

# INTRODUCTION

## Urban Research in Action: Context, Aims, Directions

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Vietnam was long absent or weakly represented in development approaches focusing on countries of the South, partly because of difficulties in accessing the field and to some extent due to geopolitical restrictions or doctrinal considerations. Now it is making a striking comeback as an ‘emerging country’ of Southeast Asia.

This general observation is also true of the field of urban studies wherein, up to the 1990’s, Francophone scientific literature dealing with contemporary urbanization in Vietnam amounted to only a handful of early studies such as those authored by Lilian Halls-French, Nguyen Duc Nhuan, Langlet-Quach Thanh Tam and Christian Pedelahore (see comprehensive bibliography at the end of the book). On the other hand, subsequent to opening up under the *Doi Moi* economic reform, a lot of catching up has been done since the 1990s, thanks to studies carried out by doctorate-level academic scholars and leading public research agencies. Some of the latter include specialized research teams from the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* (CNRS) [National Centre for Scientific Research] and the *Institut de Recherche pour le Développement* (IRD) [Institute of Research for Development, formerly ORSTOM], as well as schools of architecture that have had an impact in their own way, particularly through the architectural research network.

This book is published at the initiative of the *Institut des Métiers de la Ville* (IMV) [Cooperation Centre for Urban Development] and the Ho Chi Minh City Urban Development Management Support Centre (PADDI), under the scientific coordination of a team led by Patrick Gubry and including Franck Castiglioni, Jean-Michel Cusset, Nguyen Thi Thieng and Pham Thuy Huong, is a compendium of studies on this activity starting with the research results compiled between 2001 and 2004 by the *Programme de Recherche Urbaine pour le Développement* (PRUD) [Urban Research Programme for Development]. This collaborative work that got the ball rolling, with support from the Priority Solidarity Fund (French Ministry of Foreign Affairs), coordinated jointly by the *Institut des Sciences et Techniques de l'Équipement et de l'Environnement pour le Développement* (ISTED) [Institute of Science and Technology for Infrastructure and Environment for Development] and by the *Groupement d'intérêt scientifique pour l'Étude de la Mondialisation et du Développement* (GEMDEV) [Scientific Interest Group for the Study of Globalization and Development], is a groundbreaking contribution to urban research on Vietnam.

Indeed, this programme fits into the “priority solidarity zone” designation, a complex zone that now gives more space to countries targeted under France’s development assistance policy, going beyond the former “countries in the field” of cooperation and reaching out notably to the three countries of old French Indochina — Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. In various ways it has promoted Vietnam’s reinsertion into the field of urban studies relating to the theme of development.

With regard to scientific outputs, this reinsertion has brought together a number of heretofore unlinked studies conducted in rather challenging circumstances by Francophone researchers hailing from France, as well as from Switzerland, Belgium, and Canada. This has stimulated research on common themes carried out by mixed teams that always included Vietnamese researchers. Noteworthy, this book is evidence of the outstanding interest in the field, for out of a total of some thirty teams selected through the PRUD’s call for proposals, eight of them were studying cities in Vietnam. This has yielded the eight chapters that make up this book and that include a number of the pioneer authors referred to earlier: Christian Pedelahore, with his outstanding interpretation of “*Hanoi: le cycle des métamorphoses*” [Hanoi: Cycle of Metamorphoses], and Nguyen Duc Nhuan. They were joined by other “pioneers” in Francophone research circles studying contemporary cities in Vietnam, such as Rene Parenteau, who is remembered for his early, successful initiatives on the themes of urban heritage and habitat that he conducted as part of a Canadian cooperation programme.

Other contributions, noteworthy because of their seminal nature, are those of Laurence Nguyen, in particular her thesis *Esquisse d'une politique de modernisation et de développement urbain à Hanoi et à Hô Chi Minh Ville (1986–1996)* [Outline of a Modernization and Urban Development Policy in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City]. This was the first thesis on Vietnam to be directed by the French Institute of Urban Planning (University of Paris 8) in 1999. As far as we know, it is also the first thesis to focus on what was being done and who was doing it in the realm of urban management in both of Vietnam's metropolises.

Furthermore, the theme put forward by PRUD was deliberately directed at analysing urban interventions in cities of the South, as well as stakeholder approaches and the strategies behind them or induced by them. It also highlighted the reinsertion taking place — in sync with the regional integration process at work in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) — and the comparative opening and putting into perspective of research on Vietnam. Of course, only by reading this book between the lines does one discern the comparisons developed in the research that prompted them, first relating to the “Indochinese” context: Cambodia, Laos (Chapters 2 and 8), as well as to a country of the Mediterranean South, Morocco to be precise (Chapter 5). On the other hand, this desire to associate the quest for common trends in cities in the developing world and identification of special features of the urban context in Vietnam comes across clearly in the chapters that compare the contexts of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, such as “Assessment of Projects Supported by Official Development Assistance Based on Partnership Formats” (Chapter 7) and the approach to “Intra-urban Mobility” (Chapter 3). The research programme on this theme thus enabled the team coached by Patrick Gubry to use a comparison approach to develop demographic research conducted earlier on Ho Chi Minh City and thereby highlight a number of features of the bipolar metropolising of Vietnam, which gives the reader an interesting bonus.

More broadly, the transition theme pervades all the research material herein, more specifically the links between the two figures of transition — economic transition and urban transition — in the approach to urban dynamics in Vietnam as in other countries of the South. Claude de Miras' team made this theme a specific focus. His research programme furthermore embraces a comparative introduction on the same theme. Taking the diverse facets of transition into account in this way highlights not only the distinctive features as described in Chapter 1, “Urban Transition in Vietnam: Its Processes and Stakeholders”, but similarities as well, both the former and latter tending to refine, indeed renew the said approaches.

Likewise with the issues of metropolising and internationalizing urban production and functions and their links in a context wherein the realities of growth clash with lingering poverty, notably around issues of land and habitat, as shown in Chapter 4, “Resettlement Issues of Informal Areas in Ho Chi Minh City” and Chapter 6, “The Role of Civil Society in Urban Environmental Management”. This underscores the shaky context in which the transition — economic and urban — is taking place, in which Vietnam’s urban development policies are operating, attempting to develop principles of action that put the institutional stakeholders as well as the older grassroots organisations in new positions and confront them with new realities. These fresh approaches also illustrate how challenging it is to use notions such as *sustainable development* or *civil society* that have become internationalized in contexts where transition goes hand in hand with destabilization, as shown by the accelerated change in land patterns and, for many, have become synonymous with insecurity, notwithstanding the general — but not yet generalized — process of economic growth. The very notion of transition, in particular as it refers to stakeholder approaches in a context of transition, as debated by the researchers at an in-house workshop at the Hanoi IMV in November 2002, is revealed here in all its complexity.

Confronted with the received idea of standardization affecting urban morphologies as well as public and private intervention approaches, likewise with the stereotype of resistance to change, grasping urban transition requires a reading of the physical or institutional as well as mental traces, not only to comprehend what societies are tending to discard or trying to get away from, but also to comprehend the basic materials that generate urban transformation. Physically speaking, we will therefore not be surprised to see how far this research goes as it delves into water and traffic infrastructure issues, these sectors under regal authority upon which, as the authors see it, have devolved the role of vectors of urban transition and, through forms of delegation, the very substance that is bringing about the internationalization of the urban production.

By using the first chapter to draw the link between the long-term *processes* of urbanization and urban concepts as conceived by the *stakeholders*, the book shows clearly that the research prompted by PRUD’s programme has broken new ground. The book’s contents thereafter hinge upon these two dimensions. The early chapters introduce us to the *urban dynamics* evident at two distinct levels, that of morphological re-composition resulting from arterial system development and that of intra-urban mobility — telltale signs of urban mutation. The following chapters develop the *issues* that

these dynamics engender from the standpoint of strategies: issues of rehousing when squatter settlements are slated for urban requalification; issues relating to the choices of how one particular urban utility will be managed, namely water. Finally, *stakeholder* approaches are highlighted in the three concluding chapters — stakeholders that are emblematic of the new urban scene given the contrasting positions they occupy and the interests or contrasting rationalities that they represent, because we have on the one hand the embryo of urban civil society as it is emerging from grassroots organizations, on the other international stakeholders broken down into two aspects that are frequently connected: the financial aspect through the donors providing official development assistance (Chapter 7) and the technical expertise aspect through the work done by international consultants and engineering offices (Chapter 8). We could not find a better account of the two extremes present in the nascent urban stakeholder system. Nevertheless, these chapters highlight common points of satisfaction and frustration encountered in urban infrastructure development and the related environmental issues.

Despite their diversity of aims — from sectoral actions to holistic planning, and scale of observation — from the urban scale to national policies, the research contained in this book makes no claim to be an exhaustive study — multi-faceted by nature — of urban research on post-*Doi Moi* Vietnam. On the other hand, the research led by PRUD has obviously benefited from the fruitage of research conducted earlier or in parallel for other reasons. Besides indispensable reference works such as the *Atlas du Vietnam* by Vu Tu Lap and Christian Taillard and the major studies on urban history that help fit the recent urban changes into the broader picture (the signal contribution of Philippe Papin), it is right and proper to mention the urban geography studies of Hanoi's peripheral growth directed by Professor Georges Rossi (in the *Atlas infographique de Hanoi* and thesis papers directed by the University of Bordeaux 3 that are original spin-offs of it). In a similar vein we have the noteworthy contributions of urban sociology research on metropolising and environment issues in Ho Chi Minh City conducted under the banner of Swiss cooperation under the leadership of Professor Michel Bassand. These publications and research articles have also found their way into thesis papers directed by the Federal Polytechnical School of Lausanne (EPFL). The active presence on PRUD teams of authors of thesis papers directed in each of the aforementioned contexts, namely Fanny Quertamp Nguyen for Bordeaux 3 and Sebastien Wust for EPFL, are evidence of this dissemination of knowledge about the cities of Vietnam and the scientifically beneficial character of its cumulative effects. Also noteworthy is the thesis

on urban transit in Vietnam recently directed by the University Lumiere Lyon 2 by Nguyen Thien Phu, a member of the research team on expertise headed by Eric Baye and Jean-Michel Cusset. This paper is in fact a first on a theme of which the importance is seen because of the many references made to it in this book.

Tuning in to research conducted elsewhere in its field, the Urban Research for Development Programme also held to the principle of getting input from experts and NGO's, as seen by the presence of researchers from *Villes en Transition* (Cities in Transition) on PRUD teams, in an attempt to compare the research material with the actual sphere concerned by urban interventions — decision-makers and operational stakeholders on the one hand, citizens and users of urban services on the other. In this spirit, mid-term regional workshops were organized in part for internal exchanges between the researchers and programme supervisors and in part for these external exchanges. The first of a series of four, the workshop held in Hanoi on the theme “*Regards croisés sur Hanoi: Transition, spécificité urbaine et choix de développement*” [Swapping Views on Hanoi: Transition, Urban Specificities and Development Choices] in November 2002, from this standpoint provides special insight owing to a teaming up of PRUD (scientific coordinator), IMV and the Hanoi People's Committee in a decentralized cooperation project led by the Ile-de-France region and supported by the French Embassy. The role of the IMV and its two successive directors, including Laurent Pandolfi, a researcher on one of the PRUD teams and author of a remarkable thesis directed by the French Institute of Urban Planning in 2001, entitled “*Une terre sans prix. Réforme foncière et urbanisation au Vietnam. Hanoi 1986–2000*” [Priceless Land. Land Reform and Urbanisation in Vietnam. Hanoi 1986–2000], is especially noteworthy in this regard.

Thus, by showcasing urban development research in Vietnam developed at the incentive of PRUD, the publication herewith, as an outreach of this programme, entrenches the efforts put forth by Francophone countries through national or decentralized cooperation arrangements, offers fresh insight on urban development in Vietnam through scientific partnerships and thus provides enlightenment for government action in the relevant fields of urban development and international cooperation.