



# theFocus

A couple drinking sugarcane juice at Me Tri (The Manor), a new urban area west of Hanoi (photo by Vincent Bertholon).

## Producing & living the city in Vietnam

### Engaging with the urban field in Vietnam: crossing approaches

In a world where more than 50% of the population lives in cities,<sup>1</sup> Vietnam and its current 34% of urban dwellers<sup>2</sup> remains associated with rurality in the global imaginary. But this last figure should be put into perspective: after decades of de-urbanisation under the socialist regime the national urban growth is now exploding; the country's urban population has doubled since 1980, with an official average growth of 3.4% per year.<sup>3</sup> Beyond this steady demographic development, urbanised areas multiplied by 4 between 1995 and 2010.<sup>4</sup> Most of the urban growth takes place in and around Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), even though secondary cities are also engaged in a rebalancing process.<sup>5</sup> Today these two main metropolises of the country have respectively 7 and 7.9 million inhabitants.<sup>6</sup> In addition, since the introduction of *đổi mới* reforms in the mid-1980s,<sup>7</sup> cities have been officially recognised as the engine of national economic growth by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), which leads the country.

In this renewed context, our *Focus* offers a fresh perspective on the production of urban forms, the reconfiguration of local management, and the renegotiation of daily practices in Vietnamese cities. Our intention is not only to highlight the path-breaking transformations taking place in Vietnam today, but also to contribute to the 'Asianisation' of urban studies paradigms through grounded analysis and interpretation,<sup>8</sup> and to discuss an alternative theoretical framework, based on extensive fieldwork in Vietnamese cities and neighbourhoods.

## Engaging with the urban field in Vietnam: crossing approaches *continued*

### Unfolding the layers of the Vietnam urban fabric

If contemporary urban transformations are taking place in increasingly globalised contexts, they should also be understood by considering the long-term urban history that explains the distinctiveness of the Vietnamese metropolises' 'art of being global'.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, their contemporary 'openness' echoes the previous international links these cities kept during the historical contexts of Chinese Diaspora trade, French colonisation and the socialist bloc-cooperation period. Thus, after experiencing colonisation, decades of war, socialism and de-urbanisation,<sup>10</sup> followed by the national reunification of 1976 and *đổi mới* reforms, different Vietnamese cities reveal different urban trajectories.

In that regard, the literature has contrasted Hanoi and HCMC for a long while: HCMC is usually depicted as the country's liberal and international vanguard, while Hanoi is often associated with bureaucracy and Party enhanced control. Hanoi, as the national capital city, is indeed the place where decisions are taken, while HCMC is considered to be the potential economic engine of the country. The different places they occupy in the urban hierarchy continue to influence the understanding of Vietnam's urbanisation, even though this dichotomy is becoming less significant these days. The two metropolises are now engaged in a similar trend of opening-up and metropolisation, which leads to a progressive 'convergence process'. Thus, while concentrating mainly on these two leading cities – thereby also reflecting the reality of the academic production today, as far as urban Vietnam is concerned – this Focus will go beyond the simple juxtaposition of two competing cities, by highlighting the complementarities of their two 'worlding paths'.<sup>11</sup>

### Metropolisation: towards a reading of the 'worlding paths' of Vietnamese cities

With the adoption of a 'socialist-oriented market economy' and the opening-up to international financial flows, major Vietnamese cities, as well as secondary ranking cities like Danang located in economic development corridors,<sup>12</sup> are stimulated by a common metropolisation process.

In this *Focus*, metropolisation is understood as a process that affects a city both in its forms and functions, and is characterised by a concentration of population, activities, and wealth. This phenomenon cannot, however, be reduced to its demographic dimension only. Its originality relates to the diversification of the activities, to the concentration of strategic economic functions, and to the attractiveness of and accessibility to communication networks at various scales. In particular, metropolisation integrates cities into the networks of the global economy.<sup>13</sup> While they take part in this tendency, Asian cities display specific features. The *desakota* pattern defined by McGee suggests that metropolisation leads to the assembling of territories that combine agricultural and non-agricultural activities.<sup>14</sup> In addition, by using cheap means of transport, such as motorbikes, transportation of goods and people is facilitated between inner cities and their fringes.

In Hanoi and HCMC the early signs of metropolisation appeared with the arrival of the first Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) at the beginning of the 1990s. Though buildings of more than ten storeys were already built in HCMC during the 1960s and 1970s, Vietnamese cities generally remained quite 'low', until the FDI triggered the construction of the first high-rise buildings. This paved the way to the verticalisation and 'super-sizing' of the city. The construction of the New World Hotel in HCMC in 1991, and the Hanoi Tower in 1996 (that combines service apartments, hotel, offices and retail functions), embodied the first international functions and vertical shapes. On the outskirts, FDI materialised through the construction of rescaled industrial zones and factories (see the article by *Trần Khắc Minh* in this *Focus* section). For instance, the Japanese firm Honda settled its first motorbike assemblage chain in the North of Hanoi nearby the international airport in 1997.

In addition, urban sprawl has progressed rapidly. In the last 20 years, in both cities, an average of 1,000 hectares per year of agricultural land has been urbanised. As a result, the inner cities and their outskirts (i.e., the peri-urban areas) were densified. Noteworthy landmarks of this trend are the experimental residential areas, known as 'new urban areas' (*Khu đô thị mới*), which city authorities initiated in the early 1990s. Both Hanoi and HCMC started to develop their iconic projects in 1996, with *Ciputra* in Hanoi and *Saigon South* in HCMC. These two projects represent the kick-start of large scale urban projects in Vietnamese cities (over 400 hectares) located at the cities' outskirts, where private and foreign investors and developers are involved (see article by *Segard*). Furthermore, there has clearly been a shift from an organic growth of the city to 'project-based development' (see article by *Gibert and Phạm Thái Sơn*).<sup>15</sup>

In this context, the construction of new mass rapid transit systems became a major issue (see article by *Musil and Vương Khánh Toàn*). Furthermore, while cities deal with planned adjustment phases to frame the construction of modern economic infrastructures, urban spontaneous developments also continue.

### A reordering of stakeholders: urbanisation as a political process

Spaces are changing; so too are the stakeholders. Even though the economic transition and international opening-up have been orchestrated by the Party, the Regime has evolved, influenced both from the 'outside' (regional powers, international donors, Western countries) and from the 'inside' (intellectuals, Party branches, religious groups, inhabitants, etc.). The current production of the city, governance issues and power relations, all illustrate the complexification of the political, economic and social life of the country.

Stakeholders involved in planning, construction, acquisition of land or renovation of urban cores are much greater in numbers nowadays, and they keep diversifying. Public authorities have kept hold of the driving seat, controlling the land use system, investments licences or Official Development Assistance targets. However, they are now being challenged. On the one hand, private entrepreneurs (both domestic - notably the recomposing State-Owned Enterprise - and international) have growing expectations in terms of land availability, flexibility, incentives and enabling business environment. On the other hand, inhabitants are progressively being emancipated from rigid structures of control and mobilisation. Thus, they now participate in the production of the city 'from the bottom-up' and contribute to the emergence of a new urban society, with the wish to benefit from the country's development in general.

Even though the narrative of 'the rights to the city' is not claimed, people are negotiating, questioning policy goals, encroaching the rules every day to have a say in their city's

evolution, to be recognised as urban citizens, and to participate, even on the margins, in decision-making. Thus, power relations and structures are transforming as a result of every stakeholder's attempt to find his or her place in an evolving system, through economic competition, negotiation or protest. In fact, everyone contributes to these changes – no matter their social status, gender, origin or age – because their influence also lies in daily practices, ritual customs (see the articles by *Pannier* and by *Ngô Thị Thu Trang*), or leisure activities (see the article by *Peyvel* and *Võ Sáng Xuân Lan*) that are not always politicised, but which do nevertheless shape the global evolution of the country and society.

Practical development choices, growth policies and urban models have to be formulated and developed by the authorities. Concretely, the Party-State faces both short-term and long-term challenges: housing production and service provision, the climate change threat to river delta regions (already subject to floods), congestion issues and pollution, heritage preservation (see the article on urban heritage preservation policies in this *Focus* section) and promotion of 'modern' urban products, such as shopping malls or condominiums.

What is crucial now for the Regime is to decide how to manage developments, which arrangements to adopt, and how to mediate between economic interests and political /social stability. In other words, how to make the system work? For the authorities, the objective is to keep control and power over urbanisation while largely delegating, or privatising, the production of the city.

A street scene in Phú Mỹ Hưng, a new urban area in HCMC, with the Bitexco Tower, a city landmark, in the background (photo by Marie Gibert).





A view from the corner of Lý Chính Thắng and Trần Quốc Thảo streets in HCMC (photo by Marie Gibert).

It is important to bear in mind that the Regime's stability relies on its ability – more or less – to ensure growth and to improve living conditions for a majority of its people. The Party-State carries a strong developmentalist discourse and its members position themselves as 'state-craft thinkers', who have to, and can, turn the country from a 'latecomer state' into an 'advanced country', by making adjustments inspired by exogenous Western or Asian models.<sup>16</sup> But growth has slowed down and inequalities are increasing, especially in urban contexts, leading many to question the legitimacy of the 'socialist and communist' Regime.

So far, pragmatism and flexibility have been key to mitigate shocks and react to emerging demands, internal or external, from the local 'civil society' or from the private sector. The Party-State has demonstrated its ability to adapt and react subtly by postponing unpopular or sensitive reforms, by co-opting potential sources of opposition, by adopting new rules or by taking a step back from urban or peri-urban projects that provoke local conflicts.

#### Beyond the 'black box'

Walking through the city, from the coffee shop on the corner of the street, past private homes, official offices, city departments and police stations, our findings result from extensive fieldwork, exploring urban and peri-urban areas, engaging with people, and producing a collective effort to circulate information and perspectives.

Beyond the documentation of Vietnamese urban mutations in their various forms, this *Focus* also wants to offer a renewed perspective on urban studies' tools, from the specific context of Vietnam today. Following the track of the Southern Turn,<sup>17</sup> we have strived to tackle the inadequacy of the Western conceptual framework in urban studies. Applied out of its context, this hegemonical toolbox of globalized urbanism has become a 'black box',<sup>18</sup> invisibilising the specificities of Vietnamese cities. We therefore explore the possibility of transcending 'the West and the Rest' categorisation, inherited from colonial times.

Indeed, Vietnamese cities undergo combined forms of rigid categorisation: economically speaking, they are 'emerging cities', that is to say threatening for European and North American countries;<sup>19</sup> from a socio-spatial perspective, they are 'Southern' and 'developing' cities;<sup>20</sup> and politically they are considered to be 'opening-up', designated with the prefix 'post', to indicate both the end of colonialism and socialism. For all these reasons, the recurring discourse of 'transition' is dominant in the analyses of the production of contemporary Vietnamese cities.<sup>21</sup>

This *Focus* intends to show how the intersectionality of Vietnamese cities is fertile ground for rethinking the position,

methods and concepts of the researcher – especially when he or she is not Vietnamese. The making of this project was therefore thought to disrupt the 'black box'. As a group, we were particularly keen on a symmetrical research practice in a post-colonial perspective. This involves decentring the researcher's gaze to balance the power plays that govern the production of knowledge. We therefore sought to work *with* – rather than *instead of* – Vietnamese researchers. To do that, we functioned either in pairs (comprising both a French and a Vietnamese researcher) or we put French and Vietnamese perspectives, on objects such as heritages and rituals, side by side. This innovative working process allowed for a continued presence in the field over many years, for shared fieldwork, contradictory readings of the findings, and for co-writing processes. We were therefore able to overcome challenging practical issues such as the scarcity of statistical data, accessibility of sensitive places and stakeholders, and matters of understanding local narratives, thus contributing to a comprehensive approach to the city, and articulating macro and micro scale analyses.

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