



NUL - New Urban Languages  
Conference Proceedings  
Milan, 19-21 June 2013

Planum. The Journal of Urbanism, n.27, vol.2/2013  
www.planum.net | ISSN 1723-0993  
Proceedings published in October 2013

## ***The urban and the self across three utopias*** Mediated representations in urban Vietnam

Paolo Patelli

Politecnico di Milano

DASStU - Department of Architecture and Urban Studies

*E-mail:* paolo.patelli@polimi.it

---

The city is a site where we make our lives public, through brief but accumulated interactions (Jacobs). Accordingly, the notion of Öffentlichkeit – public sphere – implied, in the bourgeois Western world, a spatial concept, as well as the collective body constituted in this process - "the public" (Habermas). The geography of the public sphere has often been considered equivalent to that of the urban public spaces (Arendt, among others). In other contexts, though, the meaning of our contingent definitions of “public”, “the public”, and “public sphere” are increasingly unclear. Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are taken as example, as Vietnam moved from being a Socialist country, embraced first free market and then what was left of cyberspace. If everyday performances have created firstly a bustling street life in urban Vietnam, now novel techno-social practices afforded by Web 2.0 services are providing both a new vitality and spectacle, destabilizing state control in a struggle for meanings in physical spaces.

**Keywords:** public sphere, digital commons, web 2.0, Vietnam

### **1. Introduction**

*“Environmental images are the result of a two-way process between the observer and his environment.”*

Kevin Lynch (Lynch, K., 1960)

*The radio should step out of the supply business and organize its listeners as suppliers.*

Bertold Brecht (Brecht, B., 1964)

*“Have you ever heard of Brewster's Angle?”*

*“Yes, sir! Brewster's Angle is the angle at which light reflected from a medium with an index of refraction is completely polarized.”*

Richard P. Feynman (Feynman, R. P., 1985)

Gianni Vattimo argues that the post-modern condition is linked to the development of the mass media and the diffusion of systems of communication. He disputes the belief that this development will produce a more enlightened, self-conscious and 'transparent' society, maintaining, nevertheless, that it leads to a



diversity of viewpoints, which render societies more complex, even chaotic. The multiplication of perspectives on the world disorients us and removes the certainties we gain from our local culture (Vattimo, G., 1989).

This paper presents a somehow optimistic approach and tries to hint at what can we learn – from the perspective of urban studies and design - from the art of living in a world characterized by the widespread accessibility and reproducibility of information and communication, from ambiguity and flux, in particular, looking at a preliminary study on the two major Vietnamese cities, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. The presented thesis is that the opportunities posed by new media are not so much about the actual products themselves as objects or commodities, but about the results produced from their behavior. New media afford new behaviors, new interactions, ways to negotiate meanings and identities, to build and share imageries.

## 2. Urban experience and mediated publics

It is true that the city, like a piece of architecture, is a construction in space, but one of a more complex and multifaceted nature: a city “can only be experienced in the course of a long spans of time” and through the interaction of citizens in its spaces, places or stages. The city has temporal dimensions, which exceed the controlled and limited sequences of other temporal arts and media: “on different occasions and for different people, the sequences are reversed, interrupted, abandoned, cut across.” (Lynch, K., 1960). Nothing is experienced by itself; everything is in a dynamic relation with its surroundings as well as with the events leading to it, with past experiences and memories. “Every citizen has had long associations with some part of its city, and his image is soaked in memories and meanings”(Lynch, K., 1960).

Our knowledge and our experience of the urban environment are influenced by attention, perception and memory. How do the diffusion of new media and the increasingly mediated nature of our spatial transform the urban imagery?

Inside most definitions of “place” - certainly an elusive concept – one can often find the ideas of geological strata and that of palimpsest: when relations become operational, a place can then be understood as a hypertext - material and abstract at the same time - to be unfolded: a site where things are layered and many have written (Corbox A., 2001 ; Marot, S., 2003), where connections can be drawn. Places have been palimpsests ever since their beginning: the contemporary is constantly being constructed upon the foundations of the old. Yet, recently, the concept of “place” has begun to take on an entirely new dimension, as millions of places are being represented and augmented in cyberspace by a labor force of hundreds of thousands of individual writers, cartographers and artists. The virtual Earth is not a simple mirror of its physical counterpart, but is instead characterized by both black holes of information and hubs of rich description and detail. The tens of millions of places represented virtually are part of a worldwide engineering practice that is unprecedented in scale or scope and made possible by contemporary Web 2.0 technologies. What Mark Graham defined the “virtual Earth” is more than just a collection of digital maps, images and articles that have been uploaded into Web 2.0 cyberspaces; it is instead a fluid and malleable alternate dimension that both influences and is influenced by the physical world (Graham M., 2010).

In the bourgeois Western world, the notion of *Öffentlichkeit* – public sphere – implies a spatial concept, the social sites where meanings are articulated, distributed, and negotiated, as well as the collective body constituted in this process, “the public” (Habermas, J., 1989). The geography of the public sphere, though, has been considered equivalent to that of the urban public spaces, not only in the case of the Parisian boulevards (Habermas, J., 1989), but ever since the Greek polis, and its agora were established (Arendt H., 1958). Access to information, communication, the construction of identities through confrontation and debate are urban activities, and they have always involved media, even when they were “old”.

### 3. Vietnam through Socialism, Free Market and Cyberspace

The concept of “public sphere” is peculiar of the Western world, and it may be difficult to apply in non-Western societies. Nevertheless, as in developing countries of the former socialist world the processes of urbanization - and urban life itself – still seem to be poorly understood, such terms may yet retain substantial descriptive power, at least at an everyday level.

Vietnam, after the expulsion of the French in 1954, was left divided politically into two states, and only reunificated under a communist regime after a long war in 1975. Since then, the country has long been stuck in ideology and permanent economic shock, until in 1986 a new set of leaders, following China's example, embraced the free market, under a new policy called “doi moi”, meaning “renovation”. Since 2000, its economic growth has been among the highest in the world and such high growth is set to continue (O'Neill J., et al., 2012).

Contemporary Vietnam has currently 30% of total population living in cities, with a 3% annual rate of change (2010-15 est.) pointing the country towards an urban future<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, lifestyles are becoming “urban”: since the early 2000s, economic and social changes, especially in the biggest cities - Hanoi (2.668 million inhabitants) and Ho Chi Minh City (5.976 million inhabitants) - have paved the way for a dramatic transformation in the ways in which city spaces - streets, pavements and markets - are experienced and imagined by the population (Mandy T., 2002). Where there were wide open spaces, big city-center squares, with huge buildings and rhetoric monuments on strict axial plans, individual mobility, street-trading and public crowding around popular events has led to the emergence of a distinct public sphere (Mandy T., 2002). Public spaces in Vietnam's major cities are still the product of extreme centralization, urban and architectural ensembles explicitly designed to instill respect for power, expressly conceived for the mass spectacles of dictatorship, for the synchronized movements of crowds. Nonetheless, while during the Nineties squares were three-dimensional survivors from a dead age, with almost nothing left to celebrate apart from the funerals of party hierarchs (Harms E., 2011), and little to make the area feel like a social space, in the 2000s instant architectures started to appear and vanish, along with events and public manifestations.

Vietnam, a country where the government controls all broadcast media exercising oversight through the Ministry of Information and Communication, witnesses the emergence of practices of appropriation and confrontation, displaced to the immaterial nodes and networks of electronic media and information systems, following to the affordances of media spaces and Web 2.0 for collaboration and augmentation. The impressive proliferation of digital media in Vietnam is a function of Internet use: only 34% of the population in 2010 had access to the Internet, but mobile penetration was higher than 100% and 97% of Vietnam Internet users aged 15-24 in 2011 were using social media, and mobile 3G subscribers were growing by 358% per year. Unlike in developed markets, where growth in social network usage has plateaued, Vietnam and other emerging markets are experiencing rapid increase (Evens P., 2012). As in many other authoritarian countries, the Internet has opened up doors for dissent and social criticism. Of course, this is also an effect of the decentralization and withdrawal of power from the urban space, now residing elsewhere, as in exurban business parks, but that is not to say that the square has no political power left in it. Quite the contrary, as it was for Jane Jacobs, it can still be said that the city is a site where we make our lives public, through even brief but accumulated interactions (Jacobs J., 1993) and the phantom public that the mass spectacles simulated had suddenly been brought to life (Hatherley O., 2012). Despite the fact that the new generation within the ruling class might be “interested in doing business, not politics”<sup>2</sup>, at least the fact that they do not have much respect for those in power, has led in

---

<sup>1</sup> CIA The World Facts Book: Vietnam. Retrieved 2012-09-15.

<sup>2</sup> “*Half-way from Rags to Riches.*” The Economist, April 24, 2008. <http://www.economist.com/node/11041638>.

the past two years to flickers of a pro-democracy movement, asking the Vietnamese leadership to accept that a market economy works best when there is a free market in politics too.

In such context, the meaning of “publics”, “the public”, and “public sphere” are increasingly unclear. Is the public an anonymous mass, which includes consumers and tourists, or a form of resistance to the privatization or social spaces?

In place of (and opposed to) the cohesive unity of the people, the public is affirming itself within the category of the “multitude”, which signifies “plurality” - literally: being many – as a form of social and political existence, consisting of a network of individuals. The metropolis is the space where the multitude deploys itself (Virno P., 2003), producing a plurality of performances and urban imaginaries.

If everyday performances have created firstly a bustling streetlife in urban Vietnam, now novel techno-social practices afforded by Web 2.0 services are destabilizing state control in a struggle for meanings in physical spaces and digital publics. The uses and struggles over such spaces announce a new discursive platform over Vietnamese cultural imagery, as state-controlled events are being deserted and novel, contentious social manifestations are moving to the foreground.

Boundaries between public and private arenas are becoming more fluid and routinely transgressed, as in Western societies, but in ways that are distinctive to the Vietnamese situation. Vietnam displays resurgence rather than a death of streetlife, but also a convergence in the construction of ‘pseudo-public’ leisure spaces (Mandy T., 2002). These spaces – increasingly often malls, multiplex, airports and cafes – are crucial in the construction of a new representation of the self for the Vietnamese citizens, who are now, after socialism, free market and cyberspace, building their new public image, through the places they choose to inhabit and how: from being and having to being and dwelling. Due to urbanization processes and to novel techno-social practices, not only the urban population is increasing, but lifestyles, mindsets and imaginaries are changing: urban space is not just where buildings are dense, but where a public image is built. The urbanist André Corboz used to quote the roman poet Rutilius Romatianus, who in the V century BC wrote about Rome: “Urbem fecisti quod prius orbit erat”: the image of the self is strictly linked to an urban imaginary, which is increasingly global.

This new imaginary is largely built through the performativity of everyday mobilities: interdependent movements of people, objects, information and ideas. Mobilities produce social life organized across distance and form (and re-form) its contours through the (re-)configuration of people, objects, and spaces as part of dwelling and place-making. The urban imaginary and the urbanite’s self representation within it, are affected by the corporeal travel of people for work, leisure, family life, pleasure, migration and escape; but also by imaginative travel, through talk and images of places and peoples appearing on and moving across multiple media, and by communicative travel through person-to-network contact, which can be either direct or mediated (Büscher M., John Urry, 2009). Fluxes and flows, passivity, dwelling, place-making, the effervescence of co-presence, the relation of represented or imagined presences, absences, deferrals are increasingly traceable and easy to share. In contrast with the – now passé and archaic – idea of Cyberspace, which possibly became the last utopia of the 20th century and gave way to the imagination of a global mind, hyperconnected and infinitely powerful, digital media and network technologies are now part of the performativity of everyday life; the Internet has become the backbone of communication, commerce, and media. Along with this, the public transformed, now inhabiting multiple, overlapping and global networks such as user forums, Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare, Flickr, blogs, and wikis. These developments offer new platforms for social engagement and political action whose spatial and architectural implications are still matters of speculation. Experience of material public space has been radically transformed with the proliferation of mobile and pervasive media technologies throughout the physical space of the city. The explosion of social media tools posed new challenges to the Party-state’s capacity to control public opinion. They provide alternative sources of information, the Internet has facilitated self-organization among social activists, and its many communication tools allow them to assemble virtually, strengthen friendships and become empowered as a community. At the same time, shared and diffused ICT infrastructures are introducing novel ways by which immaterial bits of media and

information are tied to physical locations in urban public space and to polyrhythmic social practices within the metropolis.

New techno-social practices allow augmentation and appropriation, a “territorialization” of the social and political multitudes inhabiting the metropolis; they show the potential to generate new hybrid spaces and forms of public participation that reconnect the material dimensions of urban public space with the affordances of the networked public sphere.

How are the old concepts of identity, property, expression and participation, based as they were on physical and cohesive manifestations, do apply in a post-digital regime? How are attention, perception and memory influenced by mediated interactions with the urban body?

Getting to an understanding of the profound intertwining of urban processes with political and social change in a transitional society requires investigating mutual interactions.

#### **4. An image of the city through its “tweets”**

Twitter is an online social networking and micro-blogging service that enables its users to send and read text-based messages of up to 140 characters - “tweets”. Despite the fact that content shared over such medium is often and overtly considered nothing more than ephemeral chronicle, common language can be a precious source for understanding broad spatial, social and political transformations.

To say something is to do something; discourse is a situated action <sup>0</sup>. As in Aristotle, *Rhetoric* espouses particular views of the world and aims to explore the dynamic interaction of a rhetorical text with its context. Discourse is symbolic action: reality is a social construction and individuals are symbol creators and consumers. Language makes subjective meanings ‘real’, and at the same time typifies these meanings through creating ‘semantic fields or zones of meaning within which daily routines proceed. Discourse creates mental frames that are ‘meta-communicative’ (Bateson G., 1999), simultaneously highlighting certain meanings and excluding others. Discursive construction takes place through social interaction.

Tweets shared in Hanoi during the month of August 2012 show a spike on the 5th: the day 200 participants followed a leader bearing a rainbow flag through the city, in a bid to improve both their own self-confidence and society's acceptance of the LGBT community: the country's first-ever gay pride parade, spurred by an unexpected government proposal to recognize same-sex couples in law [see Fig. 2].

Looking at Ho Chi Minh City, we notice that 90% of the geolocalized tweets still reference the city by its pre-liberation name of Saigon. This choice reveals the conflicted nature of contemporary urbanization in Vietnam, and perhaps throughout the global South, where agrarian societies are attempting rapidly to transform themselves into cosmopolitan urban ones [see Fig. 4].

In both cities the term “Am”, associated symbolically with the moon, the female, the outside, rurality, is used three times more often than “Duong”, the sun, the male, the inside, urbanity. Outer city districts, “huyen”, are referenced much less than the inner city areas.

#### **5. An image of the city through its “checkins”**

Foursquare, is a location-based social networking website for mobile devices, whose users “check in” at venues, and each check-in awards the user points and sometimes “badges”. Location is based on GPS hardware or network location.

The service redefines the environments as not the same as the physical world as it exists, taking on meaning in relation to the agents that inhabit it. Such spaces depend upon the gradual construction of complex ethologies of bodies and objects; repositories of proximities, positionings and juxtapositions



allow things to become known. Sendings and receivings of tokens of techno-social lives, the constant hum of connection and interconnection, afford new performances, where there is more attention paid to verbs like intersect, connect, assemble rather than adjectives like rooted, individual, organic (Thrift N., and J.-D. Dewsbury, 2000). Communication within the city is not left anymore to signs and screens, but it extends to novel geographies of people, hands and keyboards. The cityscape, the boulevards, the market place, the park, the main square, pull audiences together and produce performers. The vortex of behaviors is a center of cultural self-invention. There is considerable room for the exploration of unintended meanings of all forms of space and space use.

Looking at the maps depicting the spatial distribution of checkins in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City [see Fig.1] [see Fig.3], we notice that the places where people build and share their public image are mainly private, commercial spaces, not related to the flow of subjective lives as they are linked to the spectacle and consumption of a westernized lifestyle: people construct their digital self through malls, multiplex, café and airports.

**6. Conclusions**

Web 2.0, marked by the rapidly evolving domains of social media, and social networking, has affected all aspects of our daily life, reshaping how citizens form communities and cultures, forge social structures, utilize resources, and engage in politics. The metropolis welcomes the fragment, the invisible, the minute and it binds and connects them to build pluralities of meanings. Communication reshapes relationships of power, inserts itself into the real and into the urban stratification, rendering it more complex. This affects the mutually dependent image - the mental representation that each and every citizen builds of its environment - and the performances taking place within the geography of the urban publics, again through accumulations of “brief but accumulated interactions” (Jacobs J., 1993).

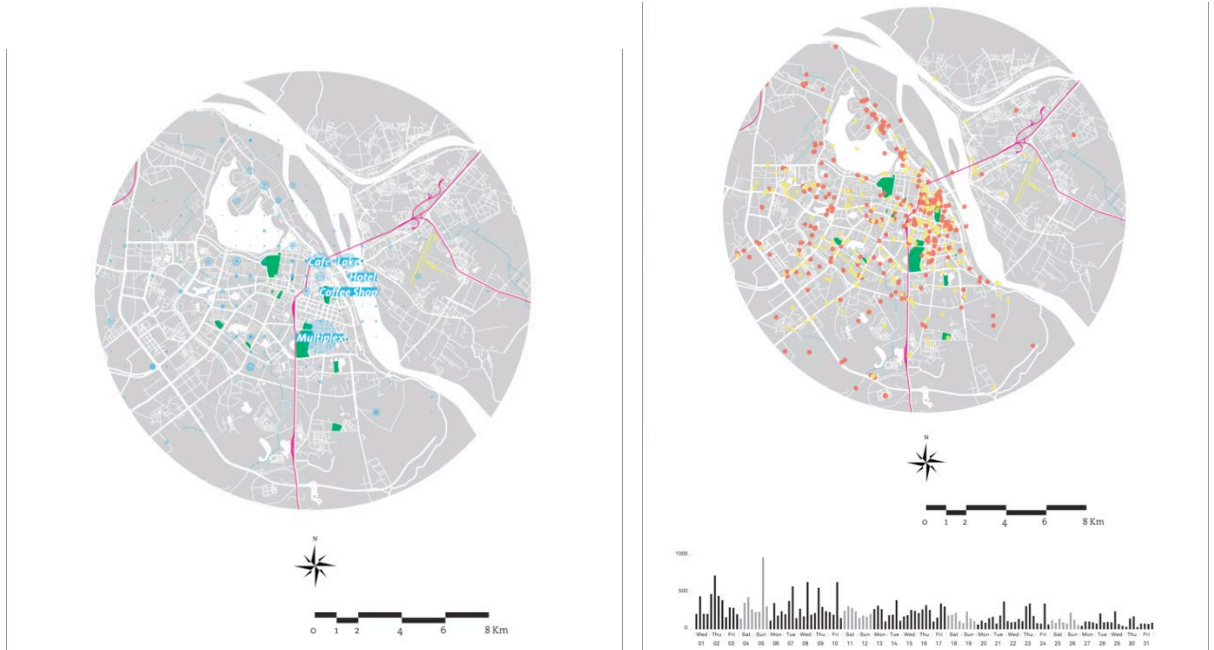


Figure 1. Hanoi. Venues listed in Foursquare. Circle radius visualizes the relative popularity among users.  
 Figure 2. Hanoi. Geo-localized content shared on Twitter during the month of August 2012. In red are tweets written in Vietnamese.



Figure 3. Ho Chi Minh City. Venues listed in Foursquare. Circle radius visualizes the relative popularity among users.  
 Figure 2. Ho Chi Minh City. Geo-localized content shared on Twitter during the month of August 2012. In red are tweets written in Vietnamese.

## References

- Arendt H., (1958), *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Austin, J. L. (1961) "Performative Utterances". In, *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J. O. Urmson & G. J. Warnock. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Bateson G., (1999), [1972] *Steps to an ecology of mind: collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Brecht B., (1964), "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication" in *Brecht on Theatre*, Hill and Wang, New York [«Der Rundfunk als Kommunikationsapparat» in *Blätter des Hessischen Landestheaters*, Darmstadt, No. 16, July 1932].
- Büscher M., John Urry, (2009), "Mobile Methods and the Empirical." *European Journal of Social Theory* 12, no. 1 (February 1, 2009): 99–116.
- Corbox A., (2001), *Le territoire comme palimpseste et autres essais*, Editions de l'Imprimeur, Besançon.
- Evens P., (2012), Vietnam - Telecoms, Mobile, Broadband and Forecasts. March 2012 (17th Edition).
- Feynman R. P., (1985), "Surely you're joking, Mr. Feynman!": adventures of a curious character, W.W. Norton, New York.
- Graham M., (2010), "Neogeography and the palimpsests of place: Web 2.0 and the construction of a virtual earth", *Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie*, 101(4), 422–436.
- Habermas J., (1989), [1962] *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Harms E., (2011), *Saigon's edge. On the Margins of Ho Chi Minh City*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Hatherley O., (2012), *Across the Plaza: The Public Voids of the Post-Soviet City*, Kindle Edition. Strelka Press.
- Jacobs J., (1993), [1961] *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Modern Library, New York.
- Lynch K., (1960), *The Image of the City*, M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, MA.

- Mandy T., (2002), "Out of Control: Emergent Cultural Landscapes and Political Change in Urban Vietnam." *Urban Studies* 39, no. 9 (August 1, 2002): 1611–1624.
- Marot, S. (2003), *Sub-urbanism. The Art of Memory, Territory and Architecture*. AA Publications, London.
- O'Neill J., et al., (2012), "Global Economics Paper No.134, *How solid are the BRICs?*. Goldman Sachs. Retrieved 2012-09-15.
- Thrift N., and J.-D. Dewsbury, (2000), "Dead geographies and how to make them live", in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 2000, volume 18, pages 411-432.
- Vattimo, G., (1989), *La società trasparente*. Garzanti, Milano.
- Virno P., (2003), *A grammar of the multitude: for an analysis of contemporary forms of life*, Semiotext (e), Cambridge, MA.

### **Acknowledgments**

This article is the first result of a personal research developed within the frame of the PhD course in Urban and Architectural Design at the Politecnico di Milano. This particular study started after a conversation with Bernd Upmeyer, who I thank for inviting me to publish it first on MONU #17 - Next Urbanism, a thematic issue about what comes after the BRICs, with regard to urbanization and urban culture.