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## **Towards a micro-geography of ordinary public spaces in Hồ Chí Minh City**

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As key places for social mixing and interactions in the city, public spaces occupy a paradoxical position in Vietnam today. While the country seeks a deeper integration within the global economy, Hồ Chí Minh City authorities support the creation of new metropolitan landmarks by launching iconic mega-projects. Thus, the planning of vast public spaces reflects the modernisation of the country and the sought-after status of the city as an emerging metropolis. But, at the same time, the ancient profusion of ordinary forms of public spaces, much more modest in size – and sometimes called “pocket public spaces” – is increasingly threatened. Two factors can be identified. First, as far as urban planning is concerned, massive real estate projects and the construction of heavy infrastructures – such as the metro – justify the progressive disappearance of small open spaces, such as parks, small squares and alleyways. Second, regarding urban regulations, vast state programmes are also launched to “clean” public spaces, directly targeting, and more and more openly, the multiple functions of these inherited spaces and the historic diversity of their daily usages.

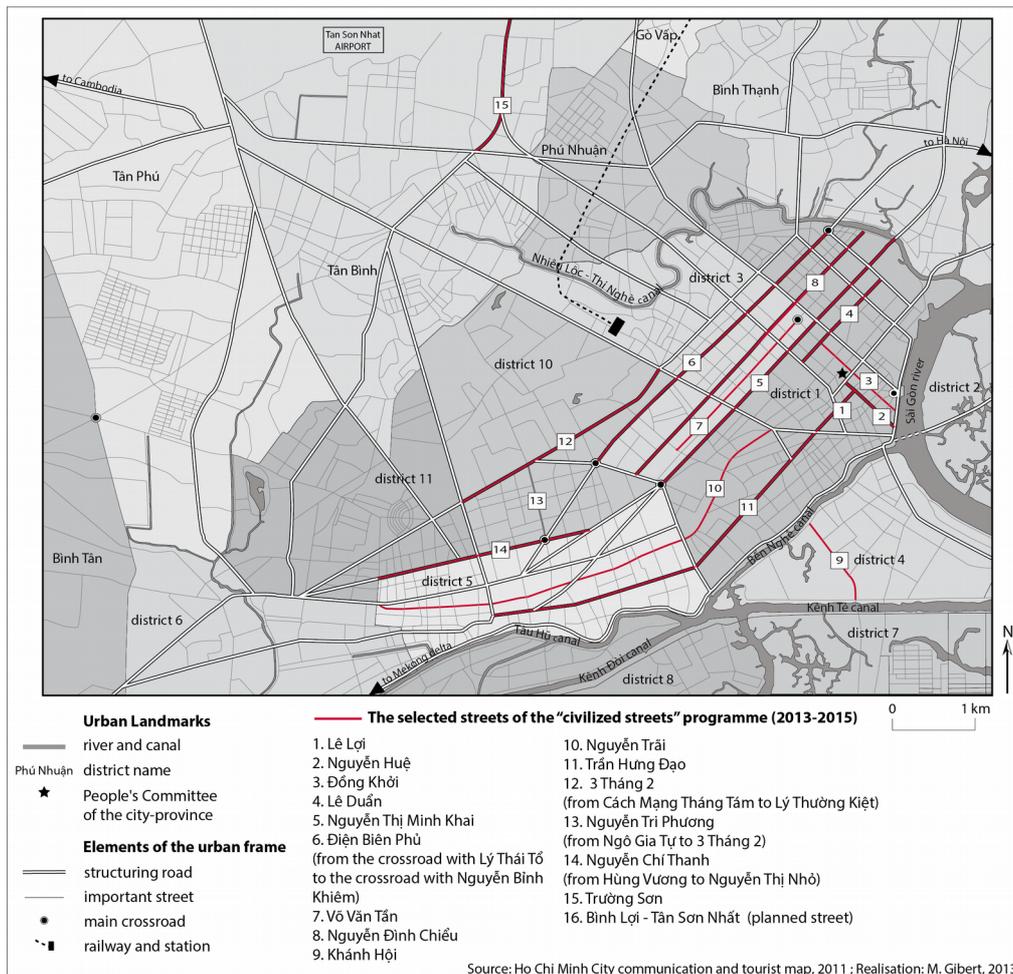
### **Ordinary public spaces under pressure**

Recent actuality illustrates this tense moment: on the 1st of March 2017, metropolitan authorities of Hồ Chí Minh City launched a programme entitled “45 days to ‘recover’ sidewalks in district 1”, with district 1 corresponding to the historical centre of the metropolis.



The poster of the official programme "45 days to 'recover' sidewalks in district 1".  
(© People Committee of HCMV)

This major operation implied poster campaigns, display of force with official announcements and extensive media coverage of strong actions, such as street vendors evictions, building facades and terraces destruction when they encroach on sidewalks, and vehicle impoundments when parked on sidewalks. Such an operation is far from being the first of its kind. Archives from the colonial period contain significant amounts of regulation projects regarding the control of street selling in Saigon. Moreover, in 2008, David Koh undertook the review of the different state campaigns against sidewalk occupation in Hà Nội since the opening reforms of 1986 (Đổi Mới). Between 2013 and 2015, Hồ Chí Minh City, municipal authorities also launched the "civilized streets" programme, which aims at removing street selling in sixteen streets.



The selected streets of the "civilized streets" programme in Hồ Chí Minh City between 2013 and 2015. (© M. Gibert-Flutre)

The will of the Vietnamese authorities to control public space hence is not new. What are new, however, in addition with the violence of the 2017 campaign, are the arguments brought forwards. Aware of the economic and social sensitivity of the issue, the authorities avoided to explicitly target street vendors to point out instead, in a much more positive perspective, the necessity to preserve access to sidewalks for pedestrians. Thus, not only street vendors were evicted, but also coffee shop terraces and unauthorized extension of buildings were promptly “cleaned”. The media coverage of a Starbucks coffee terrace being destroyed, one of the most symbolic figures of the city globalization, illustrates the change in strategy, which relies on the revalorisation of pedestrian mobility in the city. Until now, pedestrian walk was indeed extremely limited in Hồ Chí Minh City. Moreover, the scope of current works in the central business district has also facilitated the “cleaning” of public space during this campaign. There is no guarantee, however, that this tidying-up exercise will be more sustainable than the last official campaigns, such as the 2009 one, when Hồ Chí Minh City welcomed the Southeast Asian Games.

This context calls more than ever for the production of a micro-geopolitics of sidewalks and ordinary public spaces in Hồ Chí Minh City. The issues at stakes are closely intertwined: they not only concern land management, economic, social, political and cultural aspects, but also urban marketing strategies. Indeed, public spaces constitute an enlightening object of study to understand the inherent paradoxes of the current metropolisation process in the city.



*Sidewalks of Hồ Chí Minh City, appropriated urban micro-territories.*  
(© M. Gibert-Flutre)

## **Rethinking Vietnamese public spaces: a necessary theoretical shift**

This object of study is not easy to address, especially because our conception of public spaces remains dependent on a European-centered semantic heritage, particularly irrelevant in Vietnam. In terms of theoretical definition, the normative criterion is mostly focused on a juridical conception of what “public” means, which, for instance, is thought as incompatible with commercial practices. The morphological dimension of public spaces also comes into play. While plazas constitute the historical matrix of the European city and embody its democratic-ideal, in connexion with the figure of the Ancient Greek agora, Vietnamese cities count very few open spaces. As a result, based on these normative criteria, it would seem that Hồ Chí Minh City does not have any public space. In parks and streets, the expression of citizens is tightly controlled and hindered by the representatives of the party-State, who notably use these spaces as places of propaganda. In addition, the presence of numerous street vendors and of many private appropriations of the street can be read as many forms of privatisation of the city. Moreover, the few plazas and squares of

Hồ Chí Minh City were all built during the colonial period. As in most Asian cities, much more than squares, the historical nodes of centrality and sociability were, and still are, the crossroads. The absence of vast open spaces beyond the colonial centre is notably linked with the miniaturisation of the land distribution in the city, where 85% of the inhabitants live in tube-houses along narrow alleyways. This important feature of the metropolitan urban fabric explains the very high population density, in a metropolis that counts over 10 millions inhabitants (with an average of 4 000 inhab. /km<sup>2</sup> including rural districts, and up to 80 000 inhab. /km<sup>2</sup> in some pericentral districts such as district 10).

Producing a detailed analysis of the diverse elements under scrutiny regarding the control and the access to Hồ Chí Minh City's public spaces requires to de-centre our scientific approach of the topic, in a postcolonial perspective. The challenges at stake here involve three dimensions. First, we must enlarge our conception and definition of a public space in the field of urban studies, in order to go beyond the juridical criterion. This implies to acknowledge instead the value of daily usages of these collective spaces in their capacity to produce a public dimension. The "publicity" of a place can indeed rely on different criteria, their juridical status being only one of them. The capacity of a place to welcome city dwellers in their very diversity, as well as in the diversity of their daily practices and claims, is another structuring dimension in the production of urban "publicity".

Secondly, this scientific decentering invites us to revalue ordinary temporalities in the field of metropolitan studies. This allows to value interstitial public spaces – such as alleyways, sidewalks, pagoda courtyards and small crossroads – for their important potential of social diversity and the urban amenities they provide on a daily basis. Such pocket public spaces can even be ephemeral, as in the case of a road closed to traffic in the evening to welcome a night market and a space of encounters. These "metropolitan undersides" are too often absent from city maps and seriously lack recognition from the authorities and investors. They correspond to what Manish Chalana and Jeffrey Hou call « messy urbanism : the 'other' cities of Asia » (2016). Metropolitan authorities generally favours globalized mega-projects and tend to overlook the social potential of ordinary public spaces, even though their reversibility is a true asset in the context of a dense metropolis. Revaluing these ordinary elements in the city also implies revaluing the role of ordinary citizens and dwellers in the very production of the metropolis, in a truly iterative conception of the metropolisation process.

Movement Public sphere	FUNCTIONS	Sub-categories of functions	Associated territories	Associated temporalities	Associated sonor territories
↑       ↓ Immobility domestic sphere	CIRCULATION	transit road	centre of the road	daily  with a spike during rush hours (7 - 9.30 AM and 5 - 7.30 PM)	engines  horns
		service road	border of the road		
		"cabotage"	thresholds of the shophouses		
		crosswise			
	TRADING	itinerant	centre of the road	daily  with a spike during rush hours (7 - 9.30 AM and 5 - 7.30 PM)	bells, shouts and singing from street vendors  chats and conversations
		"fixed-itinerant"	border of the road		
		street market	thresholds of the shophouses		
bordering shops		domestic space			
PRODUCTION / HANDICRAFT	productive functions	border of the road	daily with a slow-down between 11.30 AM and 2 PM	possible machines	
		storage and warehouses	thresholds of the shophouses		continuously
SOCIALITY	trading sociability	border of the road	daily  exceptional	discussions possible music  orchestra	
	neighbourhood	thresholds of the shophouses			
	familial	domestic space			
	exceptional (wedding, funeral)				
DOMESTIC ACTIVITIES	cooking	border of the road	daily	conversations possible musical accompaniment  possible machines	
	meal	thresholds of the shophouses			
	handiwork / repair work	domestic space			
	leisure				
PARKING / STORAGE	parking plants garbage other goods	border of the road	during daytime		
		thresholds of the shophouses	continuously		
		domestic space	mainly at night		
			daily		

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*The reversibility of daily uses in Hồ Chí Minh City alleyways. (© M. Gibert-Flutre)*

Thirdly, this renewed approach implies to rethink critically our representations – especially regarding mapping – of the metropolis. This is what Anette Kim and her Spatial Laboratory team are doing by producing new types of maps of Hồ Chí Minh City that take into consideration the daily routes of street vendors, underlining their central place in the economy and the identity of the metropolis (Kim, 2015). This is also the goal of the computer tool « UrbanTempo » I am currently developing, to highlight – both in a synthetic and systematic way – the rich daily plurifonctionnalité of public spaces and alleyways in Vietnam. Therefore, the production of a micro-geopolitics of ordinary public spaces in Hồ Chí Minh City invites to rethink our conceptual approach and our analytical tools in urban studies, in a more decentred and post-colonial approach.

### **From local territories to metropolitan network: threatened ordinary public spaces in Hồ Chí Minh City**

The richness associated with the reversibility of ordinary public spaces in Hồ Chí Minh City is threatened today, not only by the “cleaning” campaign organized by the metropolitan authorities, but also by the increasing domination of one urban function over the others, namely motorised traffic. Until recently the sidewalks and alleyways of Hồ Chí Minh City could be considered as many urban “territories”, that is to say spaces deeply appropriated by the inhabitants for their daily practices. But nowadays alleyways are more and more viewed as simply part of a more general “network”, serving traffic flow only. Alleyways used to be local access roads, but they are now more exclusively associated with new transit functions, being increasingly used to connect different neighbourhoods in an expanding metropolis, where main roads are limited in number. But from the “street” to the “road”, this is precisely where the public space status disappears and, with it, the richness of an inclusive urban culture.

**Keywords:** *public space, metropolisation process, street vendor, Hồ Chí Minh City, Vietnam*

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