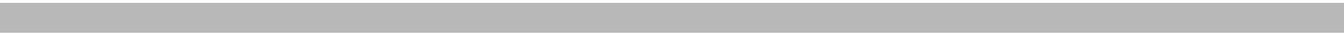


# **SIGUS**VIETNAM



January 2001



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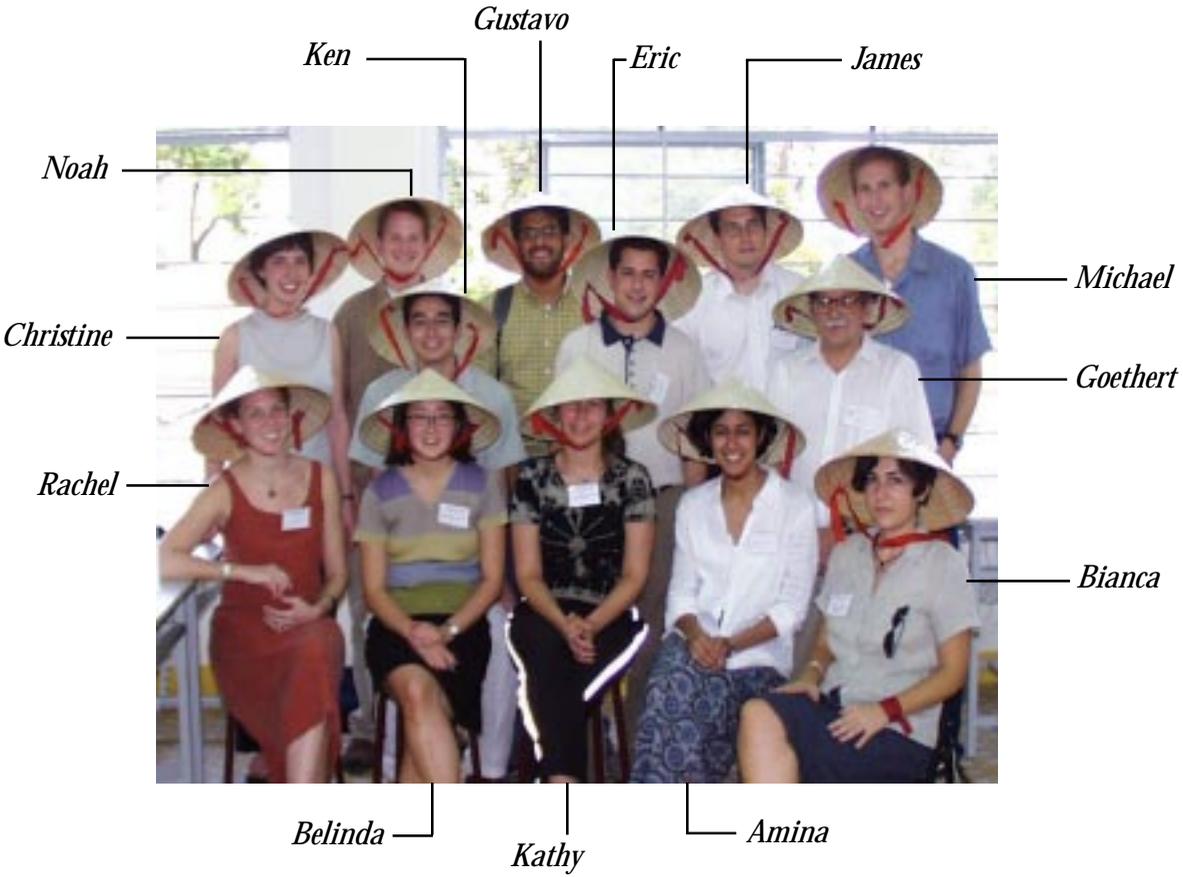


## Reflections from the Vietnam Workshop

SIGUS - Special Interest Group in Urban Settlement  
School of Architecture and Planning  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
77 Massachusetts Avenue  
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139 USA

[sigus@mit.edu](mailto:sigus@mit.edu)  
[web.mit.edu/sigus/www](http://web.mit.edu/sigus/www)

Vietnam  
January 2001



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# Foreword

This booklet is a collection of the individual reflections of the MIT students who participated in a two-week workshop in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. This is the tenth workshop in the series “Building Communities,” a joint program between SIGUS-MIT and CENDEP (Centre for Development and Emergency Practice) at Oxford Brookes University, England. It was held in collaboration with the ACHR – the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, Thailand, and hosted by the University of Architecture at Ho Chi Minh City with support from ENDA, an NGO working with the low income in Vietnam.

The Vietnam workshop focused on three types of communities: canal-side squatters targeted to be relocated, consolidating fringe communities which represent the predominate form of future city expansion, and inner-city worker communities. An oddity – a 15-story high-rise invaded by squatters – was also targeted by one team of students.

Some of the key questions addressed included:

- How to mitigate the harsh affects to the families and the communities in the relocation process?
- What interventions are suggested to ease the transition from rural to urban on the fringes? How to incorporate fringe communities into the formal administrative structures and provide necessary services?

- How to maintain affordability in housing and avoid gentrification when upgrading inner-city areas?

Students formed into teams, with each team working with one community for the two-week period. The workshop ended with a formal presentation of key findings to government officials, planning professionals, faculty of the University, and development agencies.

The workshop series exposes students to working with communities of very low income, and provides the students with an opportunity to jointly define ways to improve the situation. Students are predominately from the architecture and planning fields, but also include engineers, social scientists, nurses and economists.

As in the previous workshops, several basic principles guide the program:

- Hands-on testing of methods for participatory planning and field surveys, while working in multidisciplinary and multicultural groups.
- Identification of community leaders and other stakeholders as working partners for project development and implementation.
- Reflection on the concept of community and on the relationship between ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ when deciding interventions.
- Identification of an effective institutional framework for project development and to look at alternative ways of influencing policy through community-level projects.

- Development of presentation skills appropriate to a variety of settings and audiences.

We would like to thank our hosts at the University of Architecture at Ho Chi Minh City for their hospitality during the workshop, and to ENDA for excellent on-site support in making the workshop a success. And as in previous workshops, the ACHR made it possible to bring everything together by doing the initial groundwork in setting-up the program. Special appreciation is offered to Dr. Tran van Luong, Vice-Rector, and his staff at the University of HCMC, with particular recognition to Do Phu Hung and Vu Thi Hong Hanh, Lecturers; Le Minh Kha, ENDA; and Patama Roonrakwit of ACHR.

– *Dr. Reinhard Goethert*

*SIGUS - Special Interest Group in Urban Settlement - offers an umbrella for research support, workshops, and courses focused on low income communities, stressing participatory method in promoting affordable and equitable housing. A key goal is to explore and define the new professionalism emerging from the challenges of today and tomorrow. Established in 1984, SIGUS grew out of the rethinking of method, practice, and teaching in the housingfield driven by the concerns of the rapidly expanding informal sector in developing countries.*

*SIGUS is directed by Dr.-Ing. Reinhard Goethert, assisted by graduate assistants from the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies. In its activities it draws on faculty from throughout MIT and from national and international agencies in exploring the new professionalism.*

# SIGUSVIETNAM





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## From McDonald's to Diamonds: A Vietnamese Expatriate's Return

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*Most of the boat people who risked their lives to flee Communist Vietnam never imagined returning. Over a period of nearly ten years, thousands left on foot or by raft despite knowing that many others had already died in similar attempts. They fled torture, forced labor, indoctrination in “re-education camps,” and resentment from party officials. Treatment was especially brutal for the South Vietnamese soldiers and their families. The exodus caused by the change in power was responsible in shifting nearly five percent of the Vietnamese population abroad, an estimated 2.3 million people.<sup>1</sup> This is the story of Hung Q. Lê, a political refugee, who stayed with my family for two years in Tacoma, Washington.*

Twenty-five years after the “Fall of Saigon,” Vietnamese living abroad or “Việt Kiều,” as they are called, are returning in record numbers. According to the *Saigon Times Daily*, in 1999 total visits to Vietnam by overseas Vietnamese rose to 300,000<sup>2</sup>, and the country now boasts 373 enterprises financed by Việt Kiều.<sup>3</sup> The number of people return-

ing in Vietnam’s “reverse brain drain” is not different from neighboring Asian countries. In nearby Taiwan, for example, 23,000 Taiwanese, most with doctoral or master’s degrees, returned to direct 82 companies in the nation’s prestigious Hsinchu Industrial Park.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless what marks Vietnam’s return migration is the difference in the original migration. Unlike India, South Korea, and Thailand, most Vietnamese did not leave on planes with student visas; they left in dilapidated rafts. Most Vietnamese did not leave to acquire a better job, but to escape forced labor. The fact that any Vietnamese returned to a country that they risked their lives to flee from is beyond comparison.

Behind Việt Kiều repatriation are stories about their treatment upon returning, their acculturation to a Socialist Vietnam, and their frustrations with local corruption and the state bureaucracy. An unusual, but also in some ways representative account of the forces that trigger Việt Kiều return comes from Hung Q. Lê.

## I. Becoming a Refugee: Postwar Vietnam and the “Boat People”

During the war, Hung and his family were heavily involved in the battles against the Viet Cong. Hung’s father served as a major in the South Vietnamese Army while his brother piloted helicopters. Technically inclined, Hung was trained as a helicopter mechanic—a job that he enjoyed in part because he could spend time with his brother.

Following the unification of Vietnam in 1975, Hung, his brother, and father were forced into separate “re-education” camps given their loyalties to the South Vietnamese Army. Hung describes these conditions,

*We were forced to work sixteen hours a day and were only fed hot water and rice—not even bad coffee or tea just hot water. They always told me that Ho Chi Minh was our uncle and that he was always right, that we were wrong. We had to say yes or we were punished...I hated the camps and had to leave them.*

The inhumane conditions in the camps, coupled with the successful escape of several of his fellow prisoners to Canada and the United States, motivated Hung to look for a hole to creep out through. In 1977 his first escape allowed him to buy passage (US\$2,000) on a fishing boat that drifted into the South China Sea until it was intercepted by a Vietnamese Navy cutter one day later. Sent back to the “re-education” camp

with an extended sentence, Hung was convinced that escaping from Vietnam was only a matter of effort. This conviction inspired four more unsuccessful escapes over a period of five years. Pirates, bad weather, the Vietnamese Navy, and a defective boat engine all were reasons underlying his failed attempts.

After five years of failed escape attempts and two more years until the end of his sentence, Hung organized his last escape in 1982. While an officer left his post to buy a cigarette, Hung and a fellow prisoner, Minh, sprinted through the jungle with the hopes of eventually returning to their families in Saigon. For three days they eluded the search party by sleeping in branches of trees and taking a labyrinthine path. On the fourth day, they met a farmer who housed Hung and Minh and advised them to send notice to their families rather than risk passing five highway checkpoints between the area and Saigon. Upon receiving word of Hung, his sister traveled north to the farm and helped him go into hiding in a supply room of a relative’s grocery store.

The news of the death of Hung’s eldest brother, Dé, in a “re-education” camp prompted the family to pool their savings together to fund Hung’s escape from Vietnam. When there was not any more money to borrow from friends, his mother pawned her wedding ring. Shortly thereafter, Hung



*1. Conditions on a Refugee Boat from Vietnam in the South China Sea.*

paid a skeleton crew the US\$2,000 to guarantee passage on a dilapidated fishing boat. The day he pushed off the dock with thirty other refugees would mark the last time he would set foot on Vietnam for over seven years.

Only for the first three days did the fishing boat's motor function, thereafter the boat drifted into the South China Sea. The tactic was to rendezvous with an ocean liner leaving from Singapore and then immigrate to the freighter's home country—Israel, Germany, France, Peru, Australia, Canada or United States—the country mattered only in the sense that it was not Vietnam. Lost at sea, the fishing boat was rescued on its tenth day at sea by a private helicopter from an Australian oilrig off the coast of Indonesia. By conservative estimates, the boat had drifted for nearly 1,200 miles. Hung lived

in a tent in a refugee camp in the Indonesian island of Pulau Monyet<sup>5</sup> until his application was accepted by the U.S. Immigration authorities and he was flown to his sponsor in the town of Puyallup, Washington.

In the United States Hung struggled with assimilating into American culture and from the detachment of his family. During the 1980s, it was difficult to contact his Vietnamese family, let alone ascertain whether his father was alive or dead in the "re-education camps." In his first months he was prescribed sleeping pills for his insomnia and later found solace in a local Catholic Church. Nevertheless, he argues that his recovery from Vietnamese prison and the isolation from family took place not in a hospital or a church, but in front of a fry pit at McDonald's. Work both



*2. Boat people from Vietnam in the  
South China Sea, 1980*

connected him with Americans—customers and co-workers—and enabled him to save money for his eventual return to Saigon. Through the local Vietnamese community, he heard of the dangers of returning—possible imprisonment and a policy that required the Việt Kiều a \$200 entrance tax, be

escorted by military personnel, sleep in a government-run hotel, check-in with local Communist authorities, and visit with their family for no more than four hours a day. Only when these restrictions were lifted in 1989 did Hung return to Saigon with a new wedding ring for his mother in hand.

## II. Why Return?

Hung's return to Vietnam marked the beginning of an era in which he, and many other Việt Kiều, literally "commuted" between the Western U.S. and Vietnam. For Hung, one of the main attractions was that he could be with and support his family. Upon establishing a lucrative diamond and jade trading business, Hung deposited US\$100,000 cash for the construction of an eight-bedroom house with three bathrooms, parking garage, and balcony. Not only is he back with his family, but now houses his mother, father, sister, younger brother, brother-in-law, two nieces, and four dogs. He funds his sister's restaurant and a minivan business that transports Korean and Taiwanese managers of nearby export processing zones.

Beyond Hung's commitment to his family, he also returned because of business opportunities in Vietnam. He imports uncut jade and diamond from Myanmar to Ho Chi Minh City where he employs a jeweler to shave the jewels and make rings and necklaces according to the specification of his orders from Vietnamese communities in the United States. Typically he spends half of the year collecting these orders from Vietnamese-American businesses in Seattle, Washington, D.C., Lincoln, Nebraska, San Francisco, Santa Ana, and Los Angeles. His most popular designs are Buddha necklaces, jade bracelets, diamond rings, and chokers that are sold anywhere from \$150 to \$21,000 each. As his costs for both jewels and labor are lower than in the U.S., his clients prefer



*3. Hung Q. Le in front of his estate in the suburb of Ho Chi Minh City.*

to cut out jewelry advertisements from the local stores, and ask Hung for 75% of the price.

During the past decade, Vietnamese venture capitalists, like Hung, poured money into Vietnam, believing that it would become the next Asian Tiger. Vietnam became one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, averaging around 8% annual GDP growth from 1990 to 1997. Simultaneously, investment grew three-fold and domestic savings quintupled.<sup>6</sup> Alongside the “pull” to their family and the economic opportunities in Vietnam, several Việt Kiều were “pushed” by their frustration with their slow advancement in U.S. businesses and the feeling of being a “second-class citizen.” Ngoc Nguyen, an architect and onetime Houston resident noted, “If I’d have stayed

in the States, it would have taken me five or ten years to get where I am today.”<sup>7</sup> With expertise in foreign language and often with clientele abroad, the Việt Kiều have a clear advantage over native Vietnamese in several fields.

Beyond family and the allure of economic success, the Việt Kiều are returning in greater numbers because of a disillusionment with American culture and social mores. The displeasure relates to something as commonplace as greetings. Hung explains, “I always say ‘Hi’ to Americans and they do not say ‘Hi’ back. They’re very cold to me.” In other cases though, the dislocation with Vietnam and the freedom can lead to more serious outcomes. Married in Vietnam, Hung returned to the Santa Ana area of California with his bride. Though she did not seem to



4. In rural Vietnam where most people commute by bicycle, Hung Q. Le drives a new motor scooter.

have a gambling problem in Vietnam, she became a compulsive gambler. Hung reflects,

*"she went to the casino every night. I work hard for money for her and our daughter and she gambles it all away. She gambled the diamonds from her wedding ring and then put in fake diamonds. But I know diamonds and I knew that she has a problem. She is a good person in Vietnam, but in California she is someone else... Now when my friends leave for the states, I say 'go, see the United States, work hard, but keep a house here. If you don't like it, you can always come back."*

The lifestyle in the United States, coupled with both the "pull" of economic opportunity and slow advancement in the U.S. attract Việt Kiều back to Vietnam. Though they leave problems endemic to the United States behind them, their arrival creates a host of different cultural and political obstacles.

### III. The Uphill Homecoming of the Việt Kiều

Though Hung is in all respects Vietnamese by birth, language, and family he is officially an American according to the Vietnamese government. For this reason, he is charged tourist prices for domestic airfare, property, sales tax, and hotel tax. To avoid these high

taxes, his brother and father place all the family's holdings in their names. In other words, technically the home in the suburb outside Ho Chi Minh City, the four mopeds, two vans, and restaurant is all the property of his younger brother and father. Technically, they are housing Hung.

Hung's return coincided with an introduction to the Communist dimension of Vietnam. He is awoken each morning at 5:30 by loudspeakers proclaiming the glories of Socialism and the daily censored news of the town officials. When Hung reaches in his wallet for the local currency, he must look at the face of Ho Chi Minh, a man his family crossed swords with. Visually he is confronted with billboards of Lenin, Marx, and the ubiquitous bronze sickle and hammer. Though these pieces are valued even as relics in Russia, they perhaps best symbolize the political lethargy of post-cold war Vietnam.

Given his involvement in the war, Hung must continually report his activities to the local Communist leaders and security apparatus that view Vietnamese expatriates with suspicion. This is reinforced by the Vietnam's state-controlled press that uses "Việt Kiều" when referring to "foreign scofflaws, rabid anti-Communists, or people plotting acts of sabotage against the nation."<sup>1</sup>

Though most Americans have recovered from the tragic loss of lives in Vietnam, Hung is reminded of his family's "defeat" and the North Vietnamese "victory" on an hourly basis.

#### IV. “Commuting” Between Two Nations

Hung Lê’s story describes both the brain drain and the return of Vietnamese émigrés. In one direction, Vietnamese continue to leave in large numbers not on rafts, but through student visas. Of the 4,301 government-sponsored Vietnamese graduating from universities abroad between 1985 and 1999, only 1,365 (31.7%) came back to report at the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in Vietnam. MOET calculates that the remaining 2,936 people abroad represent a waste of up to \$114.5 million.<sup>2</sup> In the opposite direction, first generation Vietnamese Americans and Vietnamese émigrés are returning to Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, lured by the booming economy and their connections to family members.

The constant out-migration and in-migration in Vietnam represents a perfect equilibrium model in the sense that the same forces—family and economic opportunities—which drive the Việt Kiều to return also induce the Vietnamese to leave their country. With over two million Việt Kiều abroad, several Vietnamese are equally interested in reuniting with brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, cousins, and grandchildren abroad.

The need to see family in the United States and Canada place Hung between these two forces. With a home in both Ho Chi Minh City and Lincoln, Nebraska, he is al-

ways preparing to *leave* or to *return* to Vietnam. Though few in Vietnam lead such a life, the departure of a relative or a friend to the United States, places that relationship, and therefore that person in two countries at once. Perhaps, Hung’s ability to maintain both friendships and support family on both sides of the globe give him high regard in his village. Hung affirms,

*“I’ve been to the United States thirty-one times. No one believes me—they demanded to see my passport and then they saw all the stamps. That’s why I’m so important here—it is the dream of many people to see the United States just once before they die, not even to stay, but just to see. When I tell them I’ve been there thirty-one times, they can’t believe it. Before 1993, there were no diplomatic relations with the U.S.—it was impossible to go. Now after the door opened, everyone wants to go.”*

The Việt Kiều returnees have had the unique opportunity to live two lives—one in the United States the other in Vietnam. For most of the Việt Kiều, their “U-turn” back to Vietnam ends in their reunion with family members and an acculturation to the “new” Vietnam. But for those in perpetual motion like Hung Q. Le, they live both lives and in both worlds at once. ■

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> The Saigon Times Daily, "Overseas Vietnamese Want To Feel At Home," April 5, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Vietnamese News Agency. "Overseas Vietnamese Remit US\$1.1b In 1999." World Wide Web. <http://vietnamnews.vnagency.com.vn/2000-01/08/Stories/16.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> The Saigon Times Daily. "Biggest Number of Viet Kieu Returning for Tet Reported." January 18, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> From 1990 to September, 1994. See Gene Koretz, "China's Reverse Brain Drain." *Business Week*. March 6, 1995. p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> Pulau Monyet is colloquially known as "Monkey Island."

<sup>6</sup> United States Department of State. *Background Notes: Vietnam*. Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. September, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in David Lamb, "A Bridge Between Two Worlds: Young Vietnamese Americans are Returning to the Land Their Parents Fled, Drawn By the Chance to Help Rebuild Their Ancestral Home," in *Los Angeles Times*. November 4, 1997. Page A-1.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Mathes, "Overseas Vietnamese Resent 'Viet Kieu' Label," *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*. April 19, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> I would like to thank Dr. David Dapice for this reference. Vietnamese Students, 30 January, 2001, p. 46.

## Illustrations:

1. Office of the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees. *Images of Exile*. 1991. Copyright West Australian Newspapers Ltd.

2. Office of the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees. *Images of Exile*. Copyright Gerard Klijn.

3. Michael Donovan

4. Michael Donovan



## Tet New Year in Vietnam 2001, a Photo Essay

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*The following pages describe many of the experiences I had during a four week visit to Vietnam during January 2001. At first the country and its culture presented shocks to me, though I quickly became unfettered at such challenges as crossing a street in Ho Chi Minh City filled with motorbikes.*

For my first two weeks in Vietnam, I participated in an academic workshop, Rebuilding Communities - Resettlement in Ho Chi Minh City, during which I worked collaboratively with architecture and urban development students from Oxford Brookes University and the University of Architecture in Ho Chi Minh City. My travels after the workshop allowed me to experience every available mode of transportation - I took a van (aka "mini-bus") to Phan Thiet, I flew to Hanoi, took a train to Hue, traveled by van to Danang, rode by motorbike to Hoi An, and finally flew back to Ho Chi Minh City. By the end of my travels in Vietnam, I had grown comfortable and quite fond of the place I had only begun to know. Having encountered many people, places, foods,

and sights previously unknown to me, I quickly found that the people I met were warm and welcoming, and they easily engaged tourists. The food and places were rich and complex, showing signs of their colonial and sometimes war-torn past. Because I spent the most time in Ho Chi Minh City, my understanding of that place is probably the best, though my travels throughout Vietnam put the different places into perspective relative to one another.

Many of my first impressions of Ho Chi Minh City were of Go Vap, the community that my student group studied during the workshop. Go Vap is located on the northern edge of Ho Chi Minh City where there is undeveloped land and less density than in the rest of the city. About one-hundred fifty families live there, and its population is growing quickly. Our group visited the community six times in order to gather information by talking to many people individually in their homes and in a public forum. We found that many residents know one another well, some like certain people more than

others, and many expressed feelings that they much prefer living on the outer edge of Ho Chi Minh City instead of in its crowded center.

The outcome of the study provided us with a loose understanding of how Go Vap, as well as smaller sections of Ho Chi Minh City, is organized in terms of government support and involvement. Go Vap is considered a district within Ward #17. There are five leaders (#61-#65) within Go Vap who are the liaisons to their Ward leader, who is a Communist Party official. The five leaders of Go Vap are elected, unpaid, and serve residents by contacting the government with concerns such as needs of infrastructure improvement. Twice during the study, our group met with the government official in charge of Ward #17. We visited his office at the Ward planning office where we met his boss, a city planner.

Among the most important lessons I took away from the workshop was learning a process for understanding a culture completely foreign to me. Because of time constraints set by the workshop, it became apparent that understanding a relatively small community like Go Vap requires continual visits and many more conversations than we had time. During our first group visit to the community, many front doors were closed to us and the only really visible residents were men who stood on their front porches observing us as we walked through introducing ourselves. People were reluctant to talk to us initially,

but by our sixth visit each of us had been invited by at least a couple of people to spend Tet holiday with them and their families.

In the following essay, I present many of the sights I encountered. Through sketches and photographs I intend to tell many stories as opposed to attempting to draw a singular conclusion about the culture. I have organized the information into five categories; food, buildings, transportation, landscape and people are classified according to what impressed me about each particular scene. Certainly there are overlaps within the subdivisions, but hopefully the contents of the five categories will offer the reader information on several aspects of the culture. The photos are arranged in geographical order, traveling from south to north - Ho Chi Minh City, Phan Thiet, Hue and Hanoi. This will give the reader a sense of the differences between the south and the north of Vietnam. ■



*A man stands over an open-flame Weber at an eatery in Hanoi. "Thit Cho" means dog meat, and is a specialty dish found in the north of Vietnam, according to a Vietnamese student in my workshop group.*



*A view looking outside of Ben Than market in Ho Chi Minh City.*



*Dried and smoked squid roll by on a wooden, lighted cart near the Rex Hotel in the center of Saigon. In the foreground are motorbikes parked along a sidewalk, and in the background are municipal buildings commonly painted an ochre color.*



*This woman was selling "kim" on the sidewalk directly in front of Ben Than market. She explained that kim are small birds. Here they are fried and resting over a container of oil.*



*This house was located near the west edge of Go Vap. This photo was taken during the middle of the day. The father had come home to pick his son up in time for afternoon classes at a nearby school. He took his sandals off after he had parked his motorbike inside.*

*The man who lived here explained that he hangs the small mirror directly above the front door in order to prevent negative energies from entering his house.*



*Entrance to Go Vap, view of the community billiards building.*



*This abandoned colonial building in Hue was located across the street from the banks of the Perfume River. The building dwarfed the other buildings on the street because of its scale.*





*A man and his son were the attendants to this streetside motorbike repair stop in Ho Chi Minh City; they are located outside of the photograph to my right. This photo was taken at 10:30pm. The moving traffic consisted almost entirely of motorbikes, with an occasional car.*



*This was the scene outside of the Saigon airport on the day I departed Vietnam. It appeared that most were taxi drivers, but there were many people waiting around for what appeared to be the reason of people watching.*



*This cyclo was too full for its driver to ride; instead he pushes kids across the Perfume River on the Phu Xuan bridge in Hue. The children greeted me as I walked in the opposite direction. They shouted, "Hello, how are you."*

*The streets of Hanoi were filled with motorbikes carrying small tangerine trees one day before Tet. The proprietor at the hotel where I stayed explained that the tradition of putting a tree in a home was from a Chinese tradition, and that people did not eat the fruits.*



*One day before Tet, this woman sold roses on a street in the Old Quarter in Hanoi. At this time, many stores began to close for the holiday, but shopping activity still flourished on the sidewalks.*



*This is a view from a train traveling from Hanoi to Hue on the day after Tet. Sparsely populated along its eastern coast, the countryside was divided into plots that appeared to be predominantly rice fields.*





*A common sight here in Hanoi, and in Ho Chi Minh City, men of all ages received hair-cuts and shaves with a straight razor.*



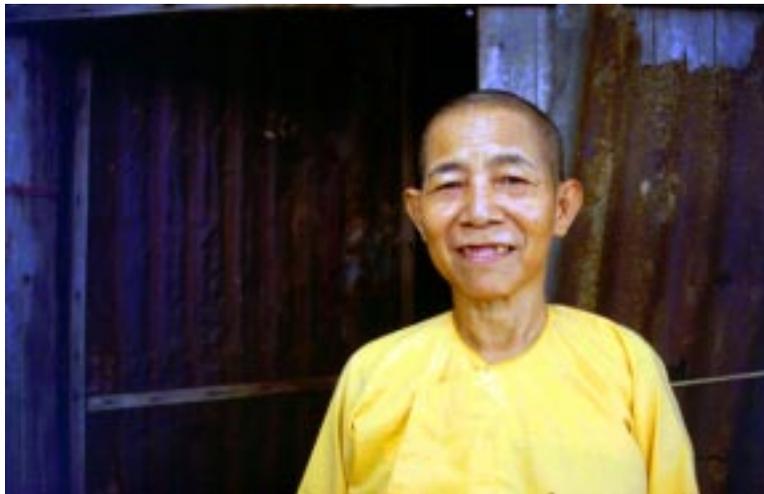
*This man stands in the front doorway of his house. He explained to me that he prayed each morning to the poster of the Buddha hanging on the wall behind his back. The incense hanging on the door frame burned each day. When speaking to me he preferred French over English when there was no help of a translator.*



*Leader #64 poses in front of his house. The red house number indicates his position as one of the five elected leaders in Go Vap. He and his family had just moved to the community from elsewhere in Ho Chi Minh City just four weeks prior.*



*Guards at Ho Chi Minh's tomb in Hanoi posed for this photo after insisting that they take my photo with my camera.*



*This Buddhist monk stays in this house only occasionally when she is not staying at the temple near Go Vap. She explained that this is a rental house that is used by other monks in her temple.*



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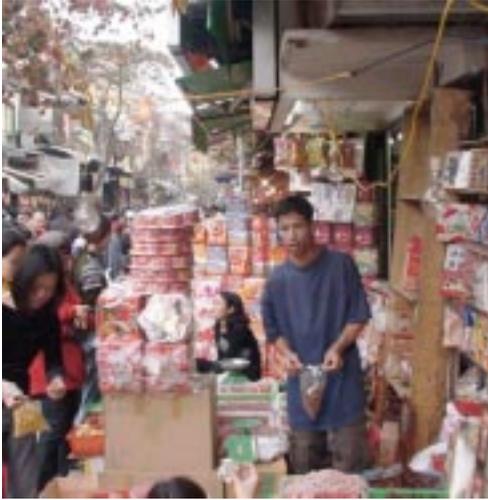
Watch out for the mechanic on the corner! The crowded sidewalks of Vietnam

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*When walking in Ho Chi Minh City, you better watch out for motorcycles, and I don't mean just in the road, but in the sidewalks. And motorcycles are not the only obstacles; barbers, mechanics, seamstresses, food carts, and even ironworkers crowd the sidewalks of the congested city, making pedestrian traffic virtually impossible. In the dense urban fabric that is Ho Chi Minh City, sidewalks*

*are the only open space available to conduct business, businesses that in other big cities would be found in the back lots of the buildings or their own small space. The reason for this appropriation of the public space is not only the lack of private space, but also other major socio-economic factors (that are far from my field of knowledge) that are specific to Vietnam and its political regime.*





In a communist system like Vietnam the concept of private property is non-existent. Land is of the people and is regularly taken without any bureaucratic procedures, creating major problems in urban planning. The informal settlements that line the canals or the outside of the city are created by people who claim the land and build on it. In a similar way the sidewalk could be seen as “public” land and its appropriation doesn’t carry the debate of tenure that would be more restrictive in other political systems, allowing the use of it not just for pedestrian traffic, but a whole range of varied uses from commercial to parking. The pictures were taken in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi during the January Workshop as a way to explore the sidewalks of Vietnam, crowded sidewalks with markets that flow from the stores in to them in a way that the pedestrians can not use them, since they are occupied by the mer-

chandise, and are forced to the streets where they share the road with the countless motorcycles that carry goods and customers.

### Motorcycles

A key aspect is the fact that a big part of the urban population use motorcycles for transportation. They are relatively inexpensive and given the lack of adequate public transportation, are a more reliable way of getting around. This generates a problem that is common in all major cities, parking; but in the case of Vietnam parking is not for cars, but for bicycles and motorcycles, given the lack of open space and that most people are using the motorcycle instead of walking, the sidewalk is transformed into parking space. The sidewalk goes from being a public thoroughway to a utilitarian place that merges different functions.



institutions and entertainment venues. But the most interesting subdivision of the public space happens in streets where there are a lot of food stalls that depend in the pedestrian traffic for business. Yellow lines are drawn on the sidewalk to limit the area which is allowed for tables at each side and the center strip is left for walking, or better yet, bike parking of the customers. This leads to a curious experience of walking down a street and seeing people eating their meals peacefully while you, on the other hand, are trying to dodge the bikes and boiling pots of the cooks. In parts of the city where sidewalks are not as wide there are no subdivisions and there is an even more chaotic interaction between food stalls, motorcycles and pedestrians.

### Food Stalls

These food stalls are the most common view on the sidewalks, varying in size from the small corner stove to the big “restaurants” that stretch the whole block. Here you’ll find the greatest

Motorcycles and commerce share space. In the really busy areas or for special events, parts of the sidewalk are roped off and used solely for paid parking. Crossing the sidewalk is practically impossible. Foodsellers settle in the space left over and create transient restaurants.

Given this situation a certain idea of propriety hatches and the sidewalk is fenced or divided. In some cases more established stores fence their fronts to keep the undesired clutter from swamping their “legitimate” use of their sidewalk for their own goods. Often the front is roped of for bike parking in public



Vietnamese food you ever had, in sanitary conditions that are highly questionable. Blocks of ice are stored under a plastic sheet; huge pots cook the most varied dishes right next to the non-stop traffic. These people set up shop every morning travelling from far away communities to make their living selling food on a corner. Whole families work all day preparing the ingredients and cutting up pieces of meat for the next day meals. Some food cart vendors spend their mornings preparing the ingredients and head out as night falls to sell a bowl of *Pho* (Vietnamese noodles) on a corner. A night stall is not only meant to get the dinner crowd, but also to avoid problems with the police. A lot of these vendors are illegally selling food and only come out at night because they believe police patrolling is less intense. The reason for the covert operations is that they are illegal immigrants to the city and don't have government permission to live in the city.



#### Other sidewalk enterprise

The food stalls may be the most common activity in the sidewalk but by no means is it the only one. You'll see a seamstress on one corner and metal polishers across the street. Business is conducted outside, the lowest overhead cost



you can find. And just like the food stalls, these people travel from their homes to the same corner just to be in the right place or because they used to live here and had been evicted in the city's many redevelopment projects. They have a clientele that know where to find them, and even if they have to travel one hour a day with the sewing machine on the back of a motorcycle they'll return to a specific corner. An interesting aspect of the businesses is that they tend to zone themselves, for example, there where two more metal polishers next to the ones on the corner. The barber on the top, who is working in one of the busiest streets in

the city, has a steady flow of customers that you see getting their haircuts, but there is another one 30 feet after him. Also, given the amount of motorcycles, mechanics and tire repair shops are abound, spreading their tools so you have to navigate between pumps, tires and chairs.

However there are a few exceptions to the clutter in the sidewalks. Ho Chi Minh City is experiencing tremendous economic growth and is the country's main commercial and industrial city. The effects of foreign capital are everywhere. This is evident in the major commercial centers, hotels and office towers that





have appeared in the city's skyline. The sidewalks of these developments are as removed from the reality of the streets as the isolated towers that they surround. The sidewalks are treated as picturesque reinterpretations of public space with planters and landscaping. The government also provides a different version of the sidewalk. Major avenues are planted with flowers and are very orderly, few dare take a bit of this space for any activity, but the streets that cross this major avenues are crowded allays giving the user a sharp contrast when you cross the intersection. Often landscaped gardens surround a government office, but on the corner you find a crowded sidewalk used as parking. In other parts of the city, planners take advantage of the width of the sidewalk and introduce a side street.

But definitely the most interesting thing about walking, or trying to, on the sidewalks of Vietnam are the people. The good thing about it being so crowded is that everybody is on the streets. The sidewalk is not only commercial, but its also the place where people escape form their houses to be outside, they live, eat, sleep, buy, sell, talk and play in public. Making the sidewalk a social melting pot allows the visitor to sample the full range of Vietnamese living: from trinket shopping in the commercial sectors, to watching a group of old men playing checkers in the alleys of the Chinese district. In this process you discover the warmth of the people, that even when struggling to get by they are always willing to give you a smile..... and sometimes sell you a bit of *Pho*.■





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## Motorbikes and Transportation Challenges in a Growing City

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### I. Introduction

*For a sprawling metropolis almost entirely reliant on private forms of transportation, Ho Chi Minh City—with its ubiquitous sidewalk vendors, food stalls and continuous rows of storefronts engaging the street—retains a remarkable degree of vitality in the public realm. At the same time, a resident of the city might regard the sight of a pedestrian strolling the city’s sidewalks as something of an anomaly; that is, assuming the pedestrian manages to find room to walk on the sidewalk instead of being forced to walk in the street. As will soon become clear, the link between these seemingly counterintuitive facets of the city is the motorbike – the city’s prevailing mode of transportation, symbol of upward mobility, cause of traffic congestion and pollution, safety hazard, sidewalk and, arguably, the most significant factor in keeping the city functioning amid a period of rapid population growth, economic development and geographic expansion.*

At present, the estimated 1.4 million motorbikes in Ho Chi Minh City (as of June 2000) comprise 80% of traffic in the city’s central area.<sup>1</sup> The number of motorbikes in the city tripled between 1991 and 1996, and, thanks in part to the availability of cheap motorbikes imported from China and Thailand, the number of motorbike registrations continues to grow at a rate of approximately 15 percent each year.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, on a national scale, the number of motorbikes throughout Vietnam is projected to quadruple by the year 2008 to a total of 32 million.<sup>3</sup>

Using the many contradictions and implications of the motorbike society as a starting point, my goal here is to highlight, from my own point a view as a visiting observer, some of the substantial transportation and development challenges confronting Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). In particular, I raise a series of considerations and

questions that I believe might inform future solutions to these challenges. By no means exhaustive or conclusive, my reflections draw primarily on my own casual observations and conversations with HCMC residents during my recent visit to the city, as well as on selected news and other sources to provide factual context.

## II. Transportation and Development Challenges in a Motorbike Society

To the first time visitor to Ho Chi Minh City, one's first visual impression is shaped by the lines of motorbike traffic (as many of as eight across in both directions on some of the widest and most heavily traveled roads)—sometimes daunting currents of traffic through which to navigate as a pedestrian—and by the curbside informal sector oriented to passing motorbikes which pull over on impulse for a range of services, including the informal gasoline and bike repair operations that seem to occupy many a street corner. Meanwhile, passing motorists exhibit a precarious resourcefulness in the ways in which motorbikes are used to transport everything from construction materials and chickens to entire families (even though there supposedly exists a law limiting motorbikes to two passengers).

From an urban design perspective, motorbikes also shape the public realm by serving as an informal variety of street furniture and a spontaneous venue for social interaction and even roadside naps, while converting many sidewalks into parking lots.

The sheer number of motorbikes on the road, as well as the flexibility and adaptability of motorbike travel, make the streets of Ho Chi Minh City a spontaneously social environment – one frequently gets the feeling that one is being watched, a sensation confirmed by the number of occasions in which passing motorists pulled over to engage me in conversation and, more disturbingly, by the tandem of men on motorbikes I witnessed attempting to snatch a distracted colleague's purse. (In a likely unanticipated consequence of motorization of Ho Chi Minh City, motorbikes now serve as a convenient accessory in hit-and-run petty theft, an unfortunate yet common phenomenon citywide.)

Also evident is the tremendous pride with which city residents embrace the motorbike. The appeal of the motorbike is both practical and symbolic: as a valuable source of independence and efficiency and also an emblem of upward mobility, progress



*Street life and commerce revolves around the motorbike.*



*Ho Chi Minh City sidewalk as parking lot.*



*Ho Chi Minh City traffic congestion and pollution*

and—particularly among the younger generation—a Vietnamese version of “biker cool.” (On a visit to the city’s most upscale department store, for instance, I was struck by a prominent display of t-shirts extolling the virtues of motorbike travel.)

While motorbikes accentuate many of the assets that make Ho Chi Minh City vibrant, they also carry with them a very observable underside. Particularly evident are two distinguishing characteristics of the city: the congestion that encumbers traffic on many city streets and the noticeable lack of public transportation. With increased congestion, travel speeds throughout the city are declining to an average of 25 kilometers per hour<sup>4</sup>, while only a small segment of the population (100,000 people) currently utilizes existing bus service on a daily basis.<sup>5</sup> Particularly when one factors in the accompanying 14.3% increase in automobile traffic in 2000, the motorbike statistics are daunting from a transportation perspective.

Also quite visible are the safety and environmental concerns associated with motorbike travel. Outside some of the neighborhood People’s Committee offices one may find a billboard with photographs displaying (often in startlingly graphic detail) traffic accidents involving motorbikes, along with captions urging the use of motorcycle helmets. A frequently cited statistic describes the rate of motorbike-related fatalities in Vietnam (25 per day) as equivalent to the effects of a 747 airliner, at carrying capacity, crashing every 20 days with no survivors.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, motorbike accidents annually lead to the death of 50,000 children under the age of 16.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, one also will notice that a significant number of passing motorbike drivers are almost unrecognizable behind face masks and sunglasses worn to mitigate against direct exposure to motorbike exhaust, one manifestation of the air pollution challenges facing the city.

### III. Transportation Policies and Proposals

A review of articles issued by the English-language news service in Vietnam reveals at least one article almost every month on the subject of transportation challenges in Ho Chi Minh City. While these challenges have been well-articulated by government officials and local and international experts, it is clear from the coverage of official government proposals and the suggestions of local and international experts that no consensus exists on the best way to begin addressing the city's transportation problems. Specific proposals range from "shock therapy"—increased fees and surcharges on motorbike ownership, imports and repairs to discourage private means of transportation and new regulations to ban vans and trucks from city streets—to a variety of large scale, costly improvements, including the construction of elevated or underground rapid transit systems as well as efforts to build new highways and widen existing roads. Moreover, other interim fixes to address the existing situation include improving the quality of bus service, imposing road fees, and increased emphasis on traffic safety measures, such as helmets and traffic controls.

Most recently, in February 2001, the Chief Architect of Ho Chi Minh City approved plans for an underground rapid transit system that, fully constructed, would comprise an five main routes (totaling 193.8 kilometers) and cost an estimated \$2.65 billion, with construction expected to begin in

2005.<sup>8</sup> A feasibility study for the construction of the system is still pending, as are specific details of how the project would be funded (the initial announcement cited some overseas bilateral donors as potential funding sources).

Meanwhile, actual transportation-related investments already underway seem to favor road projects. The city's Transport and Public Works Service (TPWS) identifies as its first priority the construction of the East-West Expressway and Thu Thiem Tunnel (\$578 million) to provide an east-west connection across the city, a new route under the Saigon River and a means of bypassing city streets. Other TPWS projects, in order of priority, include a series of road improvements (\$450 million) and, lastly, increasing public transportation services by 10% for a considerably smaller expense than the road projects.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, one must consider all proposed projects in the context of two other major ongoing efforts. First, the construction of 'Saigon South' — a massive "New City Center" spanning portions of Districts 4 and 5 and located 4 kilometers south of the central business district in District 1 — promises to profoundly alter transportation patterns and population density in the city. Comprising 8,154 acres and projected to house as many as one million residents upon completion, 'Saigon South' will include residential and commercial property, two universities and a range of cultural, recreational and open space uses.<sup>10</sup> Second, road projects such as the East-West expressway

involve plans for the relocation of mostly poor households from existing squatter settlements to newly constructed apartment buildings throughout the city. Although many of the issues pertaining to relocation are not directly relevant to the city's transportation strategies, it is important to note that many city residents will be forced to move further away from their current sources of employment, thus creating additional transportation needs should they choose to continue with the same line of work.<sup>11</sup>

#### IV. Issues to Consider, Questions to Ask

Although a brief survey of this nature does not permit a comprehensive analysis of the various transportation alternatives for Ho Chi Minh City, I do wish to highlight a number of issues that I believe ought to be considered as factors guiding future transportation decisions:

##### a. Urban Design Implications on an Increase in Car Ownership

While Ho Chi Minh City is a dense city with an active street life, the existing city fabric could be significantly altered by even a small increase in the number of automobiles on the road and the associated demand for wider roads, new highways, and parking lots (of which there are remarkably few at the moment). In other words, such projects

could involve the clearing of land and a bisecting of the city fabric, as well the ex-urban sprawl and vehicular pollution that inevitably results from automobile reliance. Ultimately, Ho Chi Minh City risks repeating many of the same mistakes that planners and designers in other countries—the United States, in particular—now seek to undo. From an urban design perspective, continued reliance on motorbikes therefore might have positive implications.

##### b. Transportation for the Poor

Although motorbike and car ownership is increasing rapidly, there remains a large segment of population that still cannot afford private means of transportation, not to mention the number of families that share the use of a single motorbike. Plans for relocation of poor households only intensify the need for affordable transportation that meets the needs of all segments of the population. To what extent would the city as a whole benefit from a large-scale rapid transit system if only the wealthy can afford the high fares required to finance the project? Further, as the proportion of high income and foreign residences in Saigon South already threatens to segregate the city along income lines, any associated transit links between the dual city centers of the future should be designed with the rest of the city in mind to avoid reinforcing any emerging segregation of the city's population.

### c. Financial Considerations

If a new public transportation system will be developed, who will fund it and what types of transportation options are realistically available given the limits of such funding? Moreover, can and should such an investment in public transportation occur at the same time as costly road improvement projects? Which should occur first: new public transportation or new roads?

### d. Motorbike Disincentives

What are the benefits of imposing financial and other disincentives to limit motorbike use and ownership if no viable transportation options exist as an alternative? To what extent is limiting the number of motorbikes on the road possible while other transportation options are still being developed?

### e. Public Transit: If you build it, will they ride it?

In conversations with city residents, I encountered repeated skepticism about the appeal and convenience of public transportation relative to driving one's own motorbike. What, therefore, is the likelihood that people will ride public transportation if viable transit options did exist?

### f. Motorbike Safety and Environmental Considerations

Two innovations, while not addressing overall transportation challenges, may make motorbike travel more sustainable in

the short-term if they are coupled with appropriate regulations, enforcement and incentives. First, the Asia Injury Prevention Foundation is currently studying the possible effectiveness of lightweight, ventilated protective headgear offered at subsidized prices and has already distributed samples of these helmets to 15,000 students throughout Vietnam.<sup>12</sup> These more desirable helmets, designed for Vietnamese traffic and climate conditions, along with an increased public awareness of traffic safety and strict enforcement of helmet use (currently not a reality), could prevent many unnecessary injuries and deaths. Second, Ho Chi Minh City might learn from the experience of Taipei, Taiwan, a city of 15 million motorbikes that is currently experimenting with the viability of environmentally-sensitive electric motorbikes in an effort to control the its largest source of air pollution.<sup>13</sup> Through a pilot project, the city will lease out free "e-motorbikes" and install recharging stations in the hopes of encouraging a market for these bikes.

## V. Conclusion: The Bangkok of the Future?

In conclusion, it is worth considering the city of Bangkok, which Ho Chi Minh City, if its current growth and development trends continue, could resemble within a decade or two. A massive, high-rise, sprawling city that is largely dependent on private means of transportation (mostly automobiles and

some motorcycles), Bangkok is now known for its traffic jams and air pollution. Multi-lane highways, built to accommodate automobile traffic, now bisect the city, making it virtually impossible or simply dangerous for a pedestrian to cross from district to another. As in Ho Chi Minh City, buses constitute the main form of public transportation, while traffic congestion and the substantial distances between parts of the city make bus travel unreliable and time consuming. Meanwhile, the city's sparkling new elevated Sky Train system, which serves the central downtown spine of the city, makes travel considerably more efficient and comfortable, but its high fares generally limit regular ridership to the upper classes and foreigners. Bangkok has succeeded, as Ho Chi Minh City aspires to, in solidifying its position as a global city, but not without growing pains and inequality. As Ho Chi Minh City considers its alternative futures, it must assess whether the Bangkok model of transportation and development is one it seeks to emulate.■

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Asia Pulse, "Vietnam's HCM City Transport System Needs Urgent Revamp" 14 June 2000; World Bank, [Vietnam Moving Forward: Achievements and Challenges in the Transport Sector](#) (1999), 3.

<sup>2</sup> World Bank, 3; [Saigon Times Daily](#), "'HCMC Urged To Resolve Traffic Problems'" (22 December 2000)

<sup>3</sup> Asia Injury Prevention Foundation Fact Sheet

<sup>4</sup> World Bank, 3

<sup>5</sup> [Asia Pulse](#), 14 June 2000

<sup>6</sup> [Asia Pulse](#), "NGO Plans to Make 'Tropical' Motorbike Helmets in Viet Nam" (8 September 2000)

<sup>7</sup> Asia Injury Prevention Foundation Fact Sheet

<sup>8</sup> [Asia Pulse](#), "Plans for Ho Chi Minh City Subway Approved" (26 February 2001)

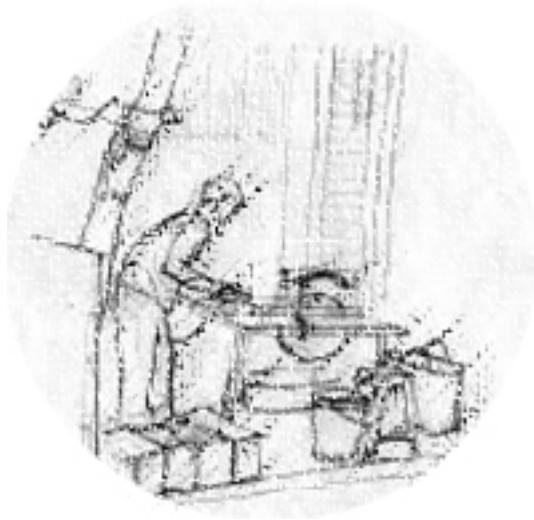
<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Saigon South web site ([www.saigonsouth.com](http://www.saigonsouth.com))

<sup>11</sup> For example, in a District 1 squatter settlement along the future East-West Highway, I spoke with numerous residents who currently rely on a nearby market for their work as street vendors but soon will face relocation to other parts of the city and away from major markets.

<sup>12</sup> Personal communication with Ben Weber, Training Coordinator, Asia Injury Prevention Foundation

<sup>13</sup> Deutsche Presse-Agentur, "Clean 'E-Motorbikes' Leased Free To Fight Taipei Air Pollution" (17 January 2000)



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## Sketching and Observing: Understanding Street Vendors in Hoi Chi Minh City

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*My first impression of the city of Saigon was formed by the sea of motorbikes on the streets, beeping incessantly and leaving pools of bad air behind mixed with the cyclo drivers and street vendors. I had never seen so many motorbikes, moreover, amidst such poor traffic control! After having lived this chaos for nearly two weeks, the motorbikes were no longer fascinating but had become a great annoyance. Crossing the street was always a tiring task of keeping a sharp eye and timing your moves right. Riding on the back of one of these bikes to get from one place to another often seemed to be a near-death experience! Yet, set aside from the maniacal street scene, I found the economic activity that thrived along the sidewalks attractive. This is where much of the social interactions seemed to take place. Amidst the economic decay, amidst the turmoil on the streets, for me, it was these street vendors that seemed to give the city the little charm it possessed.*



I chose to look more carefully at the vendors over a three-day period. The area surrounding the Victory Hotel in District 1 would be my focus. These were the streets of Vo Van Than, Pasteur, Nam Ky Khoi Nghia, and Nguyen Dinh Chieu.

It was my intention to experience being part of the everyday “sidewalk scene”; to observe and to be observed. After all, the three days devoted to this personal project were a far

cry from the time it would take to blend in amidst the existing vendors and go by “unnoticed.” I was a foreigner to them and I wanted to think of a way to go about so as to stand out the least, to create the least disturbance. Being an architecture student, I decided to use my sketchpad to do this. I chose to sit and observe and sketch for several hours at a time, move on to another area and then return. Taking pictures was out of the question and sitting for long periods of time without occupying myself in some way, just staring at them, I felt would raise more suspicion. Sketching was not just a means of keeping myself busy but served as a tool to make more detailed observations that may otherwise go by unnoticed. While sketching, I kept some questions in mind so that I may structure my time spent gathering similar information from different locations: “How does the individual vendor’s line of business compare with the vendors in its immediate surroundings? Do they seem to be part of a larger group of vendors offering identical or similar services?” “How well does the vendor sell? Perhaps success in sales may only be measured in relation to their neighbor’s success. Do they possibly work together or benefit in other ways from each other?” “Who are their primary customers? What is the nature of their interaction?” And last but not least, “How am I observed?”

As it is difficult to recollect all observations made in the course of my “sitting sessions” I would like to mention certain sessions that I feel were most successful. It should also be

noted that different sessions were unable to be carried out as systematically as intended, that is, the questions raised prior to the sessions were not always applicable.

I began by looking at two barbers along Vo Van Than Street. Their operations were setup against the wall of a two-story brick building, roughly ten meters apart from each other separated by a steel cage that protruded out onto the sidewalk. The barber closer to the intersection with Nam Ky Khoi Nghia Street was an older man, perhaps in his fifties, the other being much younger, perhaps in his late twenties/early thirties. Both operations consisted of a vinyl covering stretched over a simple, black, cushioned chair. On a ledge, loosely secured to the bars by wire, stood a framed mirror. The older barber offered an old stone bench to waiting customers while the younger one only had a plastic stool available. An item that both shared and that stirred my curiosity were these long, thin, metal devices with various shaped tips. I was told they were carefully inserted into the ear for cleaning and a massage!

Besides one other barber, even far outside the block of streets mentioned, these two were the only barbers I had seen. I believe the fact that they worked in close proximity gave them more presence. In this regard, they certainly benefited from each other.

These two barbers stood out over other vendors as not only were there scarcely any other barbers in the area but they offered a skilled service apart from the many vendors whose

business was retail-based. Certainly for these reasons and perhaps for others, I felt that both barbers were extremely successful. From schoolboys to older men, there were constantly customers, at times even two waiting their turn.

On the first day, I had gone to the younger of the two barbers for a haircut. He was friendly and polite leaving me feeling assured that I would not have to haggle when paying (as is often the case). He showed me a booklet that contained Vietnamese transla-



tions for expressions commonly used when explaining your desired haircut. I wondered how often foreigners actually came by...

After paying, I had shown him my sketchbook and what little I had drawn of his setup while waiting my turn.

I asked pointed to the drawing and said, "Okay?" He smiled and nodded his head.

Perhaps it was because I had not required his services or that he had seen me going to the other barber but my experience with the

older barber was slightly upsetting. On the morning of the day following my haircut, I strolled up to the curb in front of the barber's setup and sat down, opening up my book bag to take out my sketchpad and pencil. As soon as I directed my attention to him, he stopped shaving his pot-bellied customer and looked at me. Before I knew it, he was waving his arms in the air yelling, "NO, NO...no, no, no!!" I was taken back and slightly confused by this gesture yet tried to keep my cool, averting my gaze to my pad. Instead of sketching, I then chose to scribble some notes simply to test his reaction. As I continued to write, keeping my eyes to the page, the barber continued about his business, leaving me alone. However, once or twice I had looked up to see how things were and noticing this, the barber, in a friendlier manner gestured for me to sit on his bench. I shook my head and smiled, content with yesterday's haircut.



Further down the sidewalk, about five meters away from one of the barbers was another sidewalk operation offering a skilled service, a motorbike repair station. This “station”, similar to the barber’s, was a rather simple setup. It consisted of what looked like a tool stand protected by a beaten-up and weathered beach umbrella tucked into an indented part of a concrete building. Like the barbers who used the steel cage protrusion to locate their space, this business cleverly made use of the form of an existing building. Not only did the building’s indentation provide shelter but between the two walls angling in against each other to form this indentation, a piece of plywood was inserted, serving as a shelf on which various items were stored. Closer to the edge of the street was a rusty air compressor with a cable that seemed to connect back to the building partially hidden by a few loose sheets of cardboard behind the tool stand.

During the many hours spent observing this business, it was unclear as to who the proprietor was. On one occasion, I noticed an elderly man in a grease-stained undershirt sleeping on the cardboard sheets and the next a day a different man, seemingly close in age. Besides these men, two boys, perhaps in their late teens, operated the air compressor, serving motorbikes that would pull over from the street. One of these boys had come over to me while I was sketching to take a closer look. We exchanged smiles and I greeted him in Vietnamese. As I continued to sketch, he pointed out elements in the drawing that



were missing. This led to a simple conversation. I showed him a sheet of paper explaining who I was and my interest in being there. Struggling to find the words in English, he identified himself as a “driver”. Being a rare occasion in which someone had attempted a conversation with me, I tried to take advantage of the moment. I wanted to get a feel for how long he worked there. I wanted to know if he was well acquainted with other vendors along his sidewalk or across the street and if he would stay. After I finished my sketch the boy walked over to the barber close by and borrowed an English-Vietnamese phrase book. It was the same one that the barber had shown me the other day when asking me how I would like my hair cut.

With the help of this booklet, we exchanged information, mainly talking about our simple likes and dislikes. The phrases listed were rather limited and so it was not possible to retrieve much of the information I



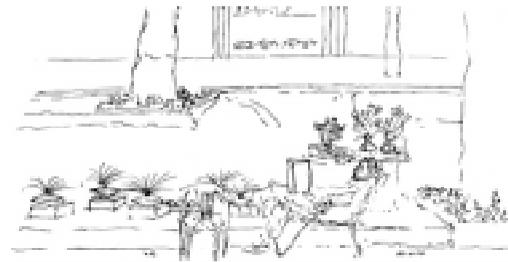
had hoped for. With the help of some sketches and writing, though, I found out that he had been working here for fourteen years and that he returns to his home at 9:30 each night.

When taking a lunch break, I had asked him for a ride to the popular back-packer's area, De Tham Street. I felt that this gesture was a way to extend our moment of fraternizing as well as be a form of respect and that he may appreciate it. I was happy that he was

willing to take me there but somewhat to my dismay, afterwards, whenever I greeted him his first response was to point to his motorbike with a look of expectation without even saying hello.

Another vendor offering the exact same services operated at the opposite end of the sidewalk. Comparatively, it seemed to receive more customers, perhaps as it had better access from the road. The one that I had sketched was in a more congested intersection with a lot of economic activity nearby, overshadowing its presence. In general, however, both businesses kept a low profile, the majority of their customers being bikers that simply needed more air in their tires.

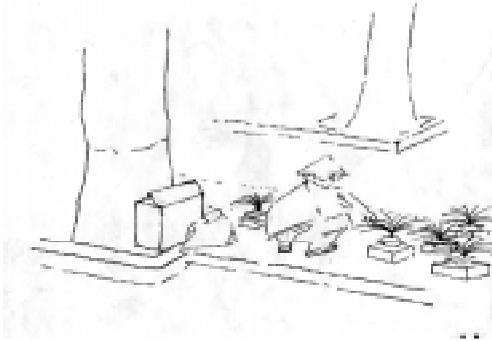
On the sidewalk of Pasteur Street worked a middle-aged lady selling curious goods that caught my attention. Between the painted trunks of two large trees, she laid out a dozen



light decoration type objects shaped like a flying saucer at the base with many transparent tentacles sprouting out of the center. Besides these, she also sold plastic roses that could be electrically lit.

I watched her patiently for a few one-hour

sessions sitting against the low wall in front of the local architecture university. Noticing my presence, she briefly glanced at me and smiled feebly. Sadly she did not sell any-

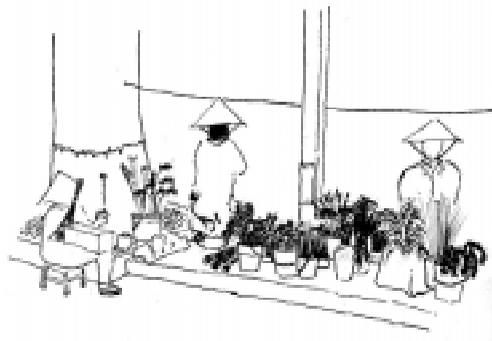


thing during the time I was there. Wearing her traditional straw hat and shuffling around in sandals, she would get up from her recliner every now and then, rearrange her “saucers” and then wait again.

When I approached the lady for the second time, before sitting down, I showed her my piece of paper explaining my background and purpose. She leaned forward, lightly tapped the sheet of paper with her index finger and smiled unable to read what I had shown her. At first, I had not considered the possibility and was confused, pointing again to the Vietnamese translation on the bottom half of the paper...no response. Once I realized she was illiterate, I embarrassingly folded the sheet, tucked it away in my pocket and sat in the same place as before.

I had seen vendors selling the same goods in other areas but hers seemed to be the only one next to a vendor selling colored, dried reeds. This operation was also run by a

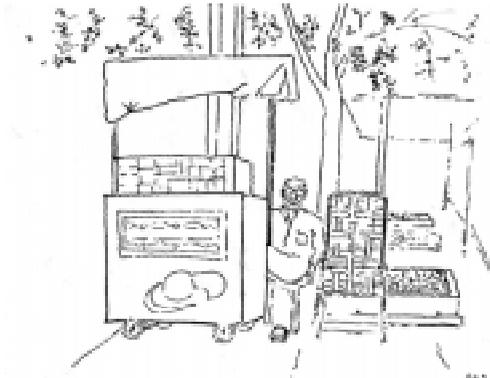
middle-aged lady wearing a similar conical straw hat. It was not so much the products that possibly brought these two vendors to work side by side but their relation. On my



last day, I noticed that the lady selling the “saucers” had only displayed her electric roses and used the remaining space in her section of the sidewalk to assist her neighbor in making dried reed bouquets. I believed that this was not a permanent partnership but simply a friend helping another in need. As this time was very close to the lunar New Year, I imagined that the lady selling the dried reeds had an unusually high level of demand to meet. As I had observed, her reeds sold very well keeping her constantly busy, attending to customers as well as making new bouquets. I had felt sympathy for the lady selling the “saucers” and had secretly hoped she would look to selling other items...

One of the last vendors I had sketched and observed was an old man who worked in complete isolation in front of a bus stop in Nam Ky Khoi Nghia Street. His business was one among many vendors who used a

steel stand on wheels with a small awning for protection, yet his operation was unusually simple in comparison. While other vendors using this stand sold everything



from bubble gum to ladies' gloves, his only item was cigarettes.

For the most part, this man appeared to be completely bored, not receiving any customers nor having anyone to talk to. That is what I had found so intriguing about him and why I chose to sketch there. While sketching, and looking at him, I had remembered how from a distance, while walking in the direction of his stand, I could see him stand up and relieve himself against a nearby wall. He did not show any sign of discontent but nevertheless, I took pity on him. He appeared to be complacent in his own world, eyes stary, not focused on anything in particular. I sat on the curb directly across from him as he leaned comfortably into the plastic chair behind his stand, legs stretched out. As I continued to sketch, I realized he had been looking at me all this time. The thick, cloudy lenses of his glasses had been misleading. As we continued to look at each

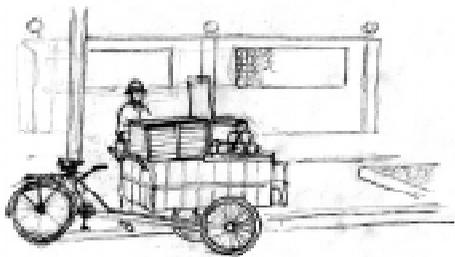
other, no words spoken, I felt a strange sadness inside me, as if for a moment I had been in his shoes.

Upon leaving, I decided to show him the sheet of paper explaining my background and purpose. I wanted to talk to him. To my surprise, he received me very enthusiastically, grinning and then saying something to me in Vietnamese. After he finished reading he extended his hand to shake mine. Mistaken, he held on to the sheet of paper as I was ready to make my way back and so I had to remove it from his hands while gesturing that I was to keep it.

The vendors discussed above are but a few among many others that I had sketched and observed. Again, I chose to present them as my experiences had been more interesting. As such, I spent more time by their operations allowing me to make better observations and have a more substantial experience, overall. For others, I had devoted much less time, essentially noting their line of business so as to get an overview of the kind of vendors in the larger area. For this purpose, I



had extended my field of observation to include Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, Pham Ngoc Thach, and Le Quy Don streets, all one block away from the streets first named. I arranged my findings under three main categories: 1. Food Vendors, 2. Sidewalk Retail, 3. Sidewalk Services



### 1. Food Vendors

#### a. Cyclo Vendors<sup>1</sup>

- grilled corn
- coconut drink

#### b. Sidewalk hawkers

- banana and strawberries
- rice vermicelli with chicken stew
- noodle soup with ginger
- baguette sandwiches
- pasta, sweet and sour soup, grilled sparrow
- chendol with water chestnuts

### 2. Sidewalk Retail

- #### a. Mobile Steel Cart with Awning
- These portable stands provided a range of items. Besides cigarettes, which were a standard item, the following items could be found: firecrackers, stuffed



dolls, face masks for traffic pollution, lady's gloves for protection against the sun when riding motor-bikes, chewing gum, shuttle cocks, hard candy, mineral water, and rubber balls.

- #### b. As was the case for the two ladies discussed, who sold their goods on the floor, not all retail made use of the popular steel stands. Among vendors observed the following items were sold: stuffed animals (squirrels, wild cats, marmots, monkeys, and wild birds) suitcases, caps, belts, sunglasses, dried flowers and glow-in-the-dark and electric decoration.

### 3. Sidewalk Services

- Barber
- Ice Cutter
- Garbage collectors: Children, middle-aged woman, old and young men would empty trash bins, laying out the debris on the sidewalk. They would then, separate all



recyclables mainly cans and plastic bottles.

-Motorbike parking: A section of the sidewalk would be roped off and used as parking space for motorbikes. No alternative passage was provided for pedestrians who would be forced to walk on the street around this parking space and on to the other side.

-Motorbike maintenance

At the end of the day, the quantitative information I had gathered held little significance in comparison to the qualitative. Sure, I gained a sense for which vendors were more successful and a good overview of the kind of vendors in the area observed, but this set aside, the social interactions, I felt, were most meaningful; to be amidst the vendors, their routines, their daily activities, but also to be observed. It was this form of passive participation that gave me a sense for what it could be like to be in their shoes. Occasionally the feeling was positive – smiles exchanged, a

hint of laughter – yet overall, the feeling was a sad one. The, endless hours spent waiting, the bored looks on their faces – this was a harder existence than I could understand. My first impressions had changed completely. The barbers, the mechanics, the boy on his cyclo selling coconuts – what made the sidewalks attractive to me were now mere signs of desperation, a struggle to live. I'd be curious to return to Vo Van Than and Pasteur streets in five years, maybe ten. Perhaps some of the vendors will still be there or perhaps new vendors will be in their place. Yet possibly, street vendors may be a thing of the past. One can only hope, though, that as the city develops, there will always be a place for traditional trades.■

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Cyclos are 3-wheeled bicycles with a passenger seat in front. Once a popular mode of public transportation, they now mainly serve tourists and are used for moving large items.



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## Altars and Photographs in Vietnam

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*“What is a ritual?” said the little prince. “Something else that is frequently neglected,” said the fox. “It’s what makes one day different from the other days, one hour different from the other hours. There is a ritual, for example, among my huntsmen. On Thursdays they dance with the village girls. So Thursday is a wonderful day for me! I can take a stroll as far as the vineyard. If the huntsmen went dancing at any old time, the days would all be the same, and I should never have a holiday.”*

*The Little Prince, p. 71,  
Antoine de Saint-Exupery*

**This passage from *The Little Prince* effectively illustrates ritual’s power in a community’s life: not only for reflection, regeneration & getting in touch with archaic emotions; but also, as in the fox’s opportunism, the opportunities rituals present for more practical accomplishments. This synergy between ritual and practical accomplishment offers professionals the opportunity to frame culturally sensitive development responses.**

While in Vietnam I observed the use of ritual spaces in domestic settings in low-income informal settlements. This was done in the interest of observing what non-product-oriented activities groups and individuals entered into. Especially under conditions of extreme deprivation where, I assumed, resource expenditure in time and material would be more closely guarded; and where, again, I assumed, such activities as ritual may have less apparent value and may be deemed more costly. I wanted to see what rituals these communities and the larger culture considered “essential.” I also observed ritual spaces in other communities of variable income and activity in the interest of making culture-wide assessments.

The two main ritual spaces or artifacts that struck me in particular were altars and photographs. In domestic settings, the altars I observed were typically modest. In public environments they were ornate. These altars were centrally organized: a religious figure, or an ancestor’s photo, towards the back of the altars at the configuration’s tallest elevation. In front of the icon there

was a descending cascade of material objects (money, food, and alcohol) along with incense sticks and a vase with sand and ash in which to burn them.

Photographs I observed in many settings, but they were especially prevalent in domestic spaces: at altars or on walls. They generally seemed personal in nature – photos of people I assumed who were family members. In public they were used also to commemorate important members of a community and to communicate safety and criminal enforcement. I inferred through their physical condition, people’s efforts to maintain each photo permanently, and questions concerning people in my life and the significance a photo of them held for those inquiring, that most photographic images possessed a significant cultural value: almost a second life.

In the following pages I will relay my observations and then briefly speculate on the contribution these artifacts can make towards architecture. This is not intended to be an authoritative, nor an in-depth reportage of the subtleties, nuances, and structure of these artifacts’ place within their respective cultures. It is simply a first introduction based on distant observation. For instance, I am not including any images, as I often did not feel comfortable photographing these personal and spiritually-charged objects. Instead, I am relying on a narrative thread to relay these images and events.

## I. Altar

When I think of altars from my visit to Vietnam, three stand out. They stand out not for their physical attributes or make up, but for their use; the stories and personalities I can associate with them.

The first altar that comes to mind was not in the settlement I worked with, but instead in a rural Thai settlement. This was not a wealthy settlement. It was a community where the women wove scarves for supplemental income. I was visiting as a tourist with a guide from Hanoi during the Thai celebration of Tet. The home I remember most clearly had a few musical instruments, a tea setting, an electronic keyboard, and the altar. This altar sat squarely in the middle of the room against a long wall, opposite the entry. It was organized symmetrically, with an icon at the back and center. Just in front of the icon, and also centered, was a pot filled with sand and ash where sticks of incense were burned. The arrangement was to be viewed from the front, like a stage set. It was atop a dresser and contained money, incense, photos, and a bottle of rice wine. As guests, we were invited to drink from the bottle of wine. The guide I traveled with burned some incense at the altar for his family.

The second altar was in Hanoi itself. It is a great public altar at a large public lake in the city’s center. I walked through here at around midnight the night before the Vietnamese celebration of Tet. The



lakeside was quiet. A few couples sat necking on the benches, and some teenagers kicked around in loud groups. This altar serves as the first in a series of gateways to a pagoda that sits 50 yards off shore from the lake, on an island. The altar is extraordinarily dramatic: thirty vertical feet of stacked boulders, with a lone, twisted tree perched at the top of the pile. A small, red-painted, wood altar found itself wedged into the rock pile, canted at an angle and lit by a spotlight. I was struck by the exterior exposure of ornate and richly colored paints on the tiny altar, and the drama of the tiny jewel amidst a mound of rubble. The altar provided a node of quiet amidst the nearby traffic. There was a public toilet within its grounds.

As I stood observing the altar a middle-aged couple pulled up on a motor bike with a photo, some flowers, and some incense. They placed the objects in the rock pile and then lit the incense. In their act they claimed this public space for a moment of privacy. I left them standing quietly as the incense burned. In my memory their heads are bowed as if they were praying. I strolled along the lake and sat yards away, looking out on the water. Three times within the next half an hour I was offered the services of young male prostitutes by three different sets of men.

The third altar I remember is really a handful of them. There was a table set as a feast in a monastery; a massive figure in the same monastery in a dominating room. In the community I worked with I remember

dressers topped with photos and incense in stilt-house shacks. And I remember a large, brightly daylighted outdoor pagoda in this same community, privately owned and used, but supported financially by all the households.

## II. Photos

Photographs play a significant role in the altar iconography in Vietnam. They depict deceased relatives to whom the altars are dedicated. However, they play an equally significant role as independent artifacts. The photographs that stand out for me I remember for their ability to fill in the story of an experience of a person who was important during my stay in Vietnam. Again, three or four photos stand out.

The first is a photo shown to me by a deaf man on my first visit to the squatter community in Ho Chi Minh City. He was very aggressive: an unusually large and muscular construction laborer. He invited me into his one-room leant-to to visit with him. He showed me photos atop his dresser, which loosely made up a kind of altar. He gesticulated forcefully – using different artifacts to communicate – and spoke in high-pitched phrases. The room he lived in was made of corrugated metal and rough scraps of wood. The frames for his photos were, in my memory, fairly well kept and polished — metal, plastic, or painted wood. They maybe had some gilding on the edges. These frames were finished artifacts and they stood in

sharp contrast to the rough construction in which they were housed. The photos they framed were well preserved.

One photo, which was in color, showed a small gray-haired woman. The expression on her face was quite serene; and the environment around her in the photo seemed to reflect that serenity. She was dressed in a well-tailored white blouse and a long black skirt. She was seated before a white painted, stone building. Directly behind her was a porch, the stonework in my memory has some European influence. There were trees and grasses around her, as though the photo was taken in a garden. I was struck by the contrast of this scene to the clamor of the tight, urban community and the excited, aggressive gestures of the man who showed me the picture. The photo was of his mother. I asked him when and where the photos were taken, and he kept replying that they were taken in the community. But I never found this place.

Another photo that struck me was also in the community. It was on the front of a woman's home. It was a large group photo, an 8x10, and it reminded me of class pictures I had from grade school: 30 to 50 people divided into 3 to five rows. The photo was black and white. The people were teenagers and they were in uniform. I can't remember if they were all female or not. They may have been. Just inside the front door a woman lay on the floor, resting. She watched us and smiled. Her home seemed to consist of little more than that one room. In the community we worked with most of

the children leave school after the equivalent of the fourth or fifth grade, because their math and language skills are then marketable. Was this photograph a remnant of her schooling? Was this the last grade she reached? Did she earn some status through its display?

Finally, there is the photo inside Vang's wallet. Vang was my guide to the Thai village I mentioned earlier. We spent about two and a half days together. In his wallet he kept a picture which I only glimpsed when he would pay for something. What I saw during those moments was a picture, encased in plastic, of terraced rice patties on the side of a hill. The photo showed deep greens and pale blues, and rich red-browns. The sky was overcast. Vang grew up in a farming community, and he expressed little interest in returning. But he continually expressed a deep appreciation for his village, talking often about different traditions, comparing it thoughtfully to the experience we had in the Thai village, and demonstrating deep-seated knowledge of different building or farming practices. I got a sense that although he had little desire to live in his village, the processes, practices, and values of village life were important guideposts for him.

### III. Professional Application

In the practice of architecture I believe these artifacts are primarily useful for community-based design; one where the needs and concerns of individuals serve as the foundation

for professional acts. These artifacts provide architects with windows into resident's lives, indexes of values, skills, and experiences. In establishing development goals, artifacts like these can be valuable tools with which to achieve consensus.

In the case of the deaf man who showed me the photo of his mother, just that simple act brought to the surface many questions about his personal history: the difference in his living conditions between now and then; his frequency of contact with his mother or other family members. If she is elderly, who watches over her? If she is deceased, who assumes responsibility for him when his hearing impairment becomes an obstacle for attaining daily needs or future goals? A simple discussion of a person's history can be an important step in helping an individual frame a vision for future achievement. Photos provide not only an image of a particular person or landscape; they are traces of an individual's history and their location within a larger family. They can be a first step towards forming a picture of the networks of support and family that hold particular groups of households together.

Likewise, the altar and religious iconography form a link between houses. Affiliation with a single pagoda or temple can be a strong and frequently used network. It is more formalized than invisible family ties: it is rooted in a singular site. For instance, if someone were interested in distributing or collecting information from the community with the brightly day-lighted pagoda, the pagoda may be a good place to start. But

what if it's sacrilege to advertise or canvas at a pagoda? What if they don't keep formal records of payment, or you are prohibited from seeing them? Nevertheless, a religious center may be a good start in accessing the ears and eyes of the community at large. Professionals can take advantage of religious leaders' input and the relationships in which they are invested.

I believe that the use of photographs and sites of ancestor worship as dialogue tools may be particularly effective for beginning a discussion on values within a community or household. One of the significant aspects of photos is their ability to convey a life beyond that depicted by the image. The pictures on altars, the picture in Vang's wallet, the use of photos as a criminal deterrent lead me to believe that the visual image in Vietnamese culture has a uniquely powerful impact on the individual imagination. The woman with the group photo outside her house. This photo may be a good way to begin discussing the value of education, or the situation of education within a community. The proximity of prostitution to the pagoda in Hanoi may be a way to discuss the resources and habits of that particular practice, brainstorm deterrents, causes, its relationship to the values of the temple, and the forces at work in its practice. It may be taboo to speak of these things in the same breath, but nonetheless, should such a discussion be initiated, should the problem of prostitution be verbalized, this relationship may be an effective tool for dialogue.

#### IV. Conclusion

In further study, when applying these observations in the field, it will be essential to have a deeper knowledge of altar's and photograph's histories and functions within the culture. For instance, I do not know whether all the altars I described above could be considered part of the same religion. One household's use of the altar may differ from another. Vietnam's religious make-up is widely varied. As well, the use of a camera may be very different within different households. A less-literate household may rely on images more often for communication. Different levels of technology

sophistication may govern the kind of investment a household places on photos. Are they generating their own photos or relying on others to pay for and develop them? Religious icons and photos are simply artifacts that professionals can keep an eye on as they visit and work with communities. Artifacts that speak the unspoken; that act as the eyes and ears of a community as revealed by the very people who live there. These artifacts will build a link that is at once personal and professional; resulting in professional actions that are more sensitive to the needs of those they serve.■



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## Transformation: The home is never perfect, the nest never finished

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Mankind's nest, like his world, is never finished.  
*Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space*

*Some birds, Gaston Bachelard points out in The Poetics of Space, once they have begun to build a nest, will continue to add material to it until the structure can no longer bear its own weight and collapses. The nest is more than mere shelter. Over time, it not only protects the world of its builder and inhabitant, but reflects his changing needs and resources, bears his creative mark, reflects societal values, and responds to its local environment. The building of home – of the nest – is an endless process.*

*The informal settlements of Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, comprise homes in various states of the process. At the outskirts of the city, along the shifting urban-rural edge, the Binh Trung Tây neighborhood, a squatter settlement of close to 150 houses, continually transforms as its residents build and upgrade their homes. This study is a snapshot in time of a community's development, as well as individuals build their homes over time.*

This research is largely based on site observations in the Binh Trung Tây community and throughout Ho Chi Minh City, which revealed patterns in housing materials and construction types. Cognitive mapping exercises and interviews with residents yielded further information regarding when and how particular choices were made, as well as how individual homes were perceived by other community members.

The Binh Trung Tây neighborhood is a particularly interesting example for several reasons.

1. Its location on the quickly shifting urban-rural fringe subjects the community to intensifying development pressures. Unwanted land when the first residents arrived, the area has densified over the last forty years, with pressure mounting in recent years as the city expands.
2. Unlike many squatter communities, this one has been fairly stable over time. Its oldest residents have lived there for close

to forty years. Many of the other residents interviewed have lived there for close to ten years. The variation in duration of occupation may contribute, to some extent, to the diversity in housing quality.

3. Land tenure is a critical factor in decisions regarding housing materials and investment. Because this community is located in an old burial ground, the threat of eviction has been far less than in other squatter communities. The land is far less desirable to others because of the tombs scattered throughout and there are no clear land owners (the tombs are individually owned, but the land has no clear owner or caretaker). This, too, leads to varying states of housing quality, however, as residents close to tombs may be more secure in their land tenure than those on more desirable plots of land.

### The Phases

The conditions of individual houses in BÌNH TRUNG TÂY vary considerably. However certain patterns emerge, suggesting roughly four phases of development. The phases seem to form a progression, but one that each home does not necessarily complete and one in which the length of each phase varies considerably. The four phases, as I define them here, correspond roughly to the predominant material used in or introduced to the structure in that phase. The first three are palm fronds, brick, and stucco or other exterior covering. The final phase is defined by the introduction of significant decorative elements and/or structural additions, rather than a major material change.

### Palm Fronds

Widely available at no cost, sustainable, easily replaced, and water repellent, palm fronds are a critical material in Ho Chi Minh City's informal settlements, particularly at the urban periphery. Employed in both walls and roofs, layers of palm braches are formed into thick sheets with horizontal bamboo bracing. The sheets are attached to wood framing at both walls and roof. Floors may be dirt, usually covered with grass mats, or slab-on-grade concrete, poured in a tile pattern around wood frames only an inch or two deep.



Other materials may be combined with palm, as finances allow. Salvaged doors, metal window bars, and shutters are the major decorative elements, all functional. Any land around the home is usually claimed by the household and its boundaries demarcated as private space through the use of fencing, bamboo, tin scraps, or plantings.







Those who can afford to build roofs of tin or other metal– providing significantly better protection against rain. Of the homes within this “phase”, most have tin rather than palm roofs. Materials such as plastic tarps and other scraps are employed to fill gaps and provide additional water protection.



In BTT, about 35 percent of the houses fall into this category, not counting the many accessory buildings (toilets, sheds) all of which are palm. The palm buildings seem to be concentrated at the lower part of the site, closest to marshland and the densest area of tombs. Owners of these homes cite two major factors in their choice of materials. Those living near the tombs and marsh cite financial constraints, while those living closer to the road cite a combination of financial constraints and lack of security in their land tenure. The latter tend to be renting land from others. Their uncertain land tenure renders them unwilling to invest in more permanent materials.

### **Brick**

The most important housing quality upgrade seems to be the move from palm to more permanent, brick structures. Relatively inexpensive and widely available (produced in several towns along the major roads out

of the city), brick provides greater stability, better protection from the elements, and no need to rebuild walls on an annual basis. Brick walls provide superior weather protection, particularly during the rainy season.



The shift to brick is a gradual one, beginning often with only one wall, as finances allow. [brick+palm; bricktinpalm] That wall is, without fail, the front wall, punctuated with front door, one or two shuttered and barred windows, and ventilation openings. The decisions to move to brick is usually a financial one, though the timing (as with later phases) may be related to Tet, the Vietnamese new year, when anyone who can afford to improves his home. The move to brick may also indicate a change in land tenure or in a household's confidence in their ability to remain in their current location.

When the entire palm structure is upgraded to brick, the double-pitched roof with center beam is replaced by a single-pitched roof with a front awning over a porch slab. Up-

grades to these buildings are often made in the form of additions, which are usually made of palm. Property enclosures may also be made of brick. In this stage, the brick is always bare. Roofs may be of palm fronds or tin.

Owners of brick homes (about 20 percent of BÌNH TRUNG TÂY buildings) tend to have lived in the area for a longer time than palm house owners. They are more comfortable with land tenure. It is not clear that they are more well-off than palm-house dwellers, however.

#### Stucco

Duration of occupancy and financial resources seem to be the major factors influencing the move to the next stage, which involves finishing the bricks with stucco and





other surface treatments. Stucco and paint may be applied to the façade only (with bare brick or even palm side and back walls). It may also be applied to the entire house.

Stuccoed homes seem to have more decorative features, including patterned terra cotta ventilation openings, brightly painted shutters and doors, and ceramic tile porches.



These homes are fairly evenly spaced throughout the community, tend to have more land around them, and are not clustered around the tomb areas. They make up about 35 percent of the buildings on the site.

### Ornament

Categorizing these homes in terms of materiality is difficult. Brick and stucco are the highest quality building materials used on the site. In some of these homes, tin roofs give way to terra cotta tiles, but the predominant materials are fairly consistent with the previous category. More striking differences are the sizes of these homes – much larger on average than the other categories – and

their condition. All sport fresh paint and well maintained stucco facades.

Decorative elements include extensive tilework – covering front porches or courtyard patios, edging porch overhangs, and decorating garden enclosure walls. Enclosures are stuccoed walls, often in combination with detailed iron fences painted teal, fuchsia, and other tropical colors. The enclosures often hold compounds with multiple houses and/or a courtyard. Simple posts supporting overhangs hide behind hollow neo-Classical columns with colorfully painted Corinthian capitals. Architectural intention appears in the mimicking of styles evident elsewhere in the city – most notably French Colonial and Art Deco.



The buildings in this category are clustered close to the main road, some the homes of merchants with stores on the road. They account for the remaining 10 percent of the site. Eight or so of these are two-story buildings (making up over 80 percent of such buildings on the site), upper stories used for housing above a storefront or for accessory rental units. Income appears to be the greatest factor in “upgrading” to this category.

### Analysis

That form of homes and materials employed change over time is not surprising. How the process occurs, however, might be useful information in the process of formalizing squatter communities. On one hand, priorities may be identified for assistance projects. On the other, lessons may be learned from local building techniques and opportunities for improvements identified.

Observing proposals for resettlement housing in Vietnam, China, and even affordable housing in the United States over the past year, I have noted how far these buildings are from vernacular traditions. Stylistically, they often make a superficial nod at tradition. However, the process of building formal housing involves several levels of removal from the ground – those who design and build are not those who will inhabit the spaces. As a result, years of knowledge about building in a particular place may be lost. In the US, we conduct elaborate computer studies to figure out how to ven-

tilate a site. Meanwhile, every house in BÌNH TRUNG TÂY incorporates natural ventilation into its design. Principles such as these should make their way into new housing, and local knowledge tapped in housing design.

The choice and use of building materials in this squatter settlement at the moment is ecologically sustainable. Clearly the use of widely available plants and scrap materials is a result of poor economic conditions. However, suitable homes are being constructed from salvaged material, a resource that could be used even more effectively with some assistance. Approaches such as that employed in Bangkok, in which non-load bearing infill panels were constructed from aluminum cans, could be tailored to locally available items such as tin and plastic. Japanese architect Shigeru Ban has even used plastic shipping crates from beer companies as foundation slabs for earthquake relief housing in Kobe and Istanbul. (Not to mention cardboard tubes for all manners of structures.) There is a potential to work with residents to design new building materials that better fulfill their needs or to instruct them on their construction. Mobility may be an element to consider in designing such products, as changing land tenure and migratory patterns that respond to economic opportunities prevent many squatters from building better homes.

While some elements of building patterns in BÌNH TRUNG TÂY are impressive, others raise concerns. The structural soundness of some of the buildings is ques-

tionable. Palm houses are flexible, cheap, and easily rebuilt, a decent tradeoff for having to reconstruct them periodically. Brick structures are more permanent, but are poorly built. Courses of bricks are laid unevenly and out of plumb. The top course is often constructed of angled soldier bricks (standing on the smallest surface) with large amounts of mortar filling the gaps to the beams. These structure may function well enough for their inhabitants, but they are structurally limited. Since density is rapidly increasing in this site, the viability of a two-story neighborhood of buildings is also growing. Improving the structural soundness of existing homes (and newly built ones) could provide the flexibility to add an additional level in the future. This would make the buildings more adaptable – a key element in their ability to meet this constantly changing community's needs. Efforts to assist homeowners in reinforcing their homes or in constructing second stories could also help diversify income sources for poorer residents.

## Conclusion

This is a brief and perhaps simplistic analysis of building materials employed in one squatter community in Vietnam. Though its use may be limited, I have found that thinking about these structures and the patterns of habitation within the community has shed light on how resettlement housing is constructed. If the goal is to improve living conditions, there are ways to do so with-

out sacrificing the aspects of a community's way of life that are working. The home is never perfect, the nest never finished, but breaking the nest in the name of improvement is wholly avoidable.■



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## Upgrading Through Existing Mechanisms

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***In Vietnam, as with many developing countries around the world, the urban poor live in slums and shantytowns, the result of ineffectual and dysfunctional social and economic policy, compromised structures of governance, corrupt land markets, inequitable and inhumane regulation, and improper and inefficient finance scenarios. These unfortunate people live in squalid, unsafe environments exposed to disease and crime. A growing population faces more than the lack of unique environments; they are confronted with a lack of the most essential elements within their daily living situations in which to exist humanely.***

The people of Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), in particular those who inhabit squatter settlements along the inter-city canals, lack the minimum standards in which to live. High densities of people live in small areas, and the numbers continue to grow. As the Government begins to develop a master plan for the city and a larger urban development strategy, the future of these people is uncertain. Relocation seems to be

the only option, but ineffectual planning has led to a development process in which the people are the uninformed and uninvolved in the process. Through a survey of an existing squatter settlement in HCMC, I am proposing a strategy that works in conjunction with relocation to suburban areas. I believe that through a documented and prioritized set of criteria, more humane and suitable strategies can be developed for the design and construction of low income, multiple-unit housing projects. By involving the community, and reproducing already practiced methods of upgrading, we can begin to establish more appropriate urban development strategies.

The community surveyed is located in District 1, in the Co Giang Ward, along the Ben Nghe Canal. The community was comprised of approximately 100 families living in four alleys on Ben Chuong Dong Street. The community has been here since the 1950's, and is a firmly established settlement in the neighborhood.

Over the past 50 years, the commu-

nity has expanded from the street taking over a large part of the canal, bridging into the water (Fig.1).

They have upgraded their houses over time to resemble the buildings across the street and around the neighborhood.



Fig.1

Some residents have spent 20 years upgrading their homes. While the timetable for improvements is sporadic and varied from family to family, there is a clear progression in the materials used from one upgrade to the next. The choice of materials often reveals much about a family's economic situation, length of residency in the community, and often legal or illegal status with the government. Housing is often not a primary concern, and the most basic shelter is often constructed to satisfy the most basic living arrangements. Residents often get material from wherever they can. Those who cannot afford to buy material find material or are sometimes given materials as others discard them. Others buy materials, the cheapest at first, and then upgrade when they can afford better materials. Material investment often comes after minimum standards such as water, sanitation, and electricity. But,

eventually, they do upgrade. The houses which lined the canal side of Ben Chuong Duong Street have, in the past 50 years, upgraded to look like those built in the French colonial period (Fig.2). The process of upgrading has been slow, but left to their own devices, the people built, or had built, houses which are structurally stable and respond to the immediate cultural and architectural context.

### The upgrading sequence

The residents upgrade in the following steps:

1. Collected Scraps: often include sheets of plastic and board, serve as roof and walls and floors respectively – built on stilts (Fig.3).
2. Wood planks: Nailed or strapped together serve as roof and walls often built on mud floor or stilts (Fig.4).
3. Corrugated metal: Used for roofs and walls, with either mud slab floor or wood planks (Fig.5).
4. Exposed brick: Used for walls with mud slab floors and corrugated metal roofs. Brick is either filled in with mortar or left open, depending on what they can afford (Fig.6).
5. Brick covered with stucco/plaster: Used for walls, with mud slab floors, and corrugated metal roof. Stucco/plaster is often left plain at first and then painted when they can afford it (Fig.7, Fig.8).
6. Covered Brick, Ceramic Tile: Brick is covered with stucco then tiled with ceramic tile. Those who cannot afford an



*Fig. 2*



*Fig. 3*



*Fig. 4*



*Fig. 5*

entire tiled façade often put small tile details into headers of doors and windows (Fig. 9, Fig. 10).

7. **Decorative Embellishments/Ornament:** Those houses which have been there for some time often have more ornamental decorations such as painted doors, and shutters and ornamental grates and tiles (Fig. 11).
8. **Second Stories:** Those who can afford it often expand their houses and build second stories, usually out of wood planks and boards. These rest on top of brick foundation walls. The roof is corrugated metal. These second stories often go through a similar process of upgrading, and may eventually be built out of brick and plaster (Fig. 12, Fig. 13)

Over time we can see a clear progression of upgrading processes that are currently in place. This indicates the people's capacity to mobilize themselves and their resources for housing and their overall environment. Options that incorporate this already exiting

mechanism should be developed in conjunction with social and economic policies.

#### Self-managed construction

One option that could take advantage of the initiatives of the residents is self-managed construction. Self-managed construction is essentially what the residents are currently doing, but it could be incorporated into a more comprehensive urban development strategy that would also provide assistance from the government for relocation. The government could provide basic sites and services, including infrastructure for water, electricity, sanitation, and roads. Then by working with the community they could collectively develop plans for houses as well as the overall scheme for the community. Each household could assess what materials it currently owned, and their current space configuration, as well as plan for what they would need. Having people help in the housing design insures that apartments are configured to the people's needs as well as reinforcing feelings of ownership. Feelings of



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

ownership encourage the upkeep and maintenance of buildings over their lifetime. Overall costs would be reduced by allowing people to salvage their material and by helping the actual construction of the dwellings. Utilizing people's abilities and skills for help in secondary work such as interior partitions, painting, and plastering can reduce construction costs and help empower local residents as well as teach technical skills. Residents will also benefit from technical support for construction, possibly passing on to them a mar-

ketable trade. Architects and engineers can advise families on design, cost estimating, and construction techniques, while ensuring that basic construction methods and rules are followed.

Self-managed construction is one option of many that can help insure accessibility to these newly relocated communities. It would provide communities with the ability to help in the making of their future, reduce the development of new squatter developments in



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13

the city, cut down on costs for the government, and create viable and sustainable communities that will continue to improve and grow over time. Self-managed construction is a way to assess and manage the future development of Ho Chi Minh City, and hopefully others like it.■

### Endnotes

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## Recycling and Customization in the Building Markets of Saigon

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*The history of Vietnam made comparisons difficult with other countries, if not impossible, between it and other Asian countries. Still, the newly emerging middle and upper classes (as opposed to the state officials, who have historically enjoyed disproportionate comforts) were creating demands for foreign appliances and lifestyles, while the vast majority of the residents of Saigon still labored in relative poverty. As in China, I was struck by the ways that people in the older, local economy had modified their homes in order to improve the condition of their living spaces, and the way that people with money were endeavoring to do the same thing, through the construction of new homes or installation of new appliances.*

While traveling in Asia over the summer, I had the opportunity to study the built forms of ancient, yet rapidly modernizing cities. As the population of China continues to grow, the main cities of Shanghai and Beijing are faced with a housing shortage unheard of in western nations. China has histori-

cally faced very high urban densities, and already though parts of the city not designated as historical monuments (the Forbidden City, for example, or the historic buildings along the Bund) are filled with medium height apartment blocks. The changes that individual residents have made to these older, less well-maintained buildings (often with makeshift, poor materials) plainly demonstrated that apartment dwellers had the need and the ability to change, in diverse and creative ways, a living situation that was deficient in some way.

At the same time (often in the same city) the emerging free market economy allowed new products to flood the marketplace and the collective unconscious. People who might only own small shacks built in the corners and empty spaces of previously gracious courtyard houses can (and do) own wide screen televisions and DVD players. Clearly, there were two economies at work in mainland China, and these economies have counterparts in Vietnam. The first traded in locally produced necessary goods, such as food,



fuel, and rough building materials. The second provided exotic lifestyle accessories, such as motorbikes, televisions, and air conditioners to a rapidly growing 'middle class' group.

When I arrived in Thailand and Vietnam, the situation there was clearly similar. Although the Asian monetary crisis had stopped Thailand's out of control building boom, the country's economy was recovering, and the number of cars on the roads was a testament to the purchasing power of the Thai people. Two economies (at least) coexisted here as well, as locals bought cheap food, produce, and local goods while newly rich locals and unbelievable numbers of tourists purchased foreign foods, clothing, electronics, and vacation amenities.

These preliminary experiences were what led me to investigate a decrepit high rise building in District 1. [above picture] While the building had obviously fallen into a serious (some thought dangerous) state of disrepair, a different, less obvious kind of change had taken place in the individual apartments and hallways. From small light bulbs strung out of individual apartments to new walls, kitch-

ens, and windows, the level of informal building transformed a forbidding building into a well-adapted, healthy building.

Immediately outside this building, the neighborhood was undergoing large-scale gentrification. New row houses with storefronts were being built along Dien Bien Phu, complete with roof terraces, modern toilets, and hot water heaters. Electronics stores and upscale appliance shops lined the back streets, displacing the cafes and small produce shops that existed there.

After the class finished, I spent the next days visiting the area of Vietnam where many of the building products are collected and sold. A closer examination of these areas reveals an assortment of items ranging from the very rough filler bricks to fine power tools and finish materials. Vietnam, like Thailand, enjoys certain benefits from being near the place many cheap, exportable products are made: these products (or even their cheaper, local equivalents) are readily available. Racks of spray cans of lubricants, paints, sealers, and other industrial chemicals were everywhere, as were basic machining and weld-

ing supplies. The concentrations of building materials into one area of the city had their roots in the ancient layout of Vietnamese cities, where 'fabric street' or 'medicine street' brought together all the vendors of particular products. Interestingly, this is good for consumers by trading convenience (one might have to travel some distance to reach a market) for the ability to comparison shop.

The most interesting aspect of this market area was the juxtaposition of these shops with areas selling second hand building materials. In the lots closest to the squatter settlements along the canal, salvage workers had recovered doors, frames, windows, cabinetry

and furniture, and even the wooden ladders to the lofts commonly built in shop fronts or apartments. Stacks of this material (most of which was inexplicably painted robin's egg blue) were not overtly for sale, and yet there were far more than one person would stockpile for his own use. Additionally, several of these junkyards existed right near one another, close to the bridge.

These materials raised far more questions than the selections of new materials. From what structures did these pieces originate? Do these junk dealers hear through the grapevine that a house will be demolished, or do they just happen to find them? Do



they buy these pieces of buildings from people? To whom do they sell them? Do they ever give them away as charity? And is their location, near a bridge, and several squatter settlements, significant? Some of these questions I was able to develop hypotheses for; the others, due to the language barrier and time limitations, remain unclear.

The settlements across the canal (in addition to the ones built on the canal itself) seemed like possible customers. With a fair amount of open space around the houses (or over the canal), people were tempted to build guest rooms or enlarge existing structures. Additionally, when people moved or needed



some extra money, they could sell pieces of their house back to the shop. In this way, prefabricated walls, skylights, and doorways could function as limited, temporary means of currency.

This hypothesis presupposes a coordinated 'banking' effort on the part of an individual or small group of individuals; the fact that these materials are arranged in a limited area, and that there were clear 'shopkeepers' supports this claim. How these shops selling second-hand equipment interfaced with sellers of new goods is unclear, but it seems as though the two have considerable overlap in product and customers. It may be the case that people buy second hand wall units and roofing to build an addition with a new linoleum floor, or that they sell the old windows at the same time that they buy new ones.

Finally, the numbers of small manufacturers and fabricators in shops and on the streets [pictures] suggests that the tools and skills are available for many kinds of fabrication. Two kinds of fabrication were apparent. The first, and most prevalent, was standard, assembly-line type preparation, where human action could be easily replaced by machine. Examples of this were the construction of brake shoes and other simple objects. The other type of construction was custom work, primarily for doors and other security devices that needed to be built to fit an existing opening, but couldn't be constructed (welded, sprayed) on the spot. Additionally, large steel staircases and railings were other customized parts built in large quantities,



to be shipped to the new houses for which they are intended.

It is clear that there is a large body of semi-skilled, reasonably well-equipped laborers in Saigon, and that, they, in addition to the growing number of luxury, western-style appliances and materials shops, provide the formal building and renovation market with most goods and services. There is, however,

an informal market, which supplies goods to squatters, shops, and other, more disparate consumers. The relationship between these two markets is far from clear, and only further research into the building experiences of people from different socio-economic levels, ages, locations, and so on can clarify which market supplies what material to which person.■



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Infrastructure, Upgrading, and Resettlement:  
Can a Public Sector Response Change this Equation?



*Crossing the Saigon River on the three minute ferry-ride from the commercial business district of Ho Chi Minh to District 2 of An Khan, is to traverse a separation that is much bigger than the River. On one riverbank modern high-rise hotels and shops look out onto activity along tree-lined streets*

*that are as busy as any other major city. On the river bank of An Khan, some households live in wooden structures suspended on stilts above a river that at once represents a source of livelihood, a toilet, and a dumping ground clogged with garbage.*



The disparate access to services and infrastructure between the commercial business district and An Khan is not unique in Ho Chi Minh, or within An Khan itself. What is unique to An Khan is that it is the site of a proposed Urban Master Plan (UMP) that would extend the commercial core across the river to its own shores. The basic elements of that plan would move the settlements along the river and the interior to make room for a riverfront park - which some say is another way to describe a golf course -, a large commercial core, and a smaller section in the south of the district reserved for housing.

Infrastructure provision in the district is relatively new and not uniformly accessible by all households. There are three possible sources of formal infrastructure funding in Vietnam: the State via World Bank loans, private funding, and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In some wards, there are small informal measures that are initiated and funded by surrounding households. EDNA Vietnam and Villes en Transition, two International NGOs, are the current major sources of formal infrastructure in An Khan. Part of the World Bank mandate in Vietnam is to mobilize private investment for infrastructure.

Japan and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) are major donors on large infrastructure projects such as roads, highways, ports and bridges. One component of the proposed UMP is to construct a vehicular tunnel under the Saigon River from the com-

mercial district to An Khan. Clearly this form of investment coincides with development that benefits business interests. If the World Bank mandate is to mobilize private investment, what are its implications on displacement and resettlement, and what role if any can NGOs play in directing outcomes? This paper will provide a glimpse of some current initiatives that suggest long range impacts of private/public approaches to infrastructure development.

#### Background Information on Vietnam

Vietnam has withstood repeated invasions and wars with various countries since the 2nd Century, when China conquered the Red River Delta and imposed a 1,000-year rule. In 1858 the French invaded the coastal town of Danang to avenge the murders of several missionaries. By 1867, the southern regions of Vietnam had become a French colony. Ho Chi Minh emerged in Hanoi as the leader of the Communist Revolution in 1945, after challenging the injustices of French colonization and Japanese occupation and their role in the Vietnamese famine of that same year. In addition to the agricultural policies of the French colonial government and Japan's conversion of rice paddies to industrial use, two years preceding the famine the French put 500,000 tons of rice into storage while the Japanese exported more than 2.5 million tons to Japan. In 1954 the Geneva Accords divided Vietnam into north/south and Communist/non-

Communist halves. From 1965 to 1973 the United States was officially at war with Vietnam, and the communist party won Saigon in 1975.

Immediately after the Country became the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1975 the government entered a war with the Khmer Rouge in neighboring Cambodia that lasted until 1989. During this same era Vietnam suffered another famine due to the China-supported war with Cambodia and a trade embargo enforced by the Reagan Administration. The collapse of the Soviet Union encouraged Vietnam and the United States to start a new dialogue, which resulted in the re-establishment of diplomatic relations in 1995.

In the 1980s Vietnam initiated *doi moi*, an economic renewal program that helped to open up the Country to foreign investment. Between 1990 and 1997 *doi moi* spurred gross domestic product (GDP) rates of 8 percent per year on average. This rapid growth helped encourage rural/urban migrations in a Country that is still 80 percent agricultural, and increased the number of informal settlements and slums as many migrants and residents needed a place to settle in a rapidly urbanizing city.

Current economic indicators in Vietnam reveal a decline as real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fell from 9.5% to an estimated 3.8% between 1995 and 1998. Export growth has also reversed dramatically after rising from 28% in 1995 to 41% in 1996, only to plummet in 1998 to 2.1%. Part of this difficulty was regional as the

Asian financial crisis took a toll, but other factors are attributed to a lack of transparency in the government, unreliable property laws, and rampant corruption all the way up to the highest levels of government. As a result, much of the growth that began with *doi moi* turned downward as many foreign investors withdrew, and State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) became unable to finance their debt.

After 15 years Vietnam resumed World Bank activity in 1993 and has received US\$2.9 billion, with US\$308.3 million in International Development Association (IDA) credits since 1999. The IDA is designed to foster more active collaboration between the Vietnamese government, international donors, and private investors.

### The Current Situation in An Khan

Many of the current residents in An Khan earn their livelihoods informally as cyclo-drivers and lottery sellers in the commercial district of Ho Chi Minh. Others run their own shops out of their dwellings or open-air, wooden storefronts, and some live off of money sent by relatives living and working abroad. A common method of upgrading a house is to benefit from relatives living abroad and many of the very developed concrete structures are finished in this way. Although dwelling structures right next to each other vary widely from concrete housing to wooden and tin huts, most residents consistently listed poor income generation and flooding as their main concerns.



Informal laborers can expect to earn about 20,000 dong per day (US\$1.50 approximately) compared to a state employee who on average earns between 600,000 and 700,000 dong per month (US\$30-\$40). Although the income of an informal laborer could potentially equal that of a state employee, their earnings are rarely consistent due to a variety of hardships. One obstacle is flooding during the rainy season, when water can rise as high as waist-level on some roads and impede people's ability to work.

On an informal level, people attempt to address these obstacles in a variety of ways. An Khan is divided by a series of wards that are comprised of approximately 20-30 households each and led by an elected ward leader who is usually an elder or a military veteran. Within these wards households contribute money into a fund that can be used for a less fortunate family's medical emergency bills, cultural events, or small upgrading projects. In some areas, an at-

tempt to mitigate flooding is visible by informal drainage techniques.

Access to water and electricity also varies along formal and informal connections. Those that have formal connections sell water and electricity to those without formal access. At one time there was a public tap near the ferry terminal of the settlement that quickly fell into disrepair. Currently, residents without formal access pay approximately 14,000 dong for a bucket of water, and 90,000 for electricity. Formal electrical arrangements cost between 120 and 170 million dong per year. Many residents around the settlement seemed to enjoy electrical access by either one of these arrangements. Much of the infrastructure such as paved roads and some formally provided electrical lines were newly installed within the last 3-6 months. One 35-year household that lives along the river was in the process of installing a new toilet that was to be shared with 10 other families.

Along the river side of the settlement there is a freshly dug path that has been filled in after the installation of a water pipe. The district leader of An Khan provided two business cards of the international organizations responsible for installing these services: Enda Vietnam and a French university that appeared to be an administrative branch of Villes en Transition. In one case the path was followed to find the current point of installation - a crew installing a water pipe next to a storefront vendor. According to a crew supervisor, a private company ran the installation with their own crew.





## Tenure and Resettlement

Tenure in the settlement varies from registered long-term residence of at least 6 years to shorter-term settlement of 2 years. Legally, all new migrants and residents to a new district must register with the district headquarters to receive a resident permit that dates the time of arrival. Long-term residents of 6 years or more receive a blue book of papers and short-term residents of two years or less a yellow book. Officials report a 60/40 percent split between blue and yellow books. Although district headquarters reports the first residents to arrive just before 1975, many families claim to have lived there much longer. There seems to be no legal separation between riverfront areas and the interior of long-term and short-term settlers. If many of them are forced to move as the UMP dictates, they will receive a compensation amount that is commensurate with their housing structure and duration in the settlement. AN PHU, ETC.

In the long run those costs may fall disproportionately on the urban poor as more are displaced, and eclipse NGO effectiveness if resources are allocated to areas that will be appropriated for commercial use.■

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## Eggs in One Basket: Phu Quoc Island's Tourism Development Plan

Phu Quoc  
Island



*ture attraction of the island rests on the preservation of its environment, this paper will highlight three areas that the local officials should consider in concert with their tourism development and environmental management strategy; rural development policy, education and job training and waste management control.*

### CURRENT SITUATION

*Located in the Gulf of Thailand, Phu Quoc is an under-populated, pristine island slightly smaller than Singapore. Since Vietnam and Phu Quoc opened their doors to tourists ten years ago, life on the island has generally improved. However, most of the island's 80,000 inhabitants still survive at subsistence level either by fishing in the waters of the Gulf of Thailand or through agriculture. In line with national development policy, the local government is depending on a focused and directed plan to propel the growth of the tourism sector in order to create jobs. While local tourism officials seem aware that the fu-*

As one enters Ho Chi Minh City from Tan Son Nhat Airport, a large billboard welcoming visitors to Vietnam reads, "Vietnam: A Destination for the New Millennium!" In conjunction with evolving economic reform policies, Vietnam is banking on continued growth of tourism to accelerate its development. Blessed with several thousand kilometers of unspoiled coastline, a tropical climate, mountains, the Mekong Delta, as well as ethnic variety, promotion of Vietnam's natural as well as cultural wonders remain underdeveloped. One place still in its nascent phase is a large island located

off Vietnam's southwest coast in the Gulf of Thailand, Phu Quoc Island. Known primarily for its fish sauce, pepper plantations, prisons and as a launching ground for refugees fleeing Vietnam, Phu Quoc also boasts virgin forests and fabulous fishing waters. Located 45 kilometers from Vietnam and only 15 kilometers from Cambodia, Phu Quoc Island is approximately 56,000 hectares and shaped like a light bulb. In addition to the primary island, 21 small islets complete its archipelago. The spectacular topography varies greatly as one traverses the island, ranging from mountainous virgin jungle, arid sand terrain, fresh water springs and waterfalls, mangrove forests, and cashew farms; an ecosystem different from anywhere else in Vietnam. 37,625 hectares are dedicated to silviculture, and 33,563 hectares remain natural forest.<sup>2</sup> In general, life is simple on Phu Quoc. The average per capita income is just \$215 per annum, and many homes do not have power or water.<sup>3</sup> Resources are limited; rice is imported.

Unfortunately, war has played a prominent role in the island's history, dating as far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. More recently, the French colonial government built a prison on the island, which the Americans used for Vietnamese POWs during the Vietnam War. The island served as a strategic location throughout Vietnam's conflict with the Khmer Rouge. Local people on Phu Quoc Island estimate there are 10,000 troops tucked away in no-go areas.<sup>4</sup> Some of the most beautiful parts of Phu Quoc remain under military control and off limits.



*Military bases occupy a large percentage of the island. A 1969 American made mortar head.*



Local officials deem the tourism industry as the way to accelerate the economic development process.<sup>5</sup> Cumbersome investment procedures, combined with a lack of experience and resources, limited Phu Quoc's tourism and economic development so far, which the government considers to be both positive and negative. On the upside, Mr. Liem of Kien Giang Tourism believes that the island's slow development inadvertently protected the environment. They now recognize that their number one concern should be ecology protection. Conversely, stagnant development kept the people very poor. In order to make the island more conducive



*Many people on the island are without power and retrieve their water from wells.*



for tourism and more livable for the island's population, the government invested in significant infrastructure improvements, particularly in the areas of power, communication and roads. Left over from the war era, Phu Quoc's airport recently underwent repairs. Daily ferry service is also available to and from the mainland, although the relatively short distance of 78 kilometers requires 8 hours.<sup>6</sup>



*Phu Quoc's airstrip serves as a major thoroughfare when planes are not flying. The conditions are always cramped on the ferry from Rach Gia to Phu Quoc.*

In September 2002, Duong Dong, the primary tourist town (see map below), will become an "Open City." The government has not yet specified what this means, even though they promulgated permission last year. Basically, the "Open City" status should facilitate and localize domestic and

foreign investment, as well as offer incentives to attract additional ventures. Designed to boost local production and business, the incentive policy will apply to all companies involved in export-import operations, entry and exit procedures, goods transit services, foreign warehouses, duty-free shops, fairs and exhibitions, export goods establishments and representative offices.<sup>7</sup>

The first phase of the Open City will stretch from the airport south, just past an existing hotel. Duong Dong's "Open City" status will involve a two-year trial period. If the first phase is successful, how this is measured remains to be seen, then the government will expand the Open City zone. The development area will not extend north of Duong Dong due to continuing security concerns over Cambodia, and to protect the



*Map of Phu Quoc Island with Duong Dong "Open City" plan.  
-R. Loeb*

area planned for the national park. Additional investment areas could include the beaches around Bai Vong on the east side of the island.

Since October 15th, 2000, *SuperStar Aries* out of Malaysia has been calling weekly at Phu Quoc Island from Laem Chabang (Bangkok). For the year 2000, she made over 50 calls to Phu Quoc Island bringing in approximately 38,000 passengers annually.<sup>8</sup> Phu Quoc received special permission from the government to allow the cruise ship's tourists enter the area around Duong Dong without having to pay for the visa. During the morning of the ship's call, Vietnamese customs officials board the vessel and process passports for the tourists wanting to visit the island that afternoon. The week before Vietnamese New Year, 800 out of the 1100 people on the ship disembarked and toured the island.<sup>9</sup> The financial success of this experimental program, such as funding new infrastructure improvements, encouraged local and national leaders to explore additional ways to develop the island's tourism industry.



*The Star Cruises terminal and jetty in Duong Dong town.*

Improving accessibility to Phu Quoc is a major priority for 2001, in order to increase the number of tourists on the island. Kien Giang tourism is buying several hydrofoils to facilitate access to the island. The tourism company will invest in the new boats in order to reduce the travel time from Rach Gia to Phu Quoc by five and a half hours. The government hopes that the high-speed boats will lessen the demand for air tickets. According to Mr. Liem, Vietnam Airlines also promised to increase the number of flights to the mainland from nine to eleven per week. Despite last year's upgrade, airport problems remain. During fog, wind, rain or any other atmospheric conditions that limit visibility, the planes cannot fly. The runway is short and at the eastern end there is a large hill limiting future expansion. No plan exists to promote the airport into an international terminal; all issues regarding the airport remain under national jurisdiction.

Additional infrastructure improvements under the tourism promotion plan for 2001 include road upgrading and water systems. This year the government will attempt to asphalt all roads in Duong Dong town. Other new roads, as well as the road to Bai Thom in the north should be paved in 2002. Due to water shortages on Phu Quoc Island, the government committed 70 billion dong (approximately \$4,827,600) to build a dam at Ba Dan Stream. The rainwater dam will provide for the island's population as well as for its agriculture needs. This money, however, only funds the dam's construction.

Funding sources for the distribution system are not yet secured.



*The main road is not paved. It connects Duong Dong town with the planned Open City development zone.*

Fourteen hotels (290 rooms)<sup>10</sup> operate on the island. From November through May, this supply barely meets the demand. During the raining season, very few tourists visit Phu Quoc. As previously mentioned, during the high season, more people want to visit Phu Quoc than can physically access the island. If access is improved as government officials intend, more hotel rooms will be needed. There are three classifications of hotel rooms, Bungalow, Hotel and Guesthouse. I do not how many people are currently employed by the hotels. However, all kinds of work usually associated with hotel operations are present. The Open City plan should increase these room numbers and work to improve the investment process. (See Appendix for a complete list of existing hotels.)



*The Saigon - Phu Quoc Tourist Hotel has the only swimming pool on the island.*

Returning to the issue of the environment, the government continues to make vocal gestures to protect the virgin, natural forest and to promote eco-tourism. Toward that end and according to Mr. Liem, this year, some 5000 hectares in the northern reaches of the island will be formally designated as a national park (refer to map on page 5). Currently, “no entry” signs demarcate the forest’s edges informing locals not to enter the jungle to cut firewood or to hunt for animals. It is unclear how much this restriction is enforced or whether the people even understand why they are forbidden from entering the woods or cutting trees. After the national park is established, Phu Quoc Tourism plans to open hiking trails.



*Cashew trees and jungle grow side by side to create a spectacular, green countryside.*

### THREE AREAS OF CAUTION

#### a. Agricultural Industry

According to Mr. Liem, tourism has yet to threaten the dominant agriculture industries on Phu Quoc. Agriculture, particularly pepper and cashews, and fishing remain the mainstays of the island. He also stated that the government will not designate any addi-

tional land for agriculture uses in order to protect the remaining forests. Moreover, officials recognize the need to control the fishing industry so not to deplete the waters of fish. While these are commendable policies in line with efforts to protect the natural environment, the government should not abandon its agriculture development or discourage people from farming. Not everyone can work in the tourism industry. The low levels of productivity stem from ancient farming techniques and antiquated fishing vessels. Maintaining a diversified economy, balanced with further investment into existing agriculture lands that increase efficiency, will protect against future cycles in tourism. Phu Quoc is renown for its fish sauce and pepper. 1000 tons of pepper and six million liters of fish sauce are exported each year.<sup>11</sup> This notoriety should be exploited further and incorporated into the marketing of the island. Improved bottling and packaging would strengthen the brand name of Phu Quoc, foster hype for the island, and create additional incentives for people to visit. While tours of fish sauce factories and pepper farms are currently available, expanded programming integrated into both the tourism plan and rural development policy would support agricultural development and yield higher returns.



*Pepper plantations dot the center of the island and are adjacent to virgin jungle.*



*The primary port at the mouth of the river in Duong Dong town filled with small fishing boats built for the sea.*

## b. Job Creation and Training

Job creation is one direct way for the local people to profit from the growth of tourism. However, if the “Open City” plan is successful, the people of Phu Quoc do not possess the necessary skills to win the jobs created by the expansion. Education levels are very low and people are not accustomed to working regular “9-5” jobs. The concept of a service industry is completely foreign. The owner of the Tropicana Hotel told me that he has to go to Ho Chi Minh City to find qualified staff.<sup>12</sup> Currently, only four of the fourteen hotels even come close to being capable of serving an international clientele! Unless the local government immediately invests in training programs, including English language and service indus-

try skills, the very jobs intended to assist the local people will go elsewhere. The local people of Phu Quoc will remain in poverty and without work while the sacrifices made to attract various business undertakings will benefit few. Investment in human infrastructure must go hand in hand with the Open City plan if the people of Phu Quoc are to profit directly from the increase in tourism.



*Many people work in Duong Dong's market and do not hold typical urban jobs.*

### c. Waste Treatment

Although significant expenditures have been made toward the island's infrastructure, hardly any of that money has gone toward sewage systems or wastewater treatment.<sup>13</sup> Most waste flows directly into the rivers or sea. Although the waters are clean now, further population increases coupled with the sudden impact of new hotels will severely impact the water quality in and around the island. According to Mr. Liem, in an effort to rectify this deficiency, all new hotels must build on-site wastewater treatment systems before discharging into the Gulf. The recently constructed Saigon-Phu Quoc Tourist hotel contains such facilities.

However, there are no plans to build a system for the island or even Duong Dong town. Without immediate attention, the potential damage from pollution would counter any efforts to protect and preserve the environment or attract development based on the island's pristine ecosystem.

Funding limitations understandably force the government to choose where to allocate its resources for infrastructure improvements, and what to forgo in the near term. However, sacrificing proper waste control systems in the short run could prove to be even more detrimental in the long run and counteract any progress gained from the growth in tourism. Perhaps the government could explore the concept of linkage fees to fund the development of a waste treatment system for Duong Dong. New investors to Phu Quoc, both foreign and domestic, would pay a tax according to the level of their investment that would help fund the creation of a sewage system. Not only do the local citizens benefit, but the investors also receive assurance that efforts to mitigate pollution are underway and that the clear waters and clean beaches will be preserved.



*Duong Dong's sewage dumps directly into the sea.*

## Conclusion

The opinions and suggestions included in this paper are derived primarily from repeated observations, frequent visits to the island, four years of Vietnam experience and interviews with officials and locals involved in tourism. Phu Quoc's ecology places the island in an enviable position. Few people inhabit this natural ecosystem relatively unspoiled by development. Tourism could provide a vehicle for economic development without severe displacement of residents. However, it could also bypass the people. Unless the citizens are prepared for the opportunities, the jobs created by the development policy will go to qualified people from Ho Chi Minh City. Also, the government should not depend solely on tourism to propel its growth. The tourism industry by nature is cyclical and any sudden downturn could send people already struggling to survive deeper into poverty. The phased approach, as presented by the government in the Open City plan, balanced with continued support and encouragement for those in agriculture, should protect and sustain the island's development. ■

## Endnotes

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- <sup>3</sup> Solomon, Andy. Reuters. [http://city.reuters.com/city/home/goingplaces/travel/vitenam\\_island.html](http://city.reuters.com/city/home/goingplaces/travel/vitenam_island.html)
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> Mr. Liem, general director of the Phu Quoc branch Kien Giang Tourism Company, the state provincial tourism company responsible for the development of Phu Quoc Island, provided information regarding tourism on Phu Quoc Island during an interview on 22 January, 2001.
- <sup>6</sup> Many of the observations and information included in this paper comes from the author's personal knowledge of the Phu Quoc Island and Vietnam in general.
- <sup>7</sup> Vietnam News Service, <http://vietnamnews.vnagency.com.vn/2000-08/22/Stories/04.htm>
- <sup>8</sup> [http://www.starcruises.com.my/newswire/2000/apr25\\_2000.html](http://www.starcruises.com.my/newswire/2000/apr25_2000.html)
- <sup>9</sup> Mr. Liem
- <sup>10</sup> Mr. Dung is a local tour guide on Phu Quoc.
- <sup>11</sup> [www.vietnamtourism.com/e\\_pages/tourist/tourspot/natural/hd\\_phuquoc.htm](http://www.vietnamtourism.com/e_pages/tourist/tourspot/natural/hd_phuquoc.htm)
- <sup>12</sup> Mr. Loc manager of the Tropicana Hotel, 25 January, 2001.
- <sup>13</sup> Mr. Liem
- <sup>14</sup> Information provided by Mr. Nguyen Dung, local guide.

## Appendix

### Existing Hotel Stock<sup>14</sup>:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b># Of Rooms</b>
Thang Loi	Bungalow	19
Minh	Guesthouse	4
Hong Hanh	Hotel	12
Huong Toan	Guesthouse	20
Quoc Tun	Guesthouse	25
Duong Dong	Guesthouse	14
Van Nguyen	Hotel	7
Huong Bien	Hotel	50
Saigon Tourist	Hotel	35
Kim Hoa	Hotel	18
Tropicana	Bungalow	20
Kim Linh	Hotel	21
Khu Thuong Mai	Guesthouse	19
Ong Sau Ca	Bungalow	21
<b>Total:</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>B: 3</b>
		<b>H: 6</b>
		<b>G: 5</b>
		<b>290</b>



## **SIGUS**

School of Architecture and Planning  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
77 Massachusetts Avenue  
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139 USA

e-mail: [sigus@mit.edu](mailto:sigus@mit.edu)

Url: [web.mit.edu/sigus/www](http://web.mit.edu/sigus/www)