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In Laos, Restoring the Traditional Way



Cedric Arnold for The New York Times

This house, at 110 Vat Chan Street in the capital, Vientiane, was built about 1915. It was Ms. Brown's first renovation project in the country. [More Photos >](#)

By JULIE MAKINEN
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Vientiane, Laos — For Allison Brown, it was a simple question that changed her life in 2002: "Would you like to rent the house?"

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The 90-year-old, waddle-and-daub home, a traditional structure in Laos, had first caught her eye in the early 1990s, when she came here to the country's capital on an agriculture-consulting job. Years had passed since she had become friends with a member of the family that owned the property and discussed her fondness for it.

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Cedric Arnold for The New York Times
Bamboo blinds provide shade in the dining area of the upstairs unit at 120 Vat Chan street, another property that Ms. Brown restored. The table, designed by Ms. Brown and built by local carpenters, rests on part of a banister of a staircase that originally led to the house's lower level. [More Photos](#) »

Now, the keys to 110 Vat Chan Street were dangling before her. It didn't matter that its clay-tile roof leaked, the garden routinely flooded and one bathtub was a hideous shade of green, or that her work was taking her not to Laos but to places like Ethiopia and Nepal.

"I had to have it," said Ms. Brown, who grew up in Pennsylvania but has made her home base in Thailand, an hour or so drive from Vientiane, since the early 1990s.

She negotiated a seven-year lease, starting at \$100 a month. Her plan was to renovate the 2,800-square-foot property, live in it for a while and then sublet it at a higher rate. Barely three months later, though, the owner of the property next door, another traditional Lao home, asked the same question: "Would you like to rent my

house, too?"

"We negotiated the rent, signed the lease and then I said, 'Where am I going to get the money to do this?'" Ms. Brown recalled.

She decided to create a business dedicated to preserving and restoring traditional Lao buildings. Together with the owners of the first house she rented, and working with a Danish cabinetmaker, local craftsmen and support staff, Ms. Brown's company [Unique Lao Properties](#) has now renovated six structures in Vientiane, with a total of nine units. Her company leases all the properties from their owners, restores them and then sublets the residences mostly to westerners working for foreign-aid organizations, although she recently leased one to the Asia Foundation to serve as its new office in Laos.

Since the banking system in Laos and its laws on property ownership are difficult to navigate, Ms. Brown had to develop a different business model based on long-term rentals and subletting.

"You don't start seeing profits until the fourth, fifth and sixth years," said Ms. Brown, who contributed most of the capital and spent the equivalent of \$25,000 to \$30,000 on each renovation. "It's profitable, but the returns are slow in coming and it's a lot of cash up front."

In renovating her first property, the biggest challenges were finding old tiles to redo the roof. She got some from a building being torn down in her housekeeper's village. She also had to figure out how to direct rain runoff away from the building. An elaborate drainage system, disguised beneath a fish pond and the garden in the front yard, now carries the water to the street.

When possible, Ms. Brown and her team used traditional construction methods. But replicating the original technique for wall plaster — boiling buffalo hides and feet to make glue, then mixing it with lime and rice straw — proved impractical. "Nobody boils buffalo hide anymore," she said. "We put in wall board and cement."

Inside, Ms. Brown made a few concessions to modern convenience. For instance, she reconfigured the two bathrooms, adding modern tile and lighting. She also opened up the place, tearing down several walls to convert four small bedrooms into two larger ones. The kitchen now has a skylight and a microwave.

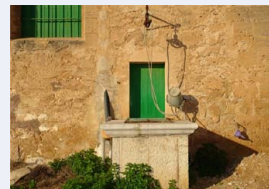
Over all, the feel of the home remains deeply traditional, with its uneven dark wood floors smoothed by generations of feet and many of its furnishings left by the previous residents — from an old radio to the black-and-white family portraits on the living room



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wall.

The most interesting part of renovating these homes, Ms. Brown said, has been developing ties with the owners. "When you take on a house, you take on the family," she said, learning about their love lives, their wartime tribulations and even their health problems.

Before the end of the year, her lease on 110 Vat Chan Street will expire. The family that owns it decided to sell the property. Though they dread the idea that the new owner could modify or even raze the structure, the hundreds of thousands of dollars they stand to make will help them live comfortably in retirement.



"I feel very bad that we are selling," said Phanomsome Outama, 67, one of the five sisters that grew up in the house, who now lives in Washington State. "But my mom didn't leave it to one of us, she left it to all five."

Although Ms. Brown is hoping for a last-minute miracle that would allow her company to buy the property, she's also making plans to move on. Unique Lao Properties just signed a lease for its seventh property, and renovations — starting with adding indoor plumbing — are underway.

"I'm happiest when I'm doing this," Ms. Brown said. "It's really fun."

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