

Book Reviews

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Sidewalk City: Remapping Public Space in Ho Chi Minh City. By Annette M. Kim. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015. 252 pp.

Sidewalks bustling with action are a defining feature of many Southeast Asian cities, including Hồ Chí Minh City (HCMC) — Vietnam’s largest urban centre and the primary focus of *Sidewalk City*. Every day, a lively ballet unfolds on the city’s sidewalks, starring — among other characters — street vendors peddling their wares, neighbours chatting with each other, kids playing improvised games, informal motorbike parking and pedestrians trying to negotiate the crowded space. Annette Miae Kim’s welcome monograph seeks to render this everyday spectacle more legible and, in doing so, to sensitize social scientists, urban planners, and municipal authorities to its multifaceted contributions to rapidly growing and evolving cities.

The book opens with the following observation: while sidewalks are central to the everyday urban experience of residents in many cities across the Global South and North, including HCMC, they have been largely overlooked by the urban studies and planning scholarship. Kim’s book seeks to fill this gap. The author convincingly argues that understanding how sidewalks are organized, negotiated and practised requires a theoretical toolkit that integrates the material physicality and socio-political construction of these spaces. The first chapter of *Sidewalk City* proposes such an analytical framework. It comprises an unusual assemblage of three rarely combined conceptual-methodological approaches: spatial ethnography, property rights theory and critical cartography. In later chapters, Kim skilfully demonstrates the value of this innovative approach in uncovering

the interplay among the physical, social and political dimensions of sidewalk practices in HCMC, along with their implications for urban planning and design practices.

Three background chapters set the historical and methodological scene for this demonstration. Chapter Two announces a discussion of the evolution of HCMC's sidewalk space since the pre-colonial era. However, and perhaps because of the availability of only limited data on these "overlooked" public spaces, sidewalks do not feature as prominently in this discussion as one would have expected. The chapter however provides a useful synthesis of existing historical scholarship on urban development in the two areas of the city on which Kim and her team have focused their attention: the historic centre of Saigon in District 1 and Chợ Lớn in western District 5 and neighbouring parts of District 6.

Chapters Three and Four discuss the cartographic and methodological orientations through which Kim and her team have documented the relationships of HCMC's sidewalks with time, social relations and economic activities. The first of these chapters is notable for its shrewd analysis of recent debates about the actual and potential role of maps in society, especially in relation to structures of power and to representation. This analysis underpins Kim's call, detailed in Chapter Four, for a more reflexive and socially engaged cartography of urban space, an agenda that she takes on to "re-map" sidewalk practices in the inner districts of HCMC.

Opening a first window on the results of this "mapping adventure" (p. 109) is an inset located mid-way through the book and entitled a "Critical Cartography Primer". This short, yet thought-provoking hiatus presents ten cartographic experiments, moving from the standard "urban planning map" (p. 115) to increasingly unconventional representations of spatial relationships, such as a "scroll map" tracing the tempo of personal interactions on HCMC's sidewalks (pp. 138–39). This short section ends with what might be described as *Sidewalk City's* manifesto for a new "mixed-use sidewalk paradigm" (pp. 147–49) — that is, a renewed vision of sidewalks' role in cities

that not only acknowledges but in fact actively seeks to enable a fluid sharing of these public spaces in time between a mix of users, including poorer sections of the urban population whose livelihood depends on access to sidewalk space.

The next two chapters plunge deeper into the case of HCMC. Chapter Five uses a property-rights framework to analyse sidewalk vending in historic Saigon and Chợ Lớn. Kim offers a careful analysis of official state narratives and of the counter-narratives of various segments of urban society straddling the state–society divide. The analysis reveals a tension between, on the one hand, desires to keep sidewalks free of vendors for the sake of orderliness and, on the other, empathy among residents and authorities for poorer urban residents’ struggles to make a living by performing various economic activities on sidewalks. These competing visions define HCMC’s “sidewalk property right regime” (pp. 150–51). And, as demonstrated by the fascinating tourist map experiment for central HCMC detailed in Chapter 6, taking this localized spatial order seriously holds considerable potential for engaged planners to renew existing approaches to public space management.

Sidewalk City illuminates the multiple dimensions of everyday sidewalk practices in HCMC and, in doing so, it awakens the reader’s gaze and shifts it on to the most pedestrian public spaces in cities. This achievement is accompanied by a cogent analysis of the multiple ways in which sidewalk spaces are socially negotiated and by a persuasive agenda for more flexible regulatory and management approaches to sidewalk practices in cities. This volume will no doubt lead students of Southeast Asian cities to rethink the role of cartography in research and, hopefully, inspire more planning scholars to bring knowledge production closer to practice.

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