

VIETNAM'S HYBRID URBAN LANDSCAPES: The Dream of Western Architects / Urbanists

Kelly Shannon
Assistant Professor,
Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium

ABSTRACT

The non-designed built environment has long been a fascination in Western-based theoretical discourse of architecture and urban design. The powerful sensation of barely controlled chaos that pervades the atmosphere of urbanity in the South has proven globally inspirational and challenges Western world's model of urbanization and modernization. This paper draws upon the particular case of Vietnam. It is premised upon the belief that there exists the possibility to embrace informal and/or illegal settlements and activities into a Vietnamese urbanity for the 21st century. Vietnam has the opportunity to develop an ambivalent urbanity – one where 'place culture' meets globalization. A balance can be struck between the forces of stability and the forces of mobility in the country's hybrid urban landscapes. Two very different but complementary elements of landscapes need to continue to develop in parallel – one established, maintained and governed by law and political institutions, dedicated to permanence and planned evolution; the other, the vernacular landscape, identified with local custom, pragmatic adaptation to circumstances, and unpredictable mobility/change. The informal and/or illegal elements within Vietnamese urbanity can become the *strategic* points to create such a balance. Examples in three secondary cities (Vinh, Hue and Can Tho) of Vietnam are explored for their respective qualities which undeniably tie the informal urbanity to 'genus loci' and suggest manners in which these hybrid landscapes can become a formal and legitimate part of future urban development.

INTRODUCTION

The so-called developing world has once again become a fashionable 'site' for progressive Western

architects/urbanists to research and occasionally intervene. Notably, a number of leading educational institutions in the field (Harvard, Sci-Arc, Berlage Institute, Architectural Association, etc.) have recently incorporated the study of cities in the South into their normal curricula. The favelas of Rio de Janeiro, canal-side squatter settlements in Ho Chi Minh City, informal housing communities of Nairobi and Gecekondu in Istanbul are documented, analyzed and to a certain degree romanticized. What is it that architects find so potentially interesting in such sites? Are there indeed lessons to be learnt from these areas? In an era of globalization, are there indigenous settlement practices that can and should survive to retain local identity?

The New World Order is radically restructuring the physical, socio-political and cultural structure of locations throughout the globe. While designed environments are becoming more visible in cities in the South, so too is the proliferation of a parallel non-designed world – often sites deemed illegal and/or informal. The market economy is completely changing the landscape and the mega-forces of international finance and multi-national capitalism, seemingly impervious to cultural distinctions and national character, are creating sprawling, global cities – containing fortified enclaves for the rich and squalor, nearly inhuman living conditions, for the less fortunate.

Nonetheless, the complexity of relationships in the non-designed world remains fascinating not only for their rich spatial environments but also for their symbolism. Often, the non-designed world represents a scene of social struggle, where no-man's land has been cleverly appropriated by local ingenuity outside of institutional frameworks. There is neither a single author, producer nor user. The autonomy and rhetoric of architecture with a capital A is questioned; heterogeneity is celebrated.

Since the mid-20th century, the non-designed built environment has become a quasi-mainstream reference for the Western-based theoretical discourse of architecture and urban design. Team X's fascination with primitive societies and sets of cultural systems that configure the non-designed built environment was replaced by a more close-to-home incorporation of popular Western vernacular forms and urban fabrics in the late 1960's and 1970's. From the International Situationists to Archigram to Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi to N.J. Habraken the 'establishment' of architecture was challenged by homage to mass culture, pop culture and the architecture of the everyday. Since the 1990's, well-known writers and practitioners in America and Europe continue to develop concepts and programs that deviate from the historical conception of urban form and use. Rem Koolhaas, the demi-God of late 20th Century and 21st Century architecture, has revalorized the notions of programmatic indeterminacy and instability. The late Igansi de Sola-Morales popularized not only time-space perceptions of flow and 'fluxus' but also reinvestigations into 'terrain vague'. Bernard Tschumi continues prolific writing on 'event-spaces' and 'event-cities', whereby the dictum 'form follows function' is abandoned in favor of 'promiscuous collisions of programs and spaces'. Steven Holl continues his plea for the development of hybrid buildings. Andrea Branzi has termed 'weak urbanization' and proposes the inclusion of agricultural activities within the urban fabric. The mass of literature that has arisen under the guise of 'everyday urbanism' explicitly comments upon the spontaneous, informal and sometimes illegal programs and spatial entities that animate daily life.

Often, the descriptions and reference images for the 'new' contemporary concepts come from existing realities of cities in the South. Occasionally, the most spectacular examples come from informal and/or illegal settlements. For example, Koolhaas' exposé of density gained the now extinct Kowloon Walled City fame amongst architects worldwide. Beyond the obvious problems of overcrowding, poor sanitary and hygiene conditions, unsafe constructions and non-durable nature of such settlements there remains an enduring appreciation for the flexible and creative use of space, the

combination of productivity of landscapes into an otherwise increasing consumptive land-use system and results of the ingenuity born from necessity. As electronic surveillance and gated, super-safe and vigilantly ordered communities gain in popularity, numerous architects look with nostalgia to the powerful sensation of barely controlled chaos that pervades the atmosphere of urbanity in the South.

The corollary of such developments is the questioning of the Western world's model of urbanization and modernization. As environments in the regions of the first world are continually destroyed by the abandonment of urban cores, piecemeal development and ever-persistent loss of 'countryside' to suburbanization one can reasonably ask if the concentric, compact-city model of urban form (with its subsequent ribbon development and decentralized suburbs) is the correct one to begin imposing on 'the rest'.

Perhaps, an answer lies in understanding developing contexts as they are and enhancing the qualities that already exist in the environments of the South. Can the juxtaposition of agriculture and urbanity remain as a viable asset for cities? Can informal and unplanned development be embraced in a series of strategies (not plans) that evolve in time – ever adapting to the changing political, cultural and social conditions of the place in context? Can globalization of culture and homogenization of the built environment be halted by the acceptance of 'alternative modes of living' where informality is given a place to flourish? Can the non-designed built environment be incorporated into newly designed worlds?

This paper draws upon the particular case of Vietnam. It is premised upon the belief that there exists the possibility to embrace informal and/or illegal settlements and activities into a Vietnamese urbanity for the 21st century (Map - 1).

1 - CIAM DREAMS / VIETNAMESE REALITIES

The *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM) – the renowned mouthpiece of the so-called Modernist Movement in architecture



Map-1: Geographic Location of Vietnam

and urbanism that was founded in 1928 – openly asserted that architecture was unavoidably contingent upon the broader issues of politics and economics. CIAM architects were passionately engaged in large-scale social-engineering experiments through the development of new urban and architectural forms.

Across the globe, the CIAM dream was premised upon improved urban living conditions vis-à-vis economic efficiency and the ideal of collectivity and community. The utopian legacy and pursuit of the 'modern project' – as the exploration of possibilities created by technology and a rebelling against all that is normative – peaked in Europe and Russia in the 1920's and 1930's. However, the 'urbanist ideal' continued to be realized decades after its conception. The dramatic conditions brought upon by the vulgarities of World War II legitimized the massive and expedient building of housing schemes throughout Europe. Pre-fabricated

concrete systems solved the urgency demanded by masses of populations requiring housing. The new house-type was also built in those countries of the developing world that underwent revolutions and claimed to build socialist societies. Today, these housing estates are witness to the 'failure' of the modern movement's contribution to mass housing. Plans are condemned as monolithic and uniform due to their strict separation of functions. The sheer scale of estates, resulting in identical housing blocks from which it was all but impossible to identify individual units, diminished the notion of collectivity and community. Blocks are perceived as autonomous objects at the ground level. Often, the vast open spaces are no-man's land, imbued with a lack of public security; they have been deemed the 'concrete disasters' of an aborted social-engineering experiment.

Numerous such housing estates were built as gifts to Vietnam from the German Democratic Republic. The East Germans not only financed the blocks, but also provided the technical expertise for their design and construction. Due to the pressing housing need for the housing following the American-Vietnamese war, estates were constructed quickly with low-quality materials and poor technical detailing. Nonetheless, they were originally designed as an attractive living area following a rational plan of clear infrastructure, with various public facilities, playing yards, green and open public spaces. Four to five-story blocks of reinforced concrete column and beam structures, with infill (brick) walls and concrete floor plates, began to mark the territory. However, neither the urban form nor the housing typologies were altered to suit the tropical climate and Vietnamese lifestyles. Compounding the non-compatibility issue was more general problem of the poor quality and short supply of building materials in addition to inadequate quality control and accountability.

The Quang Trung Housing Estate in Vinh, a provincial city 300 kilometers South of Hanoi, simultaneously exemplifies the problems of the East German transplant of their mass construction of concrete tenements into Vietnam and testifies to the power of local customs and lifestyles in appropriating foreign impositions. The extreme heat of Vinh's summers and ravages of autumn's typhoons resulted in the immediate dilapidation



Figure 1: Quang Trung Estate, Vinh - Colourfully Animated at its Base

of blocks. Apartments, designed with the nuclear European family in mind, proved far too small for extended Vietnamese families. This, in turn, has led to numerous illegal and unsafe unit and balcony extensions. The minimal size of individual apartments is further aggravated by the fact that bicycles and newly acquired motorcycles (often representing the largest investment of families) are stored in the units themselves, often occupying the living space. Public facilities and open public spaces are not maintained by the State.

However, the no-man's-land, so common in Western mid- and high-rise housing estates is colorfully and productively animated at its base, where ground units are invariably converted into shops, restaurants and informal markets; (Figure 1)

sporting activities, meeting places, small husbandry and agricultural areas colonize the open space. Although these activities are informal and illegal, they are recognized as providing legitimate reconsideration in the planning of open space. The LA21 Vinh City Project (with HABITAT and the Post Graduate Center for Human Settlements, University of Leuven) is developing a series of strategies for the rehabilitation of the site that includes the formalization of such activities in open spaces as well as rebuilding balcony extensions with structural integrity. The informal and illegal spaces and programs developed by the inhabitants has become the base from which to redevelop this important site within a secondary city in the North of Vietnam.

2 - URBAN COUNTRYSIDE / RURAL METROPOLIS

In the delta regions of Vietnam, nearly every piece of vacant land is intensively cultivated, and since 1986's *doi moi*¹, businesses of every sort continue to spring up like mushrooms. Export processing zones – strategic sites where global processes and the linkages that bind them materialize – and new industrial zones are beginning to dot the landscape. The dynamic dispersal, centralization and hyper-concentration of facilities are strengthening the inequality of resources and infrastructure in various areas of the country. At the same time however, Vietnam remains a primarily agrarian country – currently the world's third largest exporter of rice² – and it is the muscles of men, women, children and water buffaloes that make Vietnam's soil yield

its treasure, not machinery.

In terms of land use, the two (agriculture and commerce) simultaneously compete and co-exist. Similarly, the economic culture of Vietnam, like most in South-east Asia, is based upon two parallels – and seemingly contradictory systems: one modern, firm-based and the other pre-industrial, rooted in extended systems of kinship. Cottage industries appear alongside high-tech corporate enterprises; rice, lotus, sugar cane, sweet corn and spinach fields edge industrial complexes; sidewalk barbershops and noodle-stands affront entrances to new corporate headquarters. Along the numerous strings of roadside villages, cottage industries revel themselves through their neatly organized bamboo racks for rice paper and incense drying (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Informal Outlets of Cottage Industries String Along Roadsides and Sidewalks.

¹ In December 1986, facing bankruptcy and famine, Vietnam's National Assembly agreed on a program of economic reform as radical as any in the communist world. By embracing *doi moi* (literally meaning 'renovation' but more commonly translated as the 'restructuring' of the economy), Vietnam adopted the vagaries of the free market economics whilst retaining Communist Party rule. Nonetheless, the 'restructuring' of Vietnam has not merely been the erasure of the economic disaster but the dismantling of the 'cradle-to-grave' social achievements of the 'command economy' era.

² In 1989, for the first time in decades, Vietnam exported rice, becoming – virtually overnight – the world's third largest exporter behind the USA and Thailand.

Informal (and frequently illegal) cultivation of urban land is widespread in all cities of Vietnam, including the centers of the two larger agglomerations (Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi). Urban agriculture for subsistence is often carried out on land that is not owned by the user: roadsides, riverbanks, along the railroads and vacant municipal lands (Figure 3). Nonetheless, systems of informal rents and inheritance do exist. The most cultivated are short-duration seasonal crops, which do not require investments to improve soil quality, introduce tree and shrub components and undertake erosion and water-harvesting measures. This is primarily due to the illegal status of plots and subsequent fear of eviction.

In the recently approved land use and master plans to 2020 for Vietnamese cities, land allocation for urban food producers is excluded. Needless to say, there are numerous potentials in enveloping the productive landscape (agriculture, sea-products farming, salt field, etc.) into emerging urban

structures. Urban agriculture may not only provide food as security and additional income for lower income households, but also may become an increasingly valuable source in the supply of urban food. The ecological opportunities afforded by urban agriculture extend beyond urban greening and the creation of desirable microclimates to potentials for recycling and re-use of urban organic waste and wastewater. The promotion of multifunctional land use, where urban agriculture is one component, coupled with encouragement of community participation in the management of urban open spaces can reduce public expenditure in management and maintenance. Peri-urban agricultural zones can be included in urban development plans as green belts or green corridors in order to avoid uncontrolled development and destruction of soil.

In the case of Hue, a secondary city geographically in the middle of the country, the potential role of urban agriculture in the future development of the



Figure 3: Urban Agriculture Around the Forbidden City, Hue

city is particularly interesting. The Hue Imperial City (the historic citadel area of the city), an area blown to bits during the TET offensive of the American-Vietnamese War, was inscribed on the World Heritage list by UNESCO in 1993. Since that time, there have been numerous interventions in Hue of bi-lateral and multi-lateral aid agencies. Projects for the piecemeal development of the city have been embraced and the Vietnamese bureaucrats in Hanoi are forging ahead with their production of master plans. The so-called garden city atmosphere of the citadel area is to be maintained and some areas rebuilt for the purpose of tourism. However, urban agriculture is not a part of the plan. The area immediately outside the Forbidden City, which has temporarily been appropriated by urban farmers, is to become a formal public park. Likewise, the banks of the Perfume River (currently occupied by larger-scale crop cultivation) are slowly being transformed into waterfront promenades with hard surfaces, playing areas and picturesque parks.

There is no reason why food production may not be combined with recreation, water storage, nature conservation, and zones of flood risk. The combination of urban agriculture with the desired programs in Hue's open space is complementary; an economically and socially intelligent manner to combine private and public interests. The neat rows of vegetable gardens and the lush green fields of rice can become part of the palette of materials, colors and surfaces in the redesign of the city's open spaces. The step from informal and illegal to formal and legal in urban agriculture merely requires a revision of urban zoning and allocation of municipal open space bylaws and the development of policies that carefully regulate the types of agriculture so as to minimize health risks.

3 - AMBIGUOUS THRESHOLDS

Highway One³, the 2100 kilometer route, rich in history and immortalized by war, is paralleled for most of its length by the national railway⁴; the two form the only north-south artery connecting Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City. The badly rutted, single pot-holed lane in each direction is shared by bicycles, ox carts, honking motorbikes, speeding and unreliable cars, ancient buses and transport trucks, billowing bilious exhaust fumes. Along the edges of the decrepit road, men, women and children on foot (barefoot in the poorer rural areas) carry incredible loads of various kinds either on shoulder-poles with hanging bamboo baskets balanced at both ends or woven baskets precariously poised on heads. Across the country, farmers take over part of the already narrow and congested highway as a drying and threshing floor for newly harvested rice. Informal markets, a growing number of billboard advertisements and State propaganda posters colorfully decorate and indicate an approaching town. As Highway One bisects towns – it simply becomes 'main street'. From early morning until late evening, hordes of motorcycles, bicycles and cyclos⁵ compete for space with a host of other activities which gravitate towards (and in) the street: washing, storing, playing, sitting, sleeping, selling, and eating. The complexity of land use in Vietnam is accurately encapsulated along Highway One.

Vietnamese urban fabrics (the sacred precincts excluded) appear to lack civic spaces – hallmarks of a Western civilized society. Instead, the street is the vibrant focus of public life. In larger cities, sidewalks are taken over by individual households or businesses; guarded motorcycle parking places and informal cafes extend from building lot lines to curbs, forcing pedestrians to walk in the streets.

³ In a significant rewriting of history, the Government has recently acknowledged that it was the first Emperor of the Nguyen Dynasty (1802 – 1911) Gia Long, who first united the country by building the road linking its two halves together. During French times, the road was known as the Mandarin Way. During the Vietnam-American War, it was known as the 'Highway of Terror.'

⁴ In addition to city building, in 1893 (under Governor-General Paul Doumer) the French embarked on a vast public works program—eventually producing two major rail lines: one from Haiphong to Hanoi, up the Red River Valley into the Chinese town of Yunnan Fou; the other, the 1,000-mile-long Trans-Indochinese (finally completed in 1936), connecting Hanoi and Saigon, paralleling the Mandarin Road. The line was a particular target of the US bombing in the North and of the communist sabotage in the South. Bringing it back into service after the war, required the rebuilding of 1,334 bridges, 27 tunnels and 158 stations. Nowadays, the fastest train is called the 'Reunification Express,' but taking at least 36 hours to do so at an average speed of 30 miles per hour it is one of the slowest railway journeys between major cities anywhere.

⁵ A cyclo is a combination of a rickshaw and a bicycle; in some cities of the Mekong Delta, the cyclo is motorized.

Likewise, the public realm often extends into the front room of the 'tube-houses'⁶. Housekeeping, economic and free time activities literally span an ambiguous threshold between private and collective, imbuing the Vietnamese street as an unmatched public realm (Figure 4).

Fortunately, thus far, Vietnamese cities emerge as vibrant points in the network society constellation. The 'global village' has become merely another layer while the local street has retained its identity as a local street. However, as the ring of cellular telephones becomes as commonplace as the chants of the streets hawker and cyber-cafes as normal as noodle shops, Vietnam has to be prudent to

protect the quality of its streets. Urban design rules must be established that protect human safety (pedestrians can no longer be forced to walk around motorcycle parking areas occupying sidewalks) but at the same time, the street profiles must respect the rich ambiguity of urban thresholds. Creative road profiles, ample sidewalks and articulated, yet programmatically undetermined, thresholds between public open space and semi-public or private built space can incorporate existing illegal and informal activities into a more organized series of changeable urban events. The street is the penultimate public space of Vietnam and can remain so if the existing public/private dynamism is understood and intelligently transformed.



Figure 4: Ambiguous Thresholds - Private and Public Overlap

6 17th Century imperial administrators taxed the width of shop fronts, which in turn led to the construction of narrow houses that evolved into the tube houses' found in the 36-streets district. The houses were low, kept to just one story and a windowless attic, supposedly to prevent any attempt on the life of the emperor as he was carried around in a palanquin.

4 - WATER EQUALS WEALTH

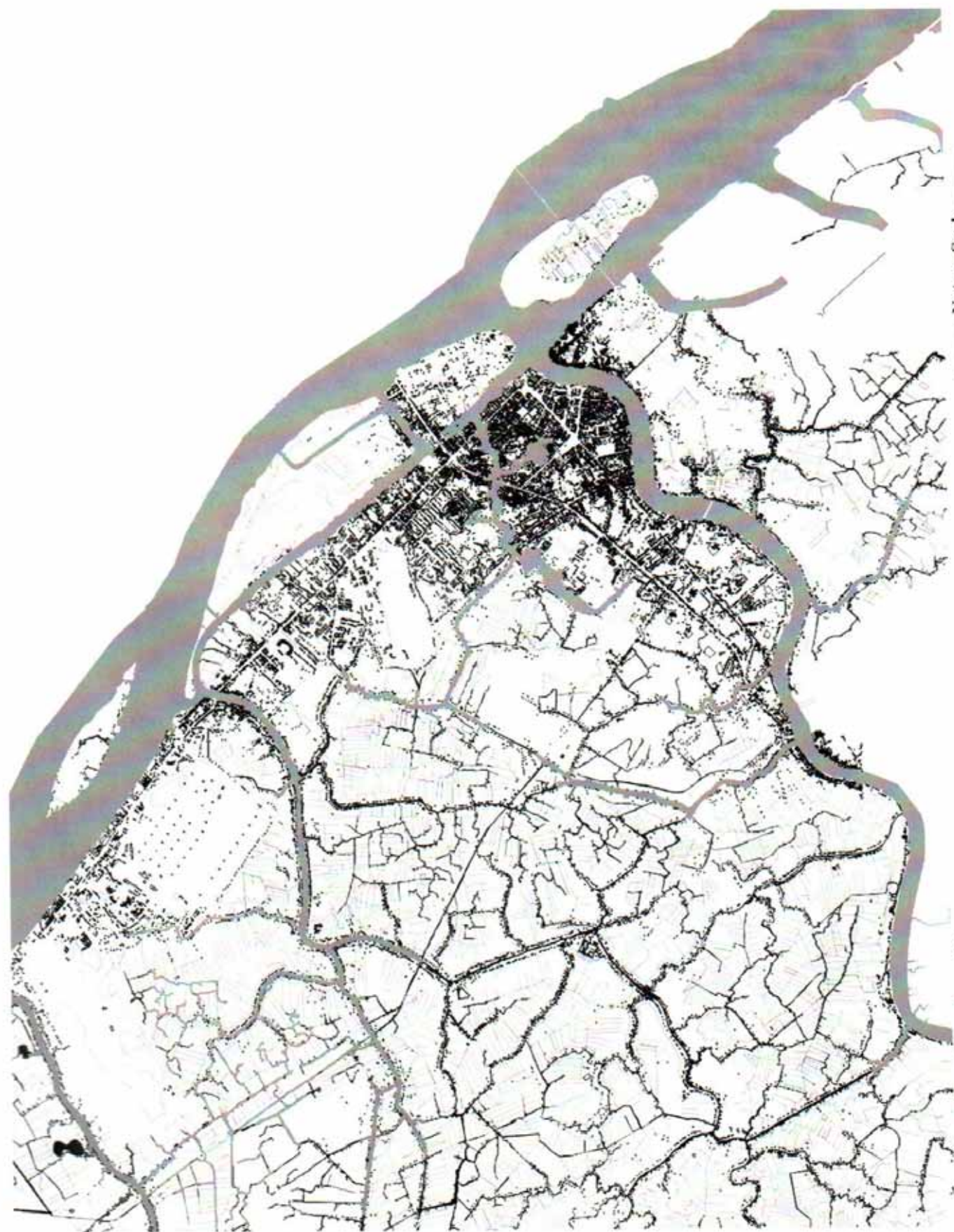
Flatland accounts for only 25 percent of the territory in Vietnam. Nonetheless, the majority of ethnic Vietnamese (87 percent of the population) lives in only one-fifth of the country's land area. Most of Vietnam's people, (rice production, industrial output, political power and cultural activity) are concentrated in two relatively small areas centered on the Hanoi – Haiphong axis in the northern Red River Delta and Ho Chi Minh – Bien Hoa – Vung Tau axis in the southern Mekong River Delta, accounting for approximately 47 percent of the urban population. The two plains – often called the 'rice bowls' of Vietnam – are joined by a narrow, mountainous strip of land that is more than 1000 kilometers long but in some places only 50 kilometers wide. Secondary cities are located along the coast of this strip and much of the densely populated, low-lying habitable areas of the country are prone to severe flooding. The struggle to contain and control water remains a dominant force in spatial planning. Vietnam has a dense river network resulting in discontinuous patches

of fertile deltas and accounting for 0.22 km/sq.km. Every major city has a river running through it, however, with the exception of Hue, no Vietnamese city is a 'river city'. Usually, only one bank of the water is developed and the other remains a hinterland.

Can Tho, a secondary market city of the Mekong Delta has an intensive network of canals that feed into its two main rivers, the Hau and Can Tho (Map - 2). The waterways are an essential means of communication for people as well as for goods. The city's role as a primary Mekong transport hub is enhanced by a vibrant water-based urbanism. The most populated areas of the city are along the main waterways. Approximately 20 percent of Can Tho's housing is built over the water; this housing is of the urban poor, illegal and built of non-durable materials. The city is in the process of constructing large embankments, covering-over inner city canals, removing waterside housing and heightening parts of the city by two meters. Meanwhile, the Cai Rang floating wholesale market is a featured stop for Western tourists (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Floating Market of Can Tho



Not on Scale

Map - 2: Can Tho a Water Based City

Admittedly, water management is all embracing and difficult. However, the present policies for Can Tho hinder inclusion of the dynamic relation between land and water in development. An antagonistic attitude towards water in spatial planning remains. Yet, if low-cost technology marries to ecological and inventive design, a new urban environment with water is possible. Amphibious living can accept flooding as an inevitable fact; house typologies and urban morphologies can be redesigned so that they work with climatic influences, tides and seasons, creating an ever-changing, ecologically balanced environment. The housing on pontoons and scaffolding that the government wants to clear can be modified to improve living conditions while retaining the identity of water-based living. The extensive network of waterways can be harnessed for public transport, recreation, agriculture and sea farming. The pragmatism of the floating market need be recognized as offering clues to income-generating activities that extend beyond tourism. Floating vegetable, flower gardens and water gardens can animate the city and provide a micro-climatic relief to the increasing density, pollution and hard surfaces of the city.

CONCLUSION

What so-called progressive Western architects and urbanists are fighting for, Vietnam already has in it; informal and/or illegal substructure. Vietnam's hybrid urban landscapes have neither been shaped by aesthetics nor symbolic aims but defined in pragmatic terms.

What so-called progressive Western architects and urbanists are striving to implant in their weakening urban structures, Vietnam has – and has to protect. Presently, the country is leapfrogging over the industrial into the information technology era and accepting the dominant wisdom of the world; Vietnam's red capitalists have embraced market economics with a vengeance. Meanwhile, the centralist planners in Hanoi have permitted themselves the luxury of dream and are producing 'master plans' to quickly propel cities into prosperity. The dynamic messiness of reality is replaced by seductive imagery. Informal and illegal settlements and activities are brushed under a

beautiful carpet of urban fantasy. The soul of Vietnamese urbanism could easily disappear.

Vietnam has the opportunity to develop an ambivalent urbanity – one where 'place culture' meets globalization. A balance can be struck between the forces of stability and the forces of mobility in the country's hybrid urban landscapes. Two very different but complementary elements of landscapes need to continue to develop in parallel – one established, maintained and governed by law and political institutions, dedicated to permanence and planned evolution; the other, the vernacular landscape, identified with local custom, pragmatic adaptation to circumstances, and unpredictable mobility/change. The informal and/or illegal elements within Vietnamese urbanity can become the strategic points to create such a balance.

In the examples of Vinh, Hue and Can Tho and Vietnamese streets, the existing potentials of informal markets, urban agriculture, water-based urbanism and ambiguous thresholds can be exploited. All four areas fit the criteria/objectives to be developed as strategic projects:

- i. economic objective: A project is strategic if it can generate income in itself or help to generate income. For example, strategic projects can create interaction between formal and informal economies. Besides socialist and capitalist economies, the importance of the informal economy was stressed, especially in its regards to the use of resources and spatial opportunities it affords.
- ii. social objective: A project is strategic if it reinforces the public realm and if it aims at improving the working and living conditions, especially of the urban poor.
- iii. spatial objective: A project is strategic if it clarifies and strengthens the basic structure of the city.
- iv. environmental objective: A project is strategic if it is able to achieve a balance between the consumptive and productive use of space and able to improve the balance between the man-made and the natural environment.

Ultimately any planning system is only as good as the political will supporting it. The public policies regarding urban form need to be up-dated to include the contemporary discourse within the professions of architectural and urban design itself. In this regard, the terms 'informality', 'unplanned' and 'illegality' become assets and opportunities, providing not only realistic arenas for the complexity of the current economy, but also as identity for communities.

Vietnam's stunted development can play strongly in the future opportunities of urbanization. Many of the ambitious plans for the country remain on paper. The period of reflection that is sweeping across South-east Asia – triggered by economic doldrums – need be earnestly taken. Architects and urbanists can build upon the potentials inherent in the existing Vietnamese structuring to create a truly Vietnamese urbanity for the 21st Century■

kelly.shannon@asro.kuleuven.ac.be

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