

Understanding the Vietnamese urban fabric from the inside

*Narrow lane, small street,
my home is there
In my dreams,
I still remember this ...¹*

Once low, dense and organic cities, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) are now engaged in a steady-paced verticalisation process, especially in the new urbanised areas flourishing at their edges (*khu đô thị mới*). But beyond iconic new urban projects and glittering business districts, the everyday city production still takes place in the interior of their specific urban pattern, namely their alleyway neighbourhoods.

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Above:
An alleyway in
HCMC (district 3)
in the morning
(photo by Marie
Gibert).

THESE ANCIENT NEIGHBOURHOODS are characterised by the 'smallness' of their plot division and by the very high density of population they foster (more than 80.000 inhabitants/km² in some central areas of HCMC; in district 10 for instance). Although lacking official recognition from the urban authorities, the urban network of alleyways still houses about 85% of city dwellers in HCMC, and 88% in Hanoi.² As such, it remains an important ingredient of the Vietnamese urban identity. Reading the contemporary production of metropolitan spaces through this lens provides insights not only into the evolution of the inherited spatial apparatus, but also into the social and political dimensions of the urbanity. It allows one to embrace the ethnographical turn in metropolitan studies that Ananya Roy and Aiwaha Ong call for, in order to fully integrate "the diversity of urban dreams, project and practices [...] in emerging world regions" in the field of urban theory.³

Hanoi's alleyways: the evidence of a rural palimpsest

The widespread existence and the typical small width of alleyways in Hanoi are not an accidental phenomenon; they are the historical result of the urban development process. Most of Hanoi's alleyways have been developing based on the spatial structure of ancient rural villages (*làng*), after some structural and dimensional restoration. The main alleyways were established from the ancient road pattern leading to the village hamlets (*thôn*): the pathway between ancient rice fields or along the edge of large ponds, once existing almost everywhere in ancient villages. The smallest alleys were created more recently, during the densification process of urban villages; either through organisational subdivisions, or through the auto-division of original private land.⁴

In the beginning of the 1990s, Hanoi's local authorities distributed land – including vacant lots, lakes, ponds and rice fields – surrounding the city centre among public groups. The receiving organisations then divided these areas into several single plots of 30-40m² and allocated them to their staff. The small alleyways were designed as straight passages, of approximately 2-2.5m wide, between the plots of land. The second mechanism mentioned above is the common phenomenon of auto-division of private land in urbanised villages surrounding the city. With the construction of new homes, or the need for familial financial resources (garnered through selling land), original land owners divide their garden, court or pond into many small plots of 30-50m², leaving

small passages of only 1-1.5m wide. Such alleys can be winding or straight, depending on the number of times a plot has been divided, and the division method of subsequent owners.

The mechanisms of alleyway development, together with the city-wide phenomenon of illegal encroachments by house construction, explain the extremely narrow width of the alleys. In Hanoi, 90% of the alleys are less than 4m wide, with a significant disparity among the different urban areas: the further from the city centre, the larger the alleyways. As a result, most alleys are inaccessible to cars.

HCMC's alleyways: the pragmatism of city dwellers during uncertain historical times

In HCMC, the very dense network of alleyways was born mainly out of the city dwellers' pragmatism during uncertain times. Only the colonial grid-pattern covering district 1, a part of district 3, and the historical structure of the Chinese neighbourhood of *Chợ Lớn*, at the West of district 5, were planned and calibrated during the 19th century. At that period the street networks were considered to be the matrix of the urbanisation process. But beyond the production of these historical neighbourhoods, urban growth took place following a spontaneous and linear logic, first guided by the main trading axes, and later by a process of densification.⁵

The further we get from these structuring main streets, the more random the alleyway grid becomes, revealing the historical interweaving between the planned and the spontaneous in HCMC's urban production. The different morphological patterns of the alleyways answered the variety of local situations: like a palimpsest, their spatial organisation often reveals the ancient frame of rural paths, paddy fields or embankment systems, that structured the territory many decades ago. As a result, HCMC's urban structure is notably based on the juxtaposition of different composite urban fabrics.

Each alleyway benefits from strong interactions with its adjacent plots of lands. This spatial apparatus constitutes the basic unit of the urban matrix. The heart of this apparatus comprises the 'shop house', today often reinterpreted as the 'tube-house' (*nhà ống*). Its shape is rectangular, very narrow and deep (around 3-4m wide and 15-25m deep), perpendicular to the street, onto which it opens directly (on one side only), and it occupies the entire plot of land. The high prevalence of this urban form helps to explain the high density that HCMC fosters, despite its low morphological profile.

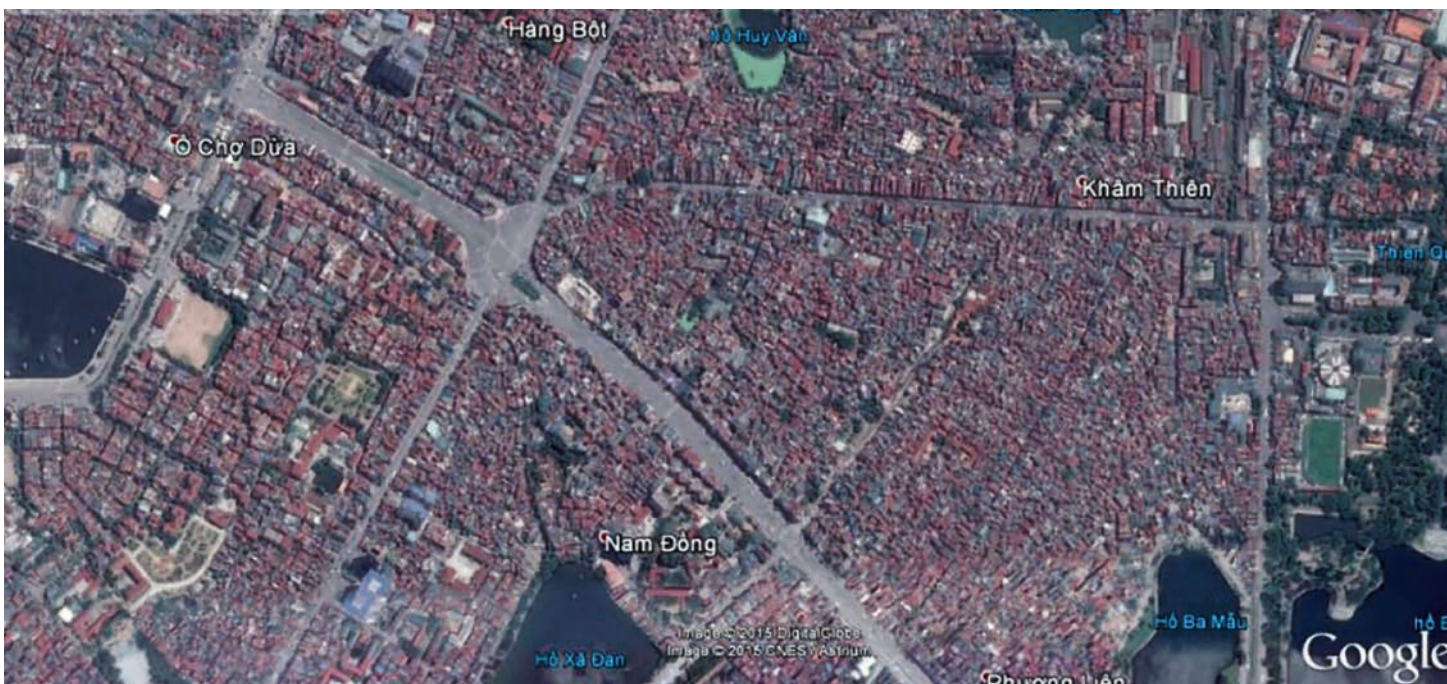
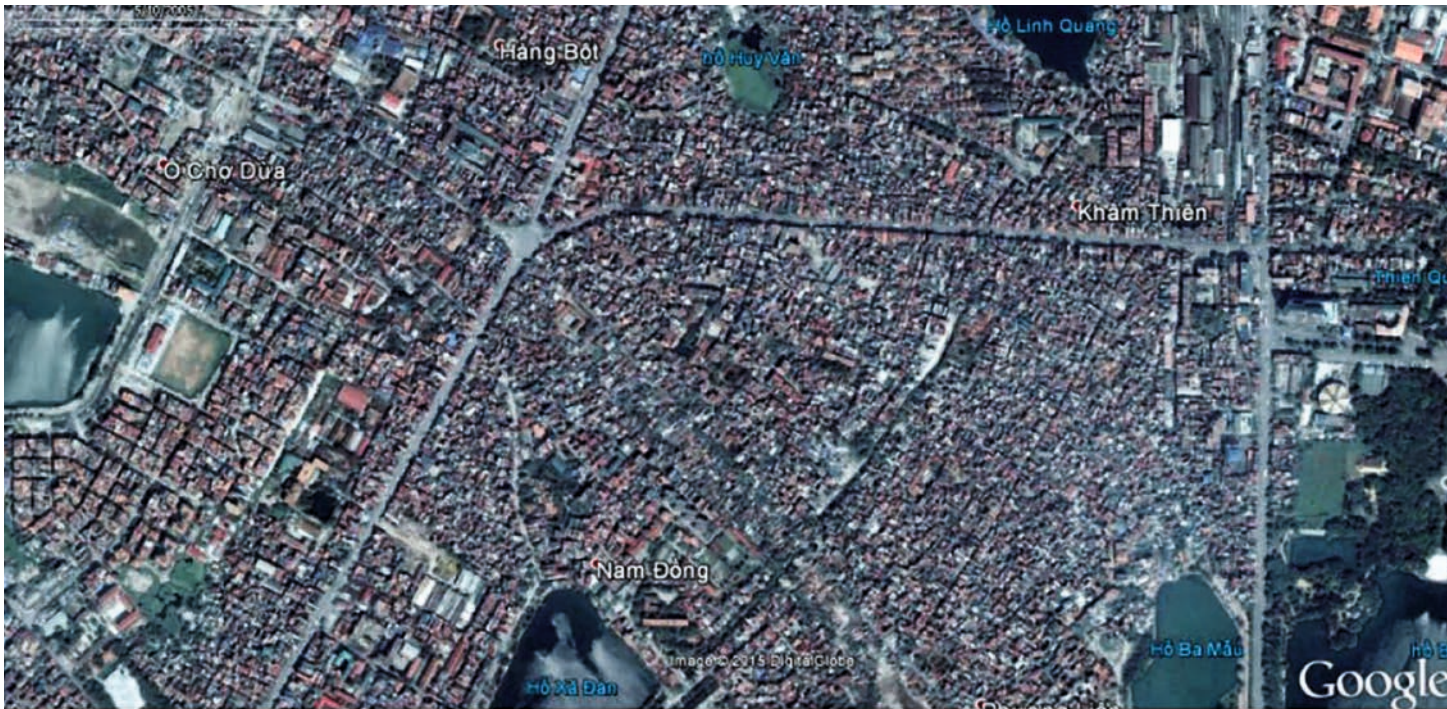
Both in Hanoi and HCMC, low-rise urban fabric allows for direct street access to a maximum of residents. Indeed, trading functions have historically driven the format of urban housing in Vietnam. Alleyways directly connected to commercial streets are the most valued. Furthermore, within this urban texture, the different blocks and neighbourhoods are not structured around any central plaza. The idea of centrality is linearly embodied by the main alleyway, which constitutes the backbone of the local structure and which is the most socially and commercially dynamic place in the neighbourhood. In Vietnamese spatial practices, the built environment itself is structured by and according to the street: it is the distance to the street that orders the layout and the functions associated with each room in the house, through a succession of ranked thresholds. The entrance room, which opens directly onto the street, constitutes the pivot of this spatial apparatus: it allows an efficient interface between public and private, commercial and domestic. Thus, Vietnamese alleyways offer a relevant example of an integrated urban apparatus, where interrelations between the form of places and their practices are obvious.

Alleyway households as self-organised communities

Alleyway neighbourhoods are divided into several resident groups (*tổ dân phố*) of 50-100 persons. Each group is led by a head person, who represents the neighbourhood at the ward level. The groups organise monthly meetings, in which they inform residents of administrative news, discuss local policies, and mediate household conflicts. Thus, alleyway households proactively participate in the management of their daily lives and the development of their surrounding space and landscape.

A good example of the willingness of urban residents to participate in the production of their space is the local project that (re)constructed alley pavements and underground sewers. To carry out the project, each household contributed to the budget; so too did the Ward People's Committee, in accordance with the principle *Nhà nước và nhân dân cùng làm* [the state and people work together]. Resident groups relied on their 'head person' to supervise the work, but each resident also kept an eye on work done in front of their own home. Most residents were satisfied with the outcome and the quality of work; more so than with projects that are totally financed by the public sector, in which cases they do not have any right of supervision or participation. Another example of urban

A view from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City alleyway neighbourhoods



self-management can be found in a small alley on *Giải Phóng* street in Hanoi. Residents were unhappy with their very narrow alley (only 1.2m), and so decided to expand its width to 2m by all contributing a part of their private land.

These examples confirm that urban residents are not passive actors in the city production, but active participants in urban morphology, the evolution of technical services and the creation of everyday public space. Daily life in the alleyways illustrates very well the traditional Vietnamese saying *bán anh em xa mua láng giềng gần* [selling far brothers and buying near neighbours]. The intimate interactions among alley residents create a strong sense of community and a shared memory, as Le Vinh describes in his famous song "Hanoi and me", quoted at the top of this article.

Alleyways as vibrant public spaces

A detour via a semantics study allows for a better understanding of the particular concept of the street within Vietnamese culture. The Vietnamese language provides a categorisation of the world characterised by the use of classifiers for nouns, according to whether they are living things (*con*) or inanimate objects (*cái*). Interestingly, the common word for 'street' is *con đường* and not *cái đường*. In Vietnamese, the street is perceived as an active being and a 'circulated space', shaped by the different types of traffic flows that go through it everyday. This notion acknowledges that social practices contribute to the street's identity and take part in its metamorphoses.

Moreover, streets are considered to be resources intuitively used to meet various needs. Not only is the alleyway a place of business, but residents also treat their doorstep and street as a natural extension of their own home.⁶ As a result, various domestic activities, such as cooking, doing one's laundry, installing ornamental plants or burning votive objects, take place in the alleyways of Hanoi and HCMC. Trading on the street or on one's doorstep has also been one of the most shared ways to earn a living in post-reform Vietnam, a time at which many people lost their state sector positions. The renewal of the private sector in the Vietnamese economy is thus strongly characterised by small businesses. The capacity alleyways have to welcome such a diversity of activities can be explained through a temporal analysis: the rotation of each type of activity during the day allows for increased access to the street for a larger number of urban dwellers.

Beyond the antagonism of the public/private duo inherited from the Western conception of urban spaces, Vietnamese alleyways offer the richness of the buffer zone of its intermediate semi-public spaces, at the interface of the tube-house and the street. In Vietnam, the level of publicness of a space varies depending on the time of day, and day of year. This remark invites us to re-think the notion of public space from the perspective of Hanoi and HCMC alleyways, in order to fully integrate the urban practices and conceptualisations of the global South in the field of urban theory.⁷ The anthropological exploration of the daily functioning of ordinary alleyways also provides an invitation to acknowledge the social value of ephemeral public spaces, which are constantly renewed by residents' uses and interchanges. These fluid and shifting spaces allow for a great reversibility in urban functions and illustrate the idea of the street as a 'capital for experimentation' and the fruit of a social agreement continuously renewed over time, which allows both for the permanence of a spatial form and the modification of its parallel uses.⁸

Alleyways in the course of the metropolisation process: current challenges and ongoing mutations

In the course of *metropolisation*, the alleyways of Hanoi and HCMC tend to more and more be considered as necessary connectors within larger road systems.⁹ This trend leads to a progressive disconnect between circulatory and residential functions, which used to be the dominant frame of the Vietnamese urban fabric.

After decades of *laissez-faire* regarding the city growth, the metropolitan authorities have come up with new priorities, beginning with the need for traffic fluidity, which reveals the rise in power of a neo-functionalism perspective concerning urban planning in Vietnam today. Beyond this concern, the inherited organic system of the alleyways is accused of challenging urban safety, fire risk for instance. These are the two main official arguments to justify the necessity of a vast alleyway enlargement programme in both cities. But it is easy to decipher other unofficial – but at least as powerful – reasons for challenging the low-rise urban pattern of alleyway neighbourhoods; think for example of the hygienist's vision of a modern city.

The metropolisation process comes hand-in-hand with a tremendous increase in demand for land and land prices during the last decade. Within urban contexts, where the price of land is, among other variables, linked to the accessibility of

the street, enlarging an alleyway both maximises the value of the plot and allows residents to build higher. Thus, increasing the land's profitability is undeniably one of the most powerful engines of urban renewal of the vernacular neighbourhoods.

And so is the urban authorities' will to control and regulate the daily practices of the urban population. The figure of the street seller is among the most threatened. Despite his central place in the everyday nature of the urban fabric, his presence is more and more perceived as contrary to the 'worlding' ambitions of Hanoi and HCMC. At the interface of network and territory, both fixed and on the move, the street seller is an interesting pivot of the street socio-spatial apparatus in Vietnam. Yet the street seller tends to be evicted in favour of traffic. In this context, there is a growing convergence of views between the urban authorities and the urban middle class owners. This convergence can be explained by the growing worry of middleclass members to protect and mark out the boundaries of their newly acquired properties by promoting a clearer distinction between public and private urban spaces. The urban authorities officially support this growing distinction, by promoting the intended edification of what is called a 'civilised and modern' city (*đô thị văn minh, hiện đại*). Official poster campaigns urge urban dwellers to follow new urban rules of civilisation, such as no trade on the sidewalk, in order to build 'cultural neighbourhoods' (*khu phố văn hóa*).

Furthermore, the current evolution of each neighbourhood depends greatly on its relationship with the emerging and renewed 'metropolitan centralities'. In HCMC, wards 22 of *Bình Thạnh* district and 13 of *Phú Nhuận* district are among the most integrated in the official renewal projects. Interestingly, despite their advanced level of metropolisation, these two wards show different trends as far as alleyways are concerned. Most alleyways of ward 13 in *Phú Nhuận* have been enlarged and renewed over the past five years, whilst those in ward 22 in *Bình Thạnh* district will soon be replaced by new vertical urban forms, along rescaled transport infrastructures. These infrastructures are already abruptly cutting up the ancient urban fabric, reflecting perfectly a common effect of 'project-based urbanism'.

The alleyway, a matter of function

Hanoi and HCMC street patterns are characterised by an endless network of alleyways. These alleyway neighbourhoods have already shown a great capacity for transformation over the past decades, especially through the various creative interventions by residents, who make full use of the alleyways on an everyday basis. Alleyways remain core elements of the urban identity and are still the most common form of public space, even though current infrastructure developments are leading to new, very distinct, articulations between public and private spaces, which were once very blurred categories in the Vietnamese urban context.

The organic growth of the urban and social network appears to be challenged today. Despite its modest local ambitions, the current project of alleyway enlargement operates within a broader development of infrastructure by the metropolitan authorities. In the current metropolisation process, movement is privileged above the production of local territories. In this perspective, the street is envisioned as a single-function urban object, entirely dedicated to transit traffic, while it used to be highly multifunctional.

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