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USP 173

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Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) - Life by the Sidewalk

The discussion of urban planning and design is critical to understanding the contexts and mechanisms in which the world progresses; the urban landscape of a place also provides insights into its history, economy, geopolitics, and most importantly, its inhabitants' lives and what factors constitute a well-functioning society. Through exploring and learning about historical urban planning practices, contemporary and future urban planners can discern the positives and negatives to inspire their decisions for the best outcomes. In Southeast Asia lies the Mekong delta, the region connecting the Mekong River and the Pacific Ocean, and the location of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) and southern Vietnam. The history of Saigon is an eventful one filled with frequent changes in control and foreign influence, in which every period carries a unique record of urban planning methodologies that shaped the layout, design, attitude, and vibrant lifestyle of modern Saigon. A thorough analysis of Saigon's urban development progress will allow a precise understanding of how the city evolved over time, *with emphasis on the important uses of sidewalks and public spaces, amplified by the French colonial period, that truly define the urban landscape of the city*, as well as highlighting the invaluable lessons applicable to contemporary urban planning.

The earliest records of human habitation throughout the Mekong delta indicate the region was first occupied by Austronesians, Mon-Khmer peoples, and indigenous groups, Cham and Mois. Archaeological evidence suggests the area thrived as an important port along the maritime

trade routes connecting the areas of the Eastern Mediterranean, the Gulf of Siam, and the Malay Peninsula, in which Roman coins and golden medallions from the reigns of Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius were discovered in the 1940s at the countryside of Saigon. As such, ancient artifacts show that frequent contact existed between Funan and ancient Rome, or through their intermediaries, that permitted a substantial cultural exchange. Despite being the first major economy of Southeast Asia, the part of Funan that consisted of Saigon met its downfall due to the region's high dependency on maritime trade as goods funneled to the north and away with the increasing monopolization of trade routes by China. Beginning in 800 AD, with the Funan Kingdom disestablished, the Mekong delta was sparsely occupied by the Champa and Mois indigenous groups that were capable of living in the harsh environments of the region, filled with swamps, disease-prone insects, dangerous animals, and seasonal floods.

Figure 1



The difficult landscape of the delta plain gave rise to numerous vernacular designs, such as “lifted” houses with supportive wooden poles to protect dwellers from floods and dangerous animals (Figure 1) and “monkey

bridges” as versatile and practical means to cross rivers (Figure 3). In addition, public spaces were used as gathering places to play music and care for the sick (Figure 2); although these indigenous peoples and the modern inhabitants of Saigon are two entirely different groups, this utilization of public spaces for social activities play a significant role in the ways contemporary

Vietnamese view open spaces and conduct daily activities. In alignment with Medieval Europe during the same period, the Mois Tribes also had a “single-purpose” township design mindset,

Figure 2



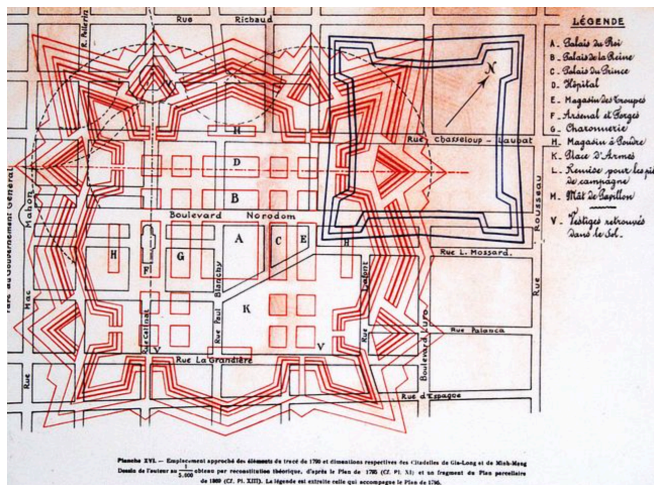
which was solely for protection from outside forces. However, there are monumental discrepancies in technologies and situational factors between the two regions that render them incomparable. From the Funan Kingdom to the Mois Tribes,

approximately from the Ancient to Medieval period in Europe, disregarding how virtually all illustrations of indigenous life in Saigon were documented by French explorers in recent history, for thousands of years, the earliest inhabitants of the Mekong delta effectively planned and built vernacular spaces for their survival and lifestyle.

The periods between the 14th and 18th centuries mark the era of southward expansion by the Nguyen dynasty from central Vietnam that would forever change the landscape of Saigon. In the late 18th century, as Saigon was under warfare between the Nguyen and Tay Son dynasty, with French technical support, the Nguyen lord sought to reassert his dominance through the construction of the Citadel of Saigon, a Vauban-style polyhedron-shaped fortress to serve as a temporary royal capital. The citadel soon proved to be a success as the Tay Son dynasty never attacked southern Vietnam again. In relation to Renaissance Rome in the same period, the Citadel of Saigon exhibited numerous qualities of the great Roman Piazzas, where the Piazzas

were a means to strengthen counter-Reformation efforts in re-establishing Roman cultural and political power. Furthermore, the perfect geometry and enclosed nature of the citadel evoke the

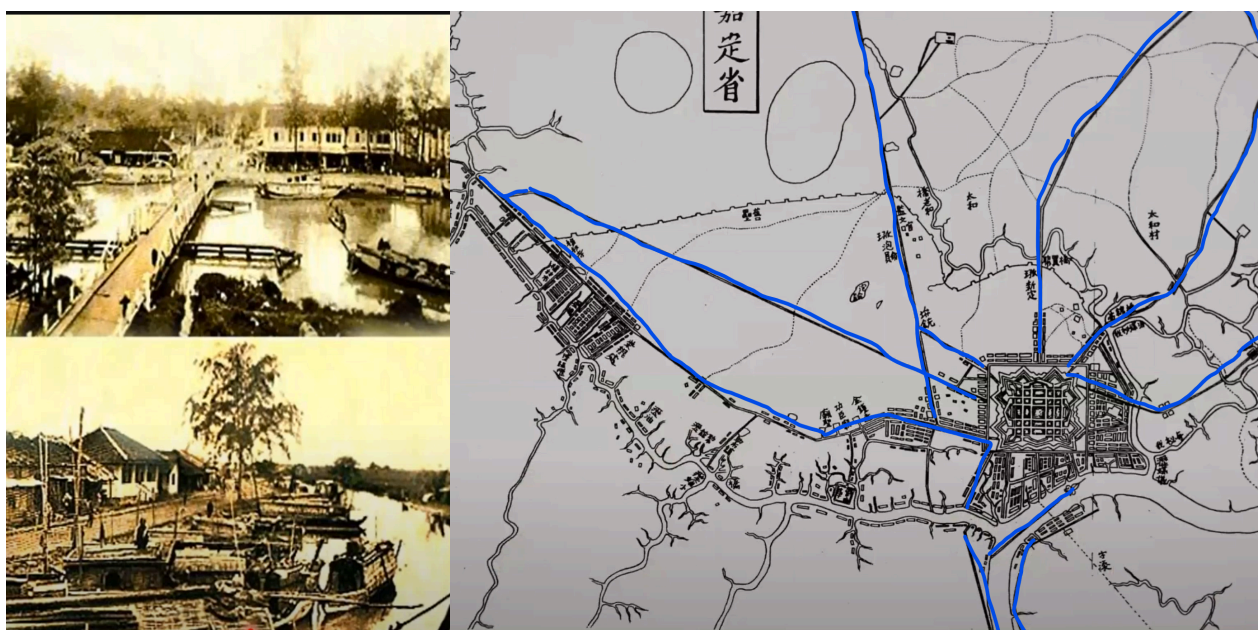
Figure 4



ideals of Renaissance Urbanism, such as uniform designs for serenity and beauty, symmetry representing discipline and order, and enclosed spaces for unity and protection (Figure 4 - red drawing). In spite of providing an immense fertile alluvial plain that is ideal for agriculture, hence the

nickname “rice bowl of the world” given to southern Vietnam, the complex river system throughout early Saigon failed to meet local needs as the rivers were unduly dense and curvy (Figure 5 - right), making the transportation of goods inefficient for an emerging economy. As a solution, the Nguyen dynasty ordered the dredging of inter-regional waterways that connected

Figure 5



different parts of Saigon to facilitate goods movement (Figure 5 - left, blue lines); this can be seen as Saigon's first significant urban planning effort to trigger the region's economic development. Notably, as shown in Figure 5, there are two distinct clusters that would eventually evolve to be the two focal points of commerce in Saigon. The smaller left cluster was formed by Chinese refugees from the fallen Ming dynasty, who were known to be highly skilled in business functions; this community laid the foundation for Ben Thanh Market, the largest market in Vietnam today. It is essential to mention the important impacts of Chinese refugees on the urban landscape of Saigon as they significantly contributed to the cultural diversity of the area, especially in culinary and language. Today, virtually all merchants in and surrounding Ben Thanh Market are fluent in Chinese and Vietnamese, with Chinese translations included on storefronts and menus, these attributes are relevant to understanding the context that formed the landscape and drives social interaction in a major commerce centroid of Saigon.

The latter half of the 19th century marks the first significant foreign influence on the Saigon urban landscape under the French colonial regime. The French colonial period can be viewed as *the most significant era* as it started a fusion of French and local style that is deeply ingrained in the lifestyle, and consequently the attitudes and preferences, of Vietnamese, in both the physical and cultural sense. Perhaps the most remarkable development of the 19th century in Saigon is the adoption of the French boulevard to replace the artificial waterway system; these boulevards connect major parts of the city, with countless smaller streets along and between them that serve as Saigon's primary mechanism for transportation until today (Figure 6). In consideration of Knox's ideals of a *Rational* city, the new plan for Saigon inherited many aspects of Parisian rationality. For instance, the boulevard system became a highly successful method of urban layout and transportation that rendered Saigon the economic powerhouse of

Figure 6

Vietnam, Southeast Asia, and soon to be globally, thanks to an elegant, interconnected street system that is perfect for facilitating the movement of goods and people. In addition, the boulevard system was designed with abundant open, green spaces, which were often accompanied by monumental

structures with iconic, stylish, and functional French architecture, such as the Notre Dame Cathedral in District 1 (Figure 7), a Neo-Romanesque basilica. Fortunately, many structures from French colonial time remain in pristine condition where some kept their uses, others serve as tourist attractions and “Instagrammable” places; collectively, they carry invaluable historical and

Figure 7

cultural values that are integral to Saigon’s sense of place and contribute to the city’s image as an extraordinary global tourist destination. Besides the mentioned functionalities of the boulevard system, *its sidewalks and open spaces also play a*

significant role in forming a lifestyle and the ways people go about their daily activities throughout the city. Beyond the discussion of transportation and urban layout, an understanding of the *cultural* influences of the boulevard system, specifically through its sidewalks and open

spaces, reveals important insights into life in Saigon and may even explain several phenomenal economic outcomes, such as the utter failures of many global food/coffee chain giants as they attempt to conquer the interests of Vietnamese, including McDonald's and Starbucks. Since the start of the French colonial period, the boulevards led to the emergence of a new way of living, particularly a new use of public spaces as gathering places to socialize and do commerce. As an illustration, Figure 8 shows the tomb and worship palace of a famous marshal of the Nguyen dynasty; physically, the palace

Figure 8



resembles the mentioned fusion of French and local style as the structure was built using Vietnamese and Chinese architectural components with a French boulevard in front. However, the more important cultural context lies in the bottom photo that captured a scene of

people gathering on the sidewalk under the tree shades during sunny hours of the typical hot and humid climate in Saigon. Using personal experience concerning the tools shown, the photo depicts street vendors selling fresh produce or food, and they are engaging in conversations with one another and customers (Figure 8 - bottom); this particular use of public space would eventually evolve to be a lifestyle in Saigon, and an indispensable aspect of life in the hearts of Vietnamese. Evident in Figure 9, outside of school and working hours, parks and sidewalks in Saigon today are lively spaces where friends, couples, and families come to play, converse, and eat from street vendors. Not only do locals enjoy and cherish their lifestyle, the described sense

Figure 9

of “Life by the sidewalk” also attracts tourists who seek the experience commonly characterized by “friendly people” and “cheap food.” In effect, the ways in which Vietnamese utilize public spaces created a sizeable community and economy of street vendors that made “street hawking” a highly sustainable way of living; as any other urban phenomenon, this unfortunately led to several negative consequences involving corrupted officials forcefully taking bribe money from street vendors for their rights to sell. Today, owing to the city’s rapidly developing economy, a growing middle class in Saigon has begun to prefer eating indoors in more expensive restaurants, for which the most valid argument involves the unsanitary conditions and pollutants created by motorcycles and automobiles as the city becomes increasingly overcrowded. Nonetheless, amid a growing sentiment of disinterest in eating by the sidewalk, another significant aspect of the lifestyle remains prevalent, that is the Vietnamese affection for coffee and *Banh Mi*, the infamous Vietnamese sandwich inspired by the French baguette. To illustrate, Figure 10 shows a common breakfast in Saigon consisting of a newspaper, a sandwich, and a coffee served with a “single-serve” filter. The presence of the filter here provides a key context to understanding the lifestyle and preference of Saigonese for spending their time, in which a person would read the newspaper or chat with friends while waiting for the coffee to be filtered; once done, the coffee is sipped slowly as the person eats the sandwich and continues the conversations. Throughout

Figure 10

Saigon's history, as demonstrated with breakfast, meaningfulness and liveliness may well be the attributes held dearest to the people of Saigon through social interactions and moments shared with close ones. As a city, when nearly every corner and sidewalk is filled with an electrifying

and spirited way of life, together they constitute a vibrant and dynamic urban landscape that is to aim for; as such, it is obvious that the introduction of fast-food and to-go coffees, having to battle the abundant and affordable Vietnamese coffee, food, and the lifestyle they bring, can hardly achieve success. Moreover, a simple cup of coffee plays such an important role in the urban history of Saigon that it is used in songs and visuals to portray life in the city.

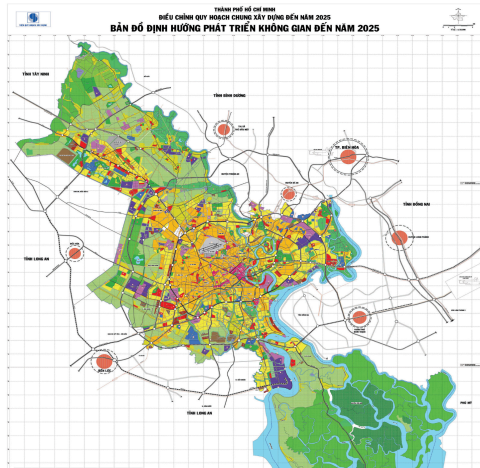
Furthermore, not limited to sidewalks by the boulevards, public spaces and sidewalks along the rivers of Saigon also serve as an integral part of the city's urban landscape thanks to their essential uses and historical influences. As mentioned, the Saigon river system, both natural and artificial, became a predominant method of transportation starting from the control of the Nguyen dynasty. Despite laying the foundation for regional development, prior to the French colonial period, the river system's impacts were modest and domestic in scope; it was not until the period of U.S. intervention that introduced the ideals of capitalism to the region's economy and revolutionized Saigon as a principal trade center. As new economic opportunities arose, merchants flocked into the rivers of Saigon to engage in commerce activities and established "floating markets," where many built homes directly over their boats or on the riverbed (Figure 11 - left). Over time, due to a lack of proper infrastructures and systematic processes for urban governance in place, Saigon's economic growth throughout the 20th century was largely

Figure 11

uncontrolled, which unfortunately created many unpleasant sites across the Saigon urban scenery as most rivers became severely polluted with waste, along with a distasteful odor (Figure 11 - middle). Thankfully, with recent financial and technical assistance from Japan and Germany, the majority of rivers in Saigon today have been treated and redeveloped into attractive and highly-active open spaces where people come to exercise (Figure 11 - right), fish, and hangout. Similar to the boulevards, riverside spaces in Saigon are often considered as ideal for street vendors for their spectacular views and openness; however, local officials tend to strictly keep vendors away to maintain walkability and minimize littering along rivers. Given the important historical and contemporary roles the rivers and their surroundings play in Saigon's urban design, they contribute a significant component to the "life by the sidewalk" narrative by facilitating a lifestyle in the natural environment. Besides serving as a catalyst to foster Saigon's economy, the U.S. intervention period is far inferior in comparison to the French colonial period in terms of influence on the city's urban planning; this is likely because the majority of the U.S. intervention period was spent at war. Granted, the fallen government of South Vietnam did adopt the U.S. grid layout and its accommodating automobile; nonetheless, besides several innovative buildings with American Modernist architecture and a highly-inaccessible mode of transportation [the

automobile] for the local population, it was arguably a subtle alteration to the existing French boulevard system, and thus may have had a modest impact.

As an emerging influential city in a rapidly globalizing world, 21st century Saigon is among the fastest growing economies globally with logistics being the leading factor. Thanks to a diverse domestic economy and skyrocketing foreign investments, Saigon typifies the *Industrial* city with new opportunities for employment and business ventures unceasingly attracting Vietnamese from all over the world. Similar to Knox's example of Manchester, life in Saigon for poorer Vietnamese who migrated from the countryside to work in factories consists of primarily long working hours, dangerous traffic at the city's edges, and burdensome living costs while having to balance monthly remittance for family at home. After nearly a quarter of the 21st century characterized by net in-migration, Saigon today is heavily overcrowded with infrastructures becoming increasingly exhausted. To accommodate future population growth, the city adopted a 2025 general plan with a multi-core expansion strategy to divert stress from the city center (Figure 12). Concurrently, moving upward on the socioeconomic ladder is an expanding population of white-collar professionals, mainly university graduates and returning international students from abroad, who are immensely changing the Saigon urban landscape by purchasing high-rise condominiums in trendy mixed-use communities, as well as introducing Western lifestyles, including fashion, music, and narratives of sustainability and gender inclusivity. Besides providing a broad overview of Saigon's demography, the above descriptions of two dominating demographic groups help to demonstrate the unique social dynamics in the city's urban environment, where people from strikingly differing socioeconomic backgrounds, unified by the Vietnamese identity, are able to live harmoniously together under a common lifestyle with a meal and conversations by the sidewalk. The aforementioned social dynamics are

Figure 12**Figure 13**

evident in the rightmost photo of Figure 9 that shows life at night on the Nguyen Hue Walking Street, a recently constructed pedestrian-only street directly in front of Ho Chi Minh City Hall (Figure 9 - rightmost photo, distant building). In practice, the Nguyen Hue Walking Street exemplifies many ideals of great urban design as empirical visuals have shown people of all ages, genders, and socioeconomic statuses are able to enjoy the space meaningfully with families and friends. Beyond the discussed uses of urban space pertinent to “life by the sidewalk,” the open spaces and streets of Saigon are also places where people express love and pride in their Vietnamese identity, this is commonly referred to locally as the “Vietnamese spirit.” For example, Figure 13 captured the celebrative atmosphere in Saigon when Vietnam became the champions of under-23 football at the 31st SEA Games.

The urban planning and design history of Saigon is truly unique in its evolution across frequent changes in control and influence; however, one thing remained consistent is the Vietnamese identity that prevailed through all of history, regardless of whether people were oppressed, colonized, or liberated. The people of Saigon evolved to define their own uses of urban space and established a lifestyle that drives a livable, vibrant, and inclusive urban

landscape for everyone to enjoy; as such, there are several notable lessons of urban planning and design from Saigon for the betterment of the future. Firstly, perhaps the first most crucial stride in Saigon's urban planning is the development of inter-regional waterways that sparked the region's economy, and the Saigon River still serves as the main logistic pipeline of the city's economy today. Recalling how the Mekong delta's harsh wetland geography was once a barrier to inhabit the region, the river system evolved to create and foster Saigon's economy into a global stature; through this change in impact of the natural environment, future urban planners can envision innovative approaches to turn a place's disadvantages into advantages for the benefit of its inhabitants. Also concerning the rivers, another essential lesson of urban development for governing officials is to ensure any urban growth progress is within expectation and is monitored. Constant and ethical monitoring of changes in the urban landscape will allow surveyors to assess and predict any potential negative consequences, and take suitable actions; this will prevent the uncontrolled growth that led rivers to become hazardously polluted in Saigon, as well as the expensive costs of water treatment and redevelopment. Thirdly, and perhaps the greatest concern of modern urban planning, is the importance of considering inhabitants' needs and use compatibility in making development decisions. Using Saigon as an example, by analyzing the lifestyle and preferences of people regarding their uses of urban space, along with the cultural values behind a cup of coffee or a street vendor selling Pho on the sidewalk, and understanding the stories of why global store chains fail, urban planners can assess what works for which segments of the population, where, and strategically make decisions accordingly for the best outcomes. It is also important to consider the modern context where, for instance, most millennials and teens realistically do not have the time and patience to filter coffees and social media drastically altering consumption habits and preferences with every new

trend; given the current circumstances, it is hard to reject the supposition that the notion of “life by the sidewalk” brought about an exemplary and admirable urban environment in Saigon.

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