

Essay

Hanoi

The City that is Continuously 'Becoming'

Monique Gross

Hanoi is an incredibly visually stimulating city. Street after street is crammed with more details than a pair of human eyes is capable of registering at one time. Laser printed banners screen the facades of buildings, trees are hung with all sorts of objects, sidewalks are covered to the centimeter with food options and vehicles... Everywhere you turn your gaze it is immediately filled. And all the forms, colors, graphics, shift on a daily basis, from the array on the footpath, to the window displays, to the signs advertising merchandise and services.



Drone photo of typical highly-densely built residential neighborhood, Ngoc Ha block looking towards West Lake, Ba Dinh District

Photo Credit: Philippe Lê 2014 (excerpt from the photo book "Hà Nội: CAPITAL City")



Source: Khổng Việt Bách

Khổng Việt Bách from series In/exterior 2013

Taking in the visual experience, the mood, whether at motorbike or bicycle or walking speed, makes for a visually saturating pleasure. Birdcages, plants, laundry hung out on a sunny day, vendors on bicycles or on foot, *giải khát* (refreshments) stands with an assortment of plastic stools in the shade of a tree or under a found piece of striped tarpaulin propped up with poles. A different street seems to appear depending on the time of year, the time of day, the light that day.

What is it in the Vietnamese character that enables this creative use of space and constant renewal? Each citizen, inhabitant of the city, seems to have claimed the space in front of their residence or work place or the place where they are sitting at that moment, creating a fluidity between the private and public, inside and outside, perpetually sharing with the community.

A slight deviation from the main road leads to the tangle of alleys making up the authentic heart of the city. The inner streets of many neighborhoods appear to have five "seasons" each day, which correspond to the five 'meals' being sold. In the morning the rice cake seller and pineapple seller pull up their bicycles and squat beside their baskets waiting patiently for customers. Later on a woman carts in fixings, bowls and stools and serves chicken soup. She is replaced in the afternoon by a man selling buns, followed by a duck and noodle seller later in the evening. All on the same two meters of walkway.

The effervescent dynamism of Hanoi extends to the 'previously' factor.

In neighborhoods that not so long ago were villages linked to the city by dirt roads, it is common to see a building torn down and a new one built, all in the course of three to six months. What is now a brand new serviced apartment or private house was three months previously a café specializing in organic weasel coffee that rented spaces upstairs to freelancers and three to six months before that it was a clothing boutique or a tailor shop. These changes have accelerated since the building boom in the early 2000s. In a well-researched article¹ mapping the historical development of Hanoi, Emmanuel Cerise, an architect and the

current director of Institut des Métiers de la Ville de Hanoi (IMV), writes about the rambling arrangement of a city that was once a series of villages before they were absorbed by the ever-extending city in a process of organic spreading rather than rigid structuring. The visual contrast of these older surviving buildings in Hanoi with modern high rises is stunning.

Architect turned visual artist Khổng Việt Bách's photo-series² captures 'ordinary people' hawking their wares in front of private development posters, present-day reality in front of a distant dream³, a juxtaposition at once amusing and heart-wrenching.



Tây Sơn Road

Source: Monique Gross 2015



Source: Khổng Việt Bách

Khổng Việt Bách from series In/exterior 2013

In a city that is vigorously in development, the layout of the roads often undergoes some fundamental shape-shifting: a road clogged with traffic can become a wide thoroughfare two seasons later, the change coming at the cost of a neighborhood that included ancient houses and a wet market that were on the itinerary of some insider tour groups. Adaptability, or persistence, characterizes the Vietnamese spirit.

During the roadway modification the city authorities installed a several large posters of Hanoi's landmark monuments along a stretch of road being altered, a set of visual focal points to

screen a visual disarray⁴. Five meters high, and 5 to 10 meters wide, these impeccable photographs of the Temple of Literature, the One Pillar Pagoda and the Imperial City, were meant to impart feelings of national pride, reverence for the past and the promise of an iconic future. But the posters were still too small to screen what was going on behind, namely the tear-down of the buildings lining these streets to make way for the development of a smoother traffic artery which integrated with public transportation lines, and the iconic symbols appeared like a comical gesture that made me blush with embarrassment.

When bulldozers and laborers expose the second layer of the densely packed street block new, if ephemeral, opportunities are created for those previously hidden in the labyrinth of streets. A gutted building with a torn off façade could become a pop-up motorbike repair and service shop. In the rubble from the demolished buildings is an opportunity for tea sellers and birdcage merchants to trolley over their set-up and make a little cash from the passers-by, despite the dust and debris from the jack-hammers.

The elements that make Hanoi so visually alluring constitute an un-ignorable articulation by its citizens proclaiming their existence and expressing their own style.

What some look upon as bird-cage buildings reflect the needs, and means, of the residents. Add-on extensions not designed as part of the original plan (and maybe not considered supportable by the original structure) make us a little suspicious that they were built surreptitiously and in flagrant disregard for building codes. Stephanie Geertman, an independent urban researcher who has lived in Hanoi for many years, has been investigating this question and explains⁵ that what appears to be 'informal' does not necessarily mean 'illegal.' It also doesn't mean that it works from the top down. Residents of Khu tập thể (KTT – collective housing), initially highly formal structures set in place by the former socialist city planning practices of the government, evolved their spaces over time into what now appears to be 'in-



Source: Monique Gross 2015

Tây Sơn Road



Source: Michael Waibel 2014

Hanoi's architectural heritage in a state of neglect (excerpts from the photo book "Hà Nội: CAPITAL City").

formal' (but now largely legal) buildings that expose the individual tastes of the residents who, after 1986, were able to buy their flats from state and in this new era are a visual symbol for residents that have found a means in their building practices to operate autonomous of the state and its institutions. These residential 'quarters' have become 'reformatted,' as residents re-adapt to formal rules, negotiating with formal government representatives in the form of a mediator official, who also mediates to resolve conflicts. This neighborhood process where a tổ dân phố, a residential organization representative, and smaller unit of governance for the 50-60 households making up a commune, has its roots in the former village communities. Many adaptations are tolerated and add to Hanoi's visual flavor.

Pham Thai Son, an architect and university professor, painstakingly interviewed and analyzed⁶ the social practices of inhabitants who apply what he refers to as 'alternatives' to technical options and social practices and described the effects on the mor-

phology of urban spaces and development. This direct participation impacting public space is fascinating in the visual raucousness that results.

Architectural heritage is undervalued in Hanoi, a city that is pre-occupied with 'catching up.' However, what may appear as a jagged discontinuity from one architectural value to the next actually articulates or develops out of fluctuating in values and alliances⁷. The problem of maintaining an identity while a city, especially a capital, develops isn't unique to Hanoi. Most developing cities have to deal with this issue in some form. But Hanoi's desire to be modern unfortunately appears to be equated with building new high-rises at the expense of historical assets. Historical assets are left to rot, or are torn down, and replaced with atrocious monstrosities styled in a pastiche of archaic European grandeur. And yet in the smaller spaces of the narrow alley neighborhoods something else is going on which Philippe Lê, an architect who lived for four years in Hanoi, observes⁸ as the crystallization of social /societal relations. He associ-

ates it with a sort of natural selection where certain hybrids create surprising volumes, spaces and forms that would not have been thought up or designed by an architectural firm or master plan committee whose goals and aims would be motivated by the same needs as those who already live and/or work in the setting and experience the chain of events motivating and generating the accidental innovations.

Hanoi will hopefully never become a tidy, ordered and blandly International city. The sparks of brilliance that flicker amidst the seeming visual chaos are exciting and inspiring. The embarrassing attempts at poetic inflection seem as relevant as the truly poetic and graceful moments. As it evolves, Hanoi would gain an advantage by recognizing the immense value of the historical assets that form its heritage.

Endnotes

¹ Cerise, Emmanuel "Le rapport entre ville et villages à Hanoi à travers les plans historiques ou le plan comme outil de production de paysages urbains", in : *Les Carnets du paysage* n°20 « Cartographies », Editions Actes Sud et l'Ecole Nationale Supérieure du Paysage, Versailles, pp.: 116, 133, 2010.

² Khổng Việt Bách from the series In/interior presented in Autopsy of Days, group exhibition at Goethe-Institut, Hanoi, Spring 2013.

³ Nick Davies, "Vietnam 40 years on: how a communist victory gave way to capitalist corruption," *The Guardian*, 22, April 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/apr/22/vietnam-40-years-on-how-communist-victory-gave-way-to-capitalist-corruption>

⁴ Photo by Monique Gross, Hanoi, March 2015

⁵ Geertman, Stephanie, Doctoral thesis "The self-organizing city in Vietnam; process of change and transformation in housing in Hanoi," Eindhoven University, The Netherlands, April 2007.

⁶ Phạm Thái Sơn, Doctoral thesis « Morphologie urbaine, dispositifs techniques et pratiques sociales cas des quartiers de ruelles hanoïens, » l'Institut National des Sciences Appliquées de Lyon, 2010.

⁷ Logan, William S. *Biography of a City*. University of Washington Press, 2000.

⁸ Personal interview, Hanoi, February 2015.

Monique Gross [moniquegross07@gmail.com] made her way to Hanoi via Los Angeles, California, where she grew up, then San Francisco where she studied art history followed by Iowa City where she earned a Master's degree in Information Science before moving to Paris, France to work in the cultural sector. Currently she lives with her husband and two sons in Abu Dhabi, UAE. She contributed an essay to the recently published photo book "Hà Nội: CAPITAL City".