cooperation.

- 1994: Restoration of gate of Vat Vixoun - Transfield, Australia.
- 1993-94: Study and Identification of Heritage Protection Zone (ZPP) - IETU Bureau des Projets Urbains (MCTPO - Project Lao 89/002 UNCHS - (HABITAT).
- 1994: Inventory of historic monuments in Luang Prabang by Direction des Musées et de l'Archéologie in collaboration with French architects of Ateliers de la Péninsule.

#### *Authenticity*

The level of authenticity of materials and techniques of many of the domestic buildings in Luang Prabang is low, since modern techniques and materials (especially concrete) have been used to replace traditional materials over a long period. The quality of the temples and monasteries is higher. However, the overall townscape and urban fabric of the town are still authentic to a high degree.

#### **Evaluation**

##### *Action by ICOMOS*

ICOMOS consulted its International Committee of Historic Towns and Villages and also Emeritus Professor Madeleine Giteau of the University of Paris. An expert mission visited Laos in February 1995.

##### *Qualities*

Luang Prabang is outstanding by virtue of both its rich architectural and artistic heritage and also its special urban development, first on traditional oriental lines and then in conjunction with European colonial influences. This is uniquely expressed in the overall urban fabric of the town. It may therefore be considered to be a unique combination of a diversity of communities - rural and urban, royal and religious - within a defined geographical area.

##### *Comparative analysis*

The trajectory of development of Luang Prabang differs in a number of particulars from that of others in south-east Asia. Its most important quality is the way in which it has preserved almost intact the evidence of its pre-colonial, non-European urban structure, which is masked in most of the other towns of the region.

##### *ICOMOS recommendations for future action*

The main concern of ICOMOS when considering this nomination at the beginning of 1995 related to the policy for the conservation and management of the historic town. The Heritage Protection Zone had not been approved until the end of 1994 and was only at that time beginning to be implemented. ICOMOS recommended that further consideration of the nomination should be deferred to await the results of a period of full implementation of the new programme, following the visit of a further expert mission. This recommendation was endorsed by the Bureau of the World Heritage Committee at its 19th Meeting in July 1995.

At the request of the Government of Laos, UNESCO sent an expert mission to Luang Prabang in October 1995, the report of which was made available to ICOMOS in mid-November. A meeting took place with one of the members of the mission, M. Yves Dauge (Inspecteur Général de l'Équipement and Mayor of Chinon) at the ICOMOS Paris headquarters on 27 November, during the course of which the reservations expressed earlier by ICOMOS were discussed in detail. As a result, ICOMOS was satisfied that the conditions that it had put forward earlier had been met.

#### **Recommendation**

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii, iv, and v*.

Luang Prabang represents to an exceptional extent the successful fusion of the traditional architectural and urban structures and those of the European colonial rulers of the 19th and 20th centuries. Its unique townscape is remarkably well preserved, illustrating a key stage in the blending of two distinct cultural traditions.







ICOMOS, November 1995

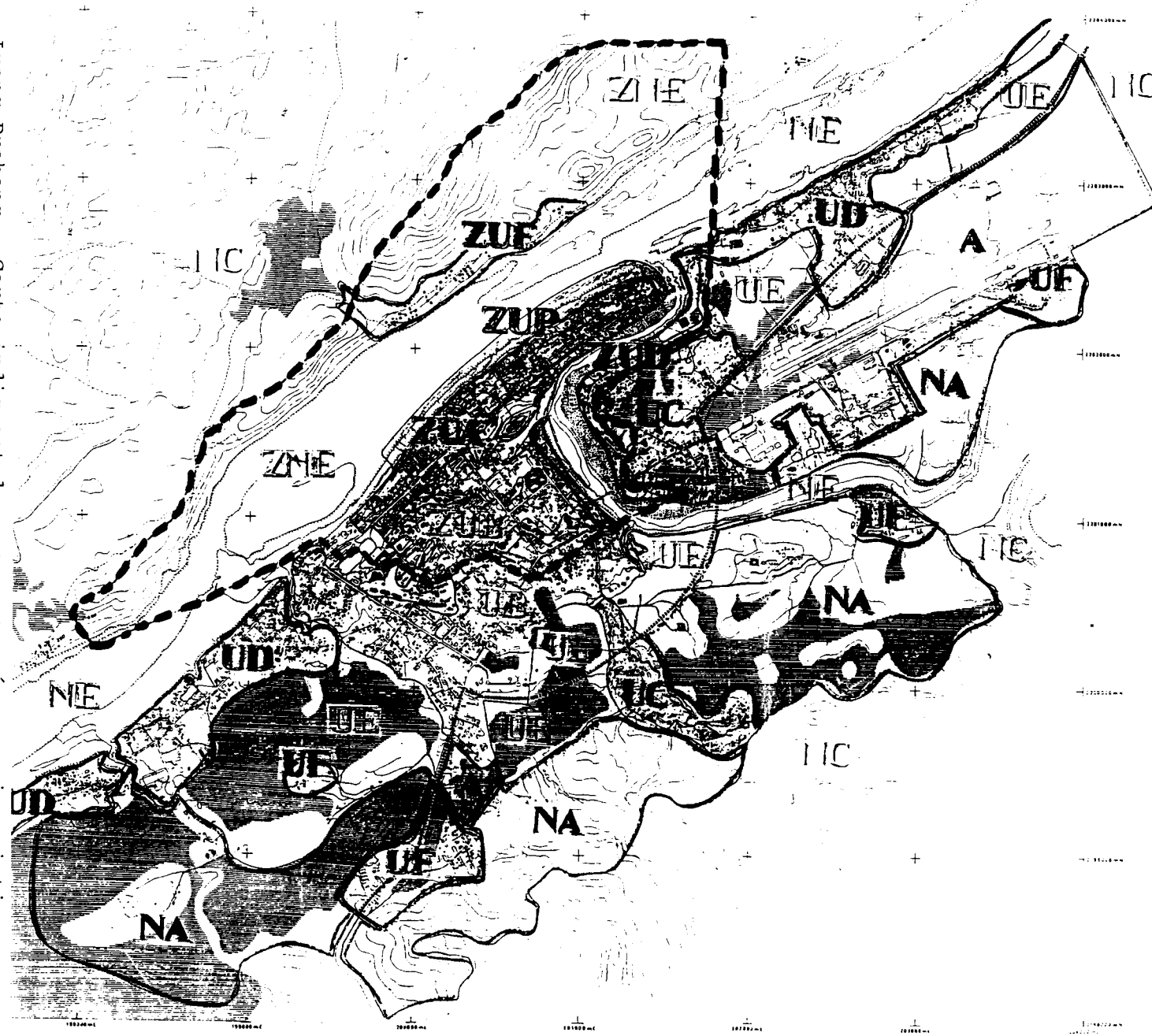
# LOUANG PHRABANG

## PLAN DE ZONAGE

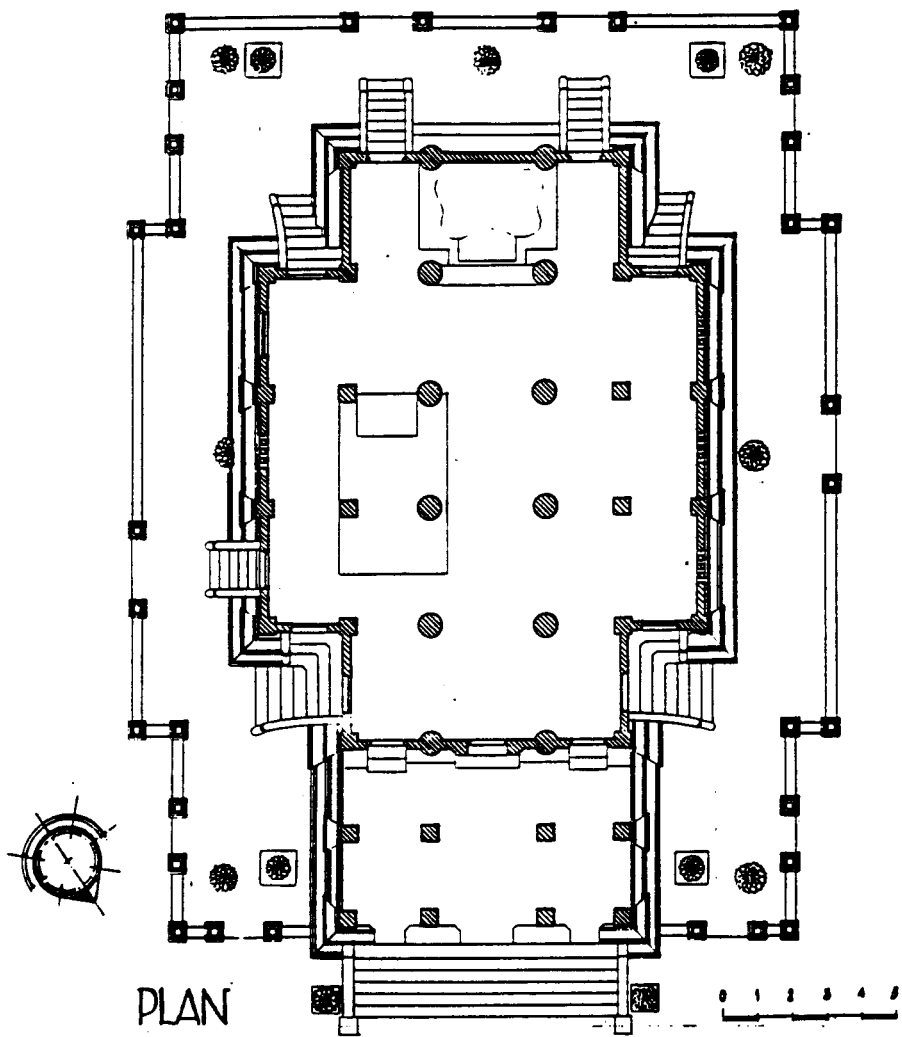
### LEGENDE

<b>UB</b>	Zone Urbaine peri-centrale a densifier
<b>UC</b>	Zone Urbaine peripherique a structurer
<b>UD</b>	Zone Urbaine cordon de berges
<b>UE</b>	Zone Urbaine d'Extension a Aménager reservee pour l'extension future de la ville
<b>UF</b>	Zone Urbaine isolee
<b>NC</b>	Zone Naturelle Cultivee a préserver
<b>NA</b>	Zone Naturelle a Aménager ultérieurement
<b>NE</b>	Zone Naturelle Sensible ( Environnement ) a préserver
<b>A</b>	Zone d'Activites economiques
<b>ZUA</b>	Zone de protection Urbaine centrale a densifier
<b>ZUB</b>	Zone de protection Urbaine peri-centrale a densifier
<b>ZUD</b>	Zone de protection Urbaine cordon sur berges
<b>ZUE</b>	Zone de protection Urbaine isolee
<b>ZUP</b>	Zone de protection Urbaine Portuaire
<b>ZNE</b>	Zone de protection Naturelle Existante

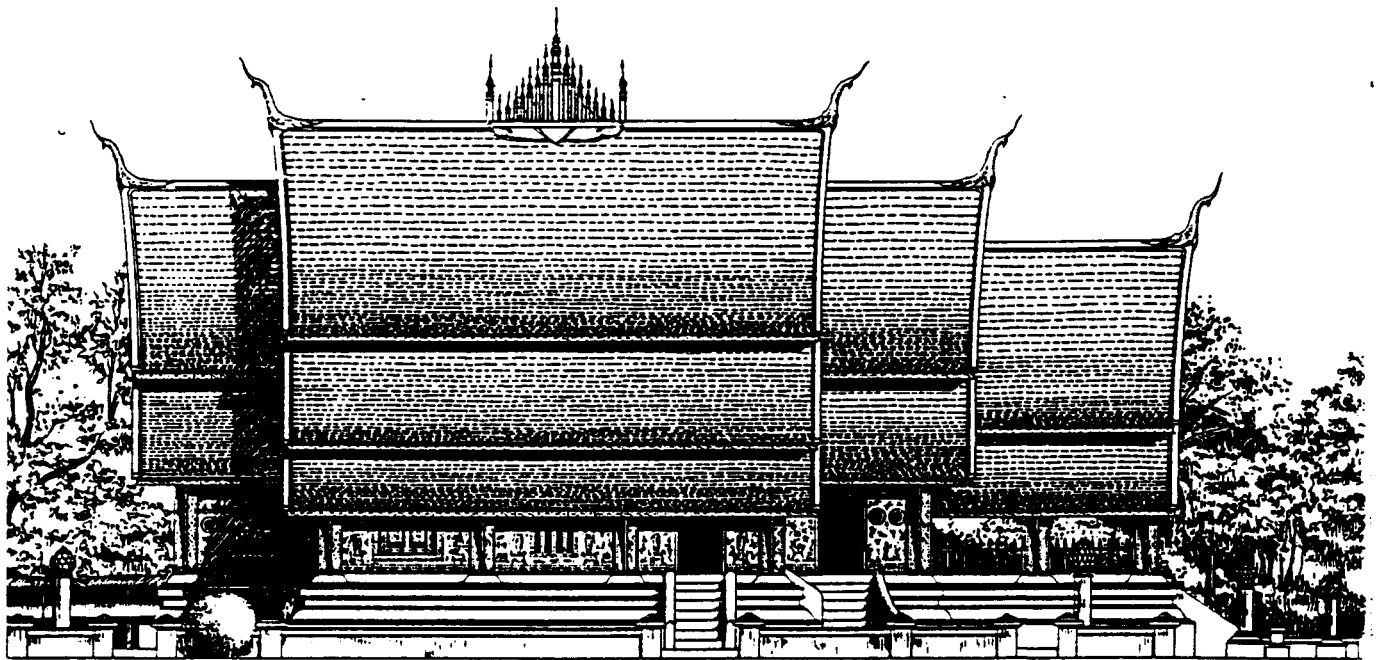
-  - Perimetre de la Zone de Protection du Patrimoine
-  - Nouveau tracé de la RN 13
-  - Rizieres
-  - Mares ou Étangs et Vergers
-  - Pagodes
-  - Cultures Maraicheres



Luang Prabang : Carte indiquant la zone proposée pour inscription  
 (Zone de Protection du Patrimoine)  
 Map showing the nominated area  
 (Zone de Protection du Patrimoine)



Sculpture sur bois  
Porte arrière du Vihan



Abri Pirogue

Vihan

Luang Prabang : partie du Vat Xieng Tong (1560), plan tiré de l'Inventaire de Luang Prabang /

Part of Vat Xieng Tong (1560), from the inventory of Luang Prabang