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**Loose Threads:
The Translocal Making of Public Space Policy in Hanoi**

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Loose Threads: The Translocal Making of Public Space Policy in Hanoi

INTRODUCTION

In October 2011, the Vietnamese Ministry of Construction and a Canadian NGO jointly organized a workshop on public space in Hanoi that included Vietnamese professionals and officials and a group of international experts, among which were the authors of this paper. The aim was to exchange experiences in public space policy. During the workshop, public space projects as well as institutional frameworks in Europe, Asia, Latin America and North America were juxtaposed against the situation in Vietnam in a classical 'best practice' perspective. This meeting is part of a web of connections that relate Hanoi to a series of other locales on issues of public space—a topic that takes on enhanced importance in a context of rapid urbanization and growing preoccupation with issues of urban livability. As one part of a larger project that compares the evolution of the 'relational worlds' of three globalizing cities during the past twenty years¹, this paper analyses how translocal exchanges feed into the making of this specific type of urban policy in Hanoi.

The paper has three aims. The first is to look at a potentially progressive urban policy in contrast to most work on 'policies in motion' that has primarily been concerned with neoliberal policies.² While this focus is both understandable and necessary, it also tends to underestimate the role of other forms of translocal policy exchange. Our second objective is to put the process of public space policymaking in Hanoi in historical and cultural perspective. We will show here that the notion of public space in Hanoi should be understood in relation to a set of historically constituted layers of meaning and physical urban patterns. The paper's third aim is to analyze the translocal connections involved in a policy that is still in the making, and therefore characterized by a series of 'loose threads'. Here we look at how different types of connections - policy mobility, topological relations and inter-referencing - relate Hanoi to multiple locales elsewhere. In the conclusion, we reflect on the 'politics of reception' of these connections in Hanoi and summarize the methodological implications of our study. We argue in particular that different conceptual and methodological tools need to be combined to fully grasp the contemporary logics of translocal policymaking.

Because of its recent politico-economic trajectory, Hanoi is a peculiar and interesting place to study public space policy change. Wars, the communist regime and the US embargo during a large part of the twentieth century limited the scope of its international relations until economic reform (*doi moi*) in 1986. Since then, and especially since 2000³, the country has embarked on a high-tempo process of economic globalization and is now the third-fastest growing economy in Asia. As a consequence, the country's urbanization rate increased from 20% to 30% between 1990 and 2010. With Hanoi's very high population density (272 persons per hectare), a strong economic and demographic growth and a low rate of public space (less than 1 square meters of park space per inhabitant)⁴, the question of access to public space is an urgent question there and in other large cities of the country. This urgency is reinforced by ongoing processes of destruction, privatization and commodification that act to further restrict public space. Correspondingly, over the past decade researchers analysing

¹ The research looks at three dimensions of relationality (embedded within urban policies, forms and practices) in the cities of Hanoi, Ouagadougou and Palermo. A book, synthesizing the results is in preparation (Söderström 2012).

² But see (McCann 2011a) and (McFarlane 2011) for studies of progressive policy connections.

³ After the Asian financial crisis.

⁴ And only 0.05 sqm per capita in the peripheries, see (Labbé 2010, pages 17-18).

changing public space in Hanoi have insisted on the necessity of preserving and developing it (Drummond 2000, Thomas 2001b, Thomas 2002, Koh 2008). Adopting a meta-analytical approach, this paper has a slightly different focus as it looks at the making of a public space policy in Vietnam and, more specifically, at the role of translocal exchanges in that process.

In Hanoi, public space policy still follows socialist planning principles with essentially quantitative targets for average rates of public space per capita. In an effort to overcome the limitations of such approaches, Vietnamese architects, planners and civil servants within the government have recently been trying to reinforce or reformulate existing policy. The ongoing effort to move from such an approach to a qualitative, design-oriented one has been informed by a series of exchanges between Vietnamese and foreign specialists that involve the circulation across space of ideas, principles, laws, images, exemplary interventions and people. Situated within the recent debates around 'policies in motion', this paper attempts to extend its empirical and methodological agenda. Since 2000, much attention has been paid to the epistemological (Allen and Cochrane 2007, Robinson 2011), methodological (McCann 2011b, McCann and Ward 2010, Robinson 2010, Roy and Ong 2011, Peck and Theodore 2010a) and empirical (Ward 2006, McFarlane 2009, Prince 2011, etc.) dimensions of such phenomena, generally under the rubric of 'urban policy mobility', a term suggested by Eugene McCann (McCann 2008). What is at stake in this strand of research is the comprehension of urban governance as going beyond both methodological nationalism, which limits policymaking to intra- or inter-national processes, and diffusionist approaches, which neglect what is contested and messy about the motion of policies. It leads us, in other words, to look carefully at how urban development is taking place today within a global polity.

Because this research field is quite recent, it is still limited in its empirical scope. Most empirical studies have been concerned with policies that are typically neoliberal, such as Business Improvements Districts (Ward 2007) and conditional cash-transfer (Peck and Theodore 2010b), while others address approaches that are apparently less so such as creative city policies (Wetzstein and Le Heron 2010, Peck 2011). Yet, as in other domains of urban studies, the powerful metanarrative of neoliberalization tends to reduce the complexity of phenomena and produce disempowering accounts of urban policymaking. Actually, existing public space policies can of course be quite neoliberal (Low and Smith 2006). However, discourses on public space in the social sciences and in planning, insisting on equality, democracy and social interaction, are usually progressive. Therefore, looking at the different connections involved in the making of public space policy means potentially investigating social-oriented policy mobilities and expanding the scope of empirical analysis in this domain.⁵ As we will see in more detail below, this paper also intends to advance a methodological contribution, arguing that translocal policymaking generally involves a whole repertoire of connections between various locales, and not simply the trajectory of a specific policy between two sites.

To develop these arguments, we will first clarify the specific meaning of public space in Hanoi. This will allow us to contextualize the question of translocal public space policy exchanges in Vietnam and its capital. Then we will move on to analyse the emergence of public space as a public and policy problem in Hanoi, seeing how the making of such a policy is criss-crossed by different types of translocal relations. We conclude with reflections concerning the selection and filtering in Hanoi of different conceptions of public space and the contribution of this study to research on urban policy mobilities.

⁵ On the criteria usefully distinguishing between market-centered and social-centered urban policies, see Savitch and Kantor (2002: 103). On the interest of looking at potential policies, see Prince (Prince 2010, page 172) and McFarlane (McFarlane 2011, page 156)

In the following section, we briefly describe how public space is generally understood and practiced in Hanoi, and how physical public spaces in the city are the result of the different planning phases that have been superimposed on one another.

PUBLIC SPACE: UNDERSTANDINGS, PRACTICES AND THINGS IN HANOI

In a recent study, Drummond and Lien show that public space is generally understood by both younger and older people in Hanoi as spaces for everyone's use (Drummond and Lien 2008, page 185). When interviewees were asked about what public space refers to, they generally mentioned streets, sidewalks, swimming pools, residential areas, squares and parks. There was more disagreement on whether closed places such as hotels, game rooms and Internet cafes qualified as public spaces (ibid.). Discussions with architects, planners and governmental officials in Hanoi revealed that definitions within professional milieus are often just as imprecise as those of nonprofessionals; in other words, there is generally no clear consensus on what constitutes public spaces. There are two terms for public space in the Vietnamese language, and both encompass the idea of open public space and public buildings. The first term is *diện tích đất công cộng* and literally means 'surface of public land'. This term refers strictly to a two-dimensional space - the quantitative amount of square meters⁶ - and is used for the legal and material classification of public space as used in planning documents.⁷ The second term, *không gian công cộng*,⁸ refers to three-dimensional space and the social activities within it. It is therefore closer to the contemporary understanding of public space in Euro-American social science.⁹

This understanding of public space as social space (*không gian công cộng*) is not new in Vietnamese urban planning. It was first introduced by the French in the mid-1920s at the University of Architecture¹⁰, and has been part of design and architectural education during the colonial period through the socialist one until the present. However, in legal planning documents the term has only appeared very recently. It is mentioned in the 2003 Law on construction¹¹, and in the 2008 Vietnam Construction Standard¹². It also appears in an important governmental decree concerning the grading of urban centers in 2009¹³ which contains the first mention of 'civilized urban streets and public areas for its inhabitants' spiritual life' as one of the six basic grading criteria (art. 6).¹⁴ However, none of these legal documents define the type of locations that are supposed to constitute public space, and the term is used today in very different ways by architects, planners and government officials. When talking about public space, for instance, most authorities in Vietnam refer to "park"

⁶ Interview with Nguyen Quoc Thong, Vice President of the Vietnam Association of Architects, December 6 2011.

⁷ Many thanks to Clément Musil for his help on these definitions.

⁸ Không gian (space), *công cộng* (public).

⁹ Interestingly this distinction parallels Lefèbvre's famous distinction between representations of space and spaces of representation (Lefebvre 1991).

¹⁰ Interview with Nguyen Quoc Thong, December 6 2011.

¹¹ In Article 3.

¹² In Article 2.6.1 regarding the tree system in cities.

¹³ Decree no 42 issued by the government at the proposal of the Minister of Construction. Cities in Vietnam are classified according to 6 different grades and this decree provides the criteria for such a classification.

¹⁴ This applies to all cities from special grade cities, such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, to cities of 50'000 inhabitants, at the exclusion of grade 5 (cities between 4,000 and 50,000).

(*cong vien*)¹⁵. Therefore, the Urban Development Agency, the policy advising body under the Ministry of Construction, is presently working on a general and operational definition of the term as they revise Vietnam's public space policy.¹⁶

The process of conceptual definition is thus still underway, which means that uncertainty and indeterminacy characterize debates over public space policy. This definitional phase is not anecdotal. It was an important one in the making of European public space policy in the 1980s and 1990s, as it allowed cities to reorganize their municipal services under a common 'public space' office or service to manage domains of planning (parks, streets, plazas), that were previously considered separately within different technical services (Thomas 2001a, page 81). As we will see below, the fact that the same definitional phase reappears across time and place does not necessarily imply that Vietnam will follow the same route.

These understandings of public space in Hanoi are of course inseparable from specific uses of private and public space in Hanoi. Lisa Drummond argues that the equation made in most countries of the North between private space and domestic activities does not hold in Hanoi, as sidewalks in particular are used for activities like cooking or washing and for commercial operations such as repairing motorbikes or selling food (Drummond 2000). Public spaces are also sites in which users stage continuous attempts to privatize them through various kinds of everyday activities and spatial arrangements: for instance, people sweep the pavement in front of their home and appropriate it with loads of smaller or bigger objects such as chairs, tables, or stalls (Figure 1). This is what Drummond calls the 'inside-out' (ibid.). It is related to the high density of the city and the subsequent lack of domestic space. Such uses of public space are also the continuation of a long tradition in Hanoi's trade quarters, as well as many other Asian cities, of using the area in front of the shophouses as intermediate or mixed spaces.

The other Vietnamese specificity Drummond identifies is the reverse, the 'outside-in'. The state has recently become involved in a range of domestic matters, including attempts to steer gender roles, regulate sexual reproduction and more generally exert biopower on bodies and thoughts. This is made possible not only through state propaganda, but also through the extremely fine-grained administrative system that allows the state to 'reach right into homes' (Koh 2004, 203). As a result, private and public spaces in Vietnam are the locus of many more types of activities than would normally be found in Euro-American cities. Public space in Vietnam thus tends to be more multifunctional than that in the Global North.¹⁷

¹⁵ Which literally means 'public flower garden': *cong* meaning 'public' and *vien* 'flower garden'. Interview with Ms. Nguyen Thi Hanh, Deputy Director, Urban Development Agency, Ministry of Construction, December 2, 2011.

¹⁶ It should be proposed to the National Assembly in 2012.

¹⁷ Here of course one should be cautious with such a category considering the important differences between uses of public space between say Spain and Belgium.



Figure 1: Uses of Sidewalks in Central Hanoi (photograph by Ola Söderström)

Additionally, to understand the specificities of Hanoians' use of public space, one should look at the private/public space divide as temporally structured rather than as stable fact. During the day spaces regularly change from public to private. In the morning sidewalks might be swept by the residents and used to cook and sell the popular *Pho* (noodle soup) for breakfast, while others might use the sidewalk in the morning as an outdoor private space to wash their hair, shave or dry their clothes. In the afternoon the same sidewalk might be used as a guarded parking space and in the evening plastic chairs and tables might turn it into a restaurant.

While applying to most parts of the city, this flexibility in the use of public space is however absent from some areas: sidewalks in front of high-end hotels, luxury residences, governmental buildings and militarized areas are strictly controlled by guards, and cannot be even temporarily used for the types of activities described above. In other words, the increasing private and public surveillance of the city is creating a series of sectors of exception to traditional ways of negotiating the private/public divide in Hanoi.

The culture of public space in Hanoi is of course also shaped by its specific physical structure. It is often claimed that public space in Hanoi was introduced by the French at the turn of the 20th c. with the application of planning principles separating private and public activities (Drummond 2000, 2381). However, different forms of public spaces predated the colonial period. The ancient city of Thang Long ('Rising Dragon', former name of Hanoi), founded in the 11th c. and modelled on the Chinese city of the time, was divided into two parts: the royal city (*Hoàng Thành*) and the commoners' city (*Kinh Thành*), each with its distinct forms of public space (Luan 1997, page 168, Thong 2001, page 17). The royal Citadel had its open ceremonial space. The public spaces outside

the citadel were composed by the trading streets, with public buildings -as the communal house and the pagoda built by people from the surrounding villages - and by other spaces of smaller sizes such as the fountains and markets near neighborhood gates.¹⁸

When observing the map established by the French when they seized the city in 1873, one can therefore identify a pre-existing network of public spaces: the Citadel (the square encircled with fortifications in figure 2), the Temple of Literature, pagodas and communal houses.¹⁹

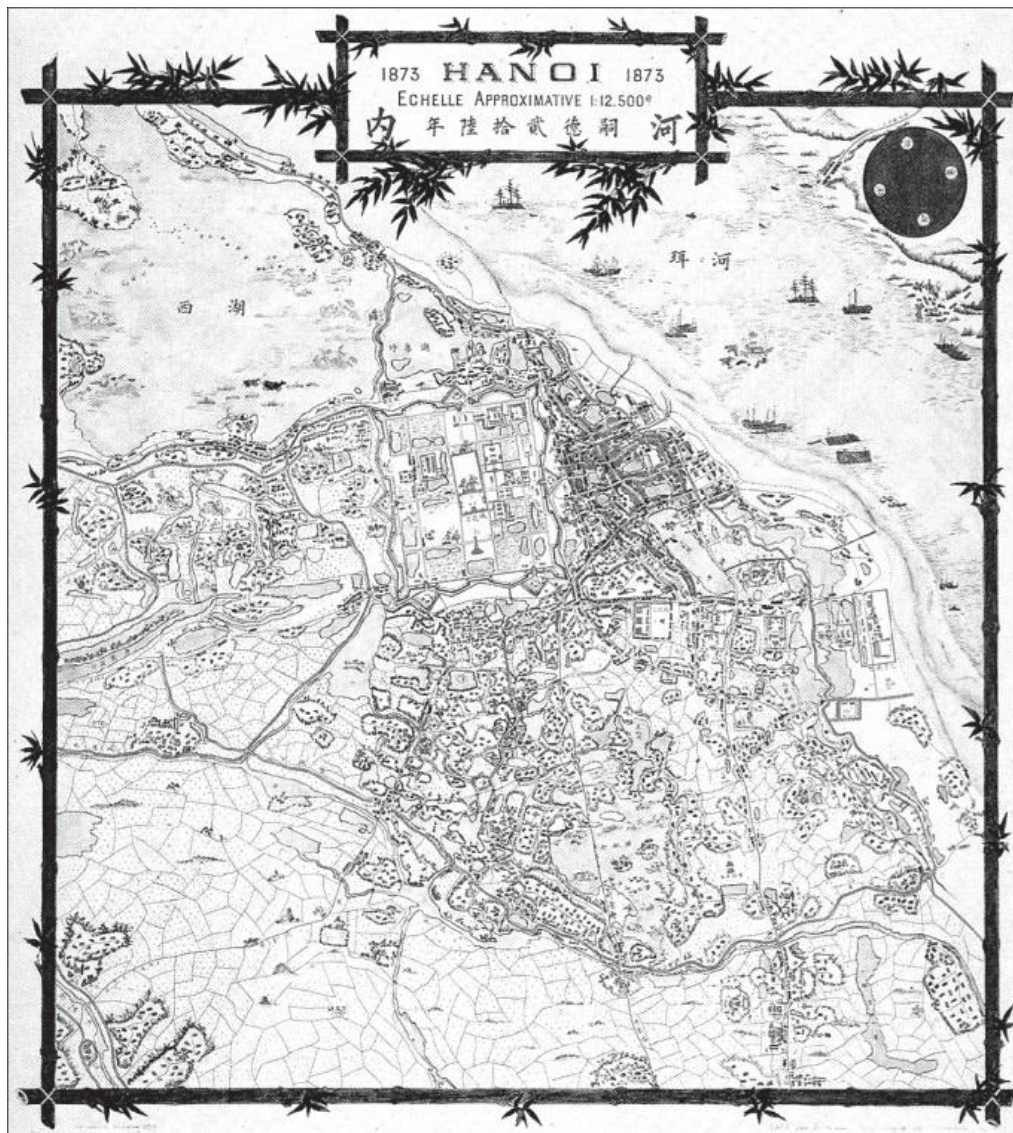


Figure 2: Map of Hanoi by the French in 1873

¹⁸ From interviews with Nguyen Quoc Thong in August and December 2011.

¹⁹ It is interesting to note that public buildings have always been considered as part of public space in Vietnam, while it is often not the case in Europe and North America.

The French added a new type and layer of public space by importing the bourgeois concept of public space such as had recently been developed by Haussmann in his transformation of Paris. Whereas in traditional Hanoi public space was purely for people to meet in groups defined by level of education, religious affiliation or a common trade,, this new form of public space was shaped for the leisure activities of the bourgeoisie, military control of the city, and the free circulation 'of money, commodities and people' (Harvey 2006, 25). In Vietnam, spatial design was adapted to the Indochinese climate conditions, requiring shade and ventilation, and to the necessity for lack of capital to use cheap local resources.

This was only the second of a number of layers of public space patterns inscribed in the city. The postcolonial period has seen the succession of seven different master plans, all of which have included the planning of public space. During the socialist period, the latter related to public works and buildings with political or historic meanings like Ba Dinh square and the Opera House²⁰. These buildings and the spaces surrounding them were freely accessible but were under direct state control and were mainly used for national parades and political propaganda. This period also saw the introduction of public spaces within the *khu tap the*: the socialist housing estates designed in partnership with North Korea, Cuba and former Eastern Europe (Figure 3). Playgrounds and athletic fields were designed and constructed to be shared by the residents. However, public space policies were very limited between 1954 (with victory over the French) and 1975 (marking the end of the war with the US), when priorities were clearly elsewhere. The same is true for the following phase between 1975 and the early 1990s.²¹

²⁰ Interview with Nguyen Thi Hanh, Deputy Director, Urban Development Agency, Ministry of Construction, 2 December 2011

²¹ The economic renovation policies were launched in 1986 (*doi moi*), however economic liberalisation and internationalisation really took off after the Asian financial crisis and the lifting of the American Trade Embargo in 1994.



Figure 3: Masterplan for Hanoi 2000, made by Leningrad planners in 1980

The post *doi moi* period in Hanoi has been characterized by two movements. The first is a spectacular resurgence of public life driven by the development of commercial activities.²² In research carried out in 2000, Mandy Thomas evokes the stark ‘contrast between the ascetic, carceral Hanoi of the 1980s and the sensuous, lively Hanoi of the present’ (Thomas 2002, page 1616). Prior to the 1990s there was indeed very little to buy in the shops and streets of the capital, due to the commercial embargo of many Western countries and to state control over the economy. With successive measures of economic liberalization and the end of US embargo in 1994, the streets now bustle with formal and informal commercial activities.²³ There has also been a second and much more negative development in the use of public space. With economic liberalization, Hanoi has also come to know the ‘banal evils’ of capitalist cities, and particularly processes such as the destruction,

²² It is also driven by a radical change in government’s attitude towards urban areas: after having been considered as places of depravity they become with *doi moi* the pivots of the country’s economic growth strategy.

²³ This has had an effect on the State’s control on public life as such changes have produced a street crowd which is more difficult to govern (Thomas 2001b, page 322).

privatization and commercialization of public space. This evolution in Hanoi has taken on different forms: the disappearance of the lakes²⁴, the invasion of motorbikes and cars, the introduction of entrance fees for public parks²⁵, the transformation of public markets into shopping malls, and of socialist communal housing (*khu thap the*) into commercial gated communities, and the construction of golf courses on village and ricefield land in the peripheries.

So in brief, because Vietnam is a society and economy in transition, Hanoi has not simply experienced a continual decline of public life and public spaces during the past quarter of a century. Rather, these elements first flourished and then became splintered and (partially) privatized and commodified. Such material and cultural specificities of Hanoi's public space are important to consider in the present attempts to develop a more substantial urban public space policy in Hanoi, especially in a context with various external influences. We now turn to these translocal policy connections that are at the core of this paper.

POLICY CIRCULATION AND PUBLIC SPACE POLICY IN THE MAKING

As we have seen, public space is not a new aspect of urban policy in Hanoi. It can hardly be otherwise, as urban policy is intrinsically tied to the conception and management of urban space. Idelfonso Cerdà, who is often credited as being the creator of modern urban planning (Choay 1981), conferred a central role both in his theory and in his famous Barcelona plan to networks of public spaces. Thus the development of a public space policy is not a matter of novelty but of priority, quality and process. What has been happening in Vietnam's capital in recent years is that calls have been made to give higher priority to public space, to design them more carefully and to involve a larger group of actors in their conception. Those calls have had some effects in terms of legislative regulation. At the same time, public spaces are seen as places of potential political contestation and considered with diffidence by the authoritarian Vietnamese state. In this section we will describe these recent moves and focus on the role of translocal connections and circulations therein.

In the years following *doi moi*, the existing housing stock faced a situation of overcrowding. As a result, housing and economic development were prioritized over other objectives in Hanoi's urban development policies. In the early 1990s issues of heritage conservation began to be debated under the influence of foreign and local experts (Logan 2000, chapter 7), and public space came to the forefront somewhat later. In 1996, a vehement public protest, officially backed for the first time by professional organizations such as the Vietnamese Architects' Association, stopped the construction of the Golden Hanoi Hotel on the banks of lake Hoan Kiem in Hanoi (Logan 2000, page 238, Thomas 2002, page 1619).²⁶ The planned eleven storey building would have limited the views of the lake, the public space which constitutes the center of today's capital of Vietnam. The same year, in the village of Kim No in Hanoi's periphery, there was strong opposition to the construction of a golf course on rice-fields by the South Korean firm Daewoo.²⁷ A series of other generally low-intensity reactions

²⁴ Logan observed in 1999 that one fourth of the city's lakes had already disappeared, victim of speculative developments (Logan 2000, page 242).

²⁵ Access is still free however between 5 and 7am and pm, when most people come to the parks for their daily exercise.

²⁶ It became one of the *causes célèbres* in Hanoi that year with over a hundred newspaper articles, radio or TV programs.

²⁷ The same firm had constructed the first office high rise in part of Thu Le Park in western Hanoi in 1993. Five prominent scientists opposed the decision writing letters to the government. But this opposition was not picked up by the press (Wells-Dang 2011, page 199).

followed other encroachments on public space in the years thereafter. In spring 2007, Hanoi's municipality approved the plan elaborated by private companies to turn Unification Park (*Thong Nhat* Park), the largest park in the city center situated south of Hoan Kiem, into a theme park. The reaction of local residents, of influential public figures and of a Canadian NGO eventually forced the city authorities to back down and freeze the plan.²⁸

Although Unification Park has continued to stimulate the appetite of developers²⁹, this event marks a turning point regarding public space policy in Hanoi because of the strong and massive indignation it provoked. Persons who had opposed the project felt that it was time to move from informal to more formal forms of action and organization.³⁰ Some state officials, on their side, interpreted the Unification Park controversy as the sign that more importance should be given to the issue of public space and that institutional changes were therefore necessary. Public space was, in other words, constructed as a social problem requiring policymaking.

In what follows we will look at this process in more detail, putting a special emphasis on the role of translocal connections, exchanges, and circulation. To explain this focus, a short excursus is needed.

A REPERTOIRE OF TRANSLOCAL POLICY CONNECTIONS

In literature on urban globalization over the past decade, there has been a growing interest in urban policy mobility. Coming mainly from geographers, new methodologies focusing on the procedures through which policies travel have been developed that detail how and by whom they are selected and packaged, and how they are then modified in the 'travel' itself as well as in the place where they are imported. Hence the term *policy mobility*, instead of policy transfer, the more traditional term within political science, which pays less attention to the geographical trajectories of urban policies (McCann and Ward 2011). Sympathetic to this idea and building on work by John Allen (Allen 2003, Allen 2008), Robinson has pushed this research strand further by inviting researchers not only to trace circulations and to follow connections, but to look also at topological relations (Robinson 2011, Robinson 2012). Topological relations refer to the reach of ideas, principles or models from place to place through means that are not necessarily material and cannot always be easily traced. It refers to the 'often messy and unmappable complexity' (Robinson 2011, page 26) of policy circulation. In a similar vein, Ananya Roy and Aihwa Ong consider what they call 'inter-referencing' as one of the ways of imagining oneself in cities as part of the world. Ong writes, 'While, , urban modelling is a concrete instantiation of acknowledging another city's achievements, inter-referencing refers more broadly to practices of citation, allusion, aspiration, comparison and competition' (Ong 2011, page 17).

This body of work invites us therefore to examine policy exchanges while keeping in mind a repertoire that includes the actual travels of people, ideas, images, the role of meeting places (conferences for instance) and specific transfer agents, as well as more immaterial means of connection such as citations, visits, interventions, and policies present in the minds of actors such as planners, architects or city officials. When we look at public space policy Hanoi, we have in fact, as we will show, a combination of these different elements of the policy circulation repertoire.

²⁸ See Wells-Dang (Wells-Dang 2011) for a detailed account and analysis of the controversy.

²⁹ In 2009, public authorities announced the construction of a luxury hotel on part of the same park. Again, public upsurge led the authorities to put the project on hold.

³⁰ Interview with Mike Di Gregorio, November 1, 2011.

Policy Mobility

In September 2008, the Government selected the international consultant Contact PPJ (Perkins Eastman – United States, POSCO E & C and JINA – South Korea) for the conception of a new master plan.³¹ The master plan was approved in July 2011 by the Prime Minister. Hanoi's new master plan covers a large metropolitan perimeter, as it follows the decision of the government taken in 2008 to extend the boundaries of the city to include the entire province of Ha Tay and other adjacent territories. As a result, Hanoi has expanded to a surface of 3,325 km² and a population of 6.3 M (Quertamp 2010, 112). At the first official presentation of the master plan in April 2009, PPJ advised the government to address a series of important needs, among which were urban management, transport and public space. In terms of the latter, the most important contribution of the master plan itself is the preservation and creation of different categories of green spaces. The PPJ master plan includes a large green belt (beyond Ring Road 4, in dark grey in figure 4) that protects the productive farmland, flood management areas, natural areas, craft and trade villages, and historic relics. In addition there are green corridors that, according to the plan, should function as green buffer zones.

These zones are located along a series of rivers around the city (the area of Day River – Tich River, Nhue River – to Lich River). Finally, a series of east-west linear parks are planned to provide a link between the green corridor and the larger green belt. Whereas the main function of the green belt is to preserve agriculture and traditional villages, the aim of the green corridors and linear parks is to create leisure space for Hanoians.

³¹ The South Korean company Posco E & C took the lead in the consortium. It is interesting to note that Posco is also realizing a very important edge city development: An Khan Splendor, South of Hanoi (www.splendor.vn).

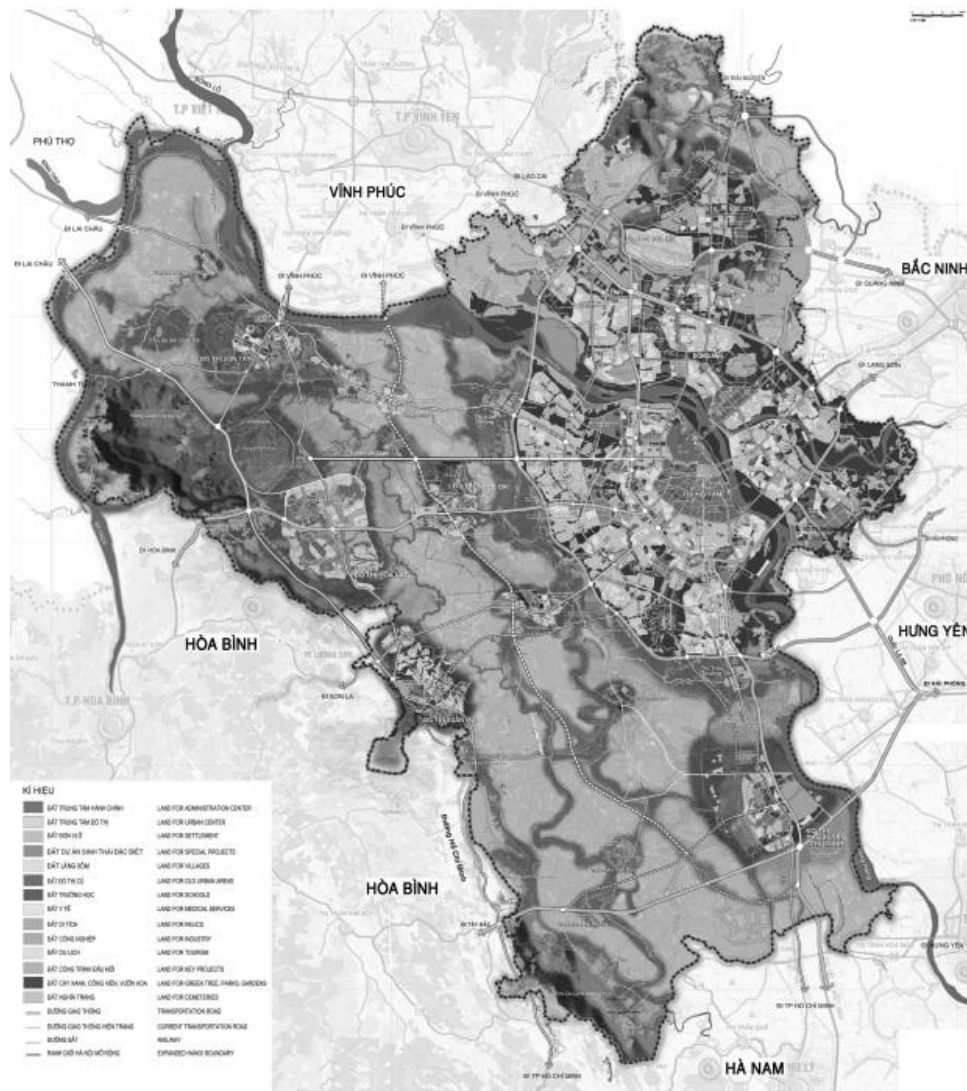


Figure 4: Hanoi Masterplan (2008)

Green corridors and belts are a classical feature of metropolitan-scale urban planning. Such functions gained prominence at the turn of the twentieth century with the influential writings of Ebenezer Howard and Raymond Unwin. The policy was first adopted by London's City Council in 1935 and was later taken up by Patrick Abercrombie as part of the Greater London Plan in 1944. Its main aim was to control London's urban sprawl, and rapidly became a policy in motion: in the late 1940s, central figures of British urban planning such as Abercrombie and Frederick James Osborn travelled extensively to propagate the green belt strategy abroad (Amati 2008). It was adopted between the 1950s and 1970s in different contexts in Europe, in the US, in Asia or Latin America. Tokyo adopted it in 1956 and Seoul in 1970.

The importation of the green belt policy to Hanoi did not follow a straight route from the UK to Vietnam, but was filtered through the experience of such policies as they were implemented in Seoul, South Korea. This is not surprising, given that Seoul has been a model city for Vietnamese authorities in recent years, and that Seoul's green belt was well known to the Korean-led PPJ consortium. However, it is more surprising to see Hanoi emulating Seoul's green belt policy at a moment when that policy is being contested in the Korean capital on two counts: first, it has failed to contain urban sprawl, and second, such strict land-use regulation has beendeemed

‘undemocratic’ by some of Korea’s political parties (Kim and Kim 2008). The apparent contradiction of Hanoi adopting a model that is in crisis elsewhere can be considered as either the result of a simple copy-paste policymaking process, or as a more subtle strategy. In the latter, more optimistic interpretation, the morphology and political system of Hanoi justifies going forward with the proposed master plan. Despite recent sprawl, Hanoi remains indeed a quite compact compared to many other cities with high growth rates. Moreover, its urban planning is still characterized by socialist-modernist planning principles, based on strict land-use regulation and the provision of rates of public services per capita.³² Authorities may therefore think they can still channel urban growth. This seemingly anachronistic mobility of a well-known, originally European urban policy would in this case proceed from an interpretation by PPJ of Vietnamese authorities’ ways of seeing their role in regulating urban development.

However, these authorities are already facing contradictions. Vietnamese planners are at pains to implement this imported policy, given that part of the land within these green belts and corridors has already been leased to developers.³³ As conceived, the possibility of seeing this metropolitan-scale public space policy realized would seem to be significantly compromised.

Topological Policy Relations

As noted earlier, the 2009 Decree on the grading of urban centers has given more importance to local public space policies in Vietnam. This decree was introduced at governmental level at the initiative of the Director of the Urban Development Agency (UDA).³⁴ When asked about the motivations and origins of such an initiative, the Director mentioned a summer course on Asian urban development she followed at the East-West Centre of the University of Hawaii.³⁵ The course, organized by Michael Douglass, an internationally renowned specialist on the dynamics of public space in South East Asia (Douglass and Ho 2008, Douglass and Danieri 2008), had a strong focus on public space. Since 2000, over one hundred Vietnamese planners have been sensitized to the importance of public space through this regularly-organized training, Douglass’s frequent conferences in Hanoi and through his numerous publications on public space in the region. Douglass is interested in what he calls civic space defined as ‘socially inclusive spaces with a high degree of autonomy from the state and commercial interests’ (Douglass 2008, page 27): a definition that is very close to Habermas’s definition of the public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*) (Habermas 1962). Douglass’s influence does not take the form of a policy, such as a waterfront or business district program, travelling from Hawaii to Hanoi. It is rather a discourse on the importance of a certain form of public space which then ‘pops up’ in particular work situations encountered by Vietnamese planners. The introduction of public space as a general criterion for the classification of Vietnamese cities in different tiers is one of those instances when this discourse becomes performative. If we refer to John Allen’s definition of topological policy spaces, we have here ideas which are not fully-fledged policies but which nonetheless have a reach that makes them effective in policymaking (Allen 2008).

³² The aim is for instance to reach 13 m² per capita of public space by 2030 (against 0.9 today in the city center). Interview with Dao Ngoc Nghiem, Director 1988-2005 of the Hanoi Authority for Urban Planning and Architecture. August 26, 2011.

³³ Interview with Le Hong Kei, Director of the Centre for Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development (CEPSD), December 5, 2011.

³⁴ Interview with Nguyen Thi Hanh, Deputy Director, Urban Development Agency, Ministry of Construction, August 25, 2011.

³⁵ Ibid. The course was organized in Hawaii between 2004 and 2007 and now takes place every year in Hanoi.

Public space policies can be developed at governmental level by laws and decrees, such as the one recently issued by the Ministry of Construction. Even more important for a change to happen in this domain is a cultural shift both within professional circles and in the general public.³⁶ Inter-referencing is an important tool of cultural change as it acts, as Ong points out, at the level of imagination (Ong 2011): referring one city to another makes us imagine our city as it could be or become.

Inter-referencing

In 2007, when people in Hanoi reacted against the project of a sort of Disneyland within Unification Park, the Canadian NGO HealthBridge initiated a campaign to save the park by creating a platform to counter the plan. Its action was oriented towards directly communicating with government bodies, working with professional associations and launching a public campaign involving traditional and electronic media. As Wells-Dang explains 'In early August, a Canadian NGO, Healthbridge, joined with the Vietnam Urban Planning and Development Association (VUDPA), a quasi-independent GONGO, to organize a workshop on the "System of Green Public Spaces" [...] The academics and architects who gathered at the conference issued a call to "save green space in Hanoi" (Wells-Dang 2011, 196). The conference received a great deal of media attention, and to support further discussion a forum was opened on the Internet. The impact of this campaign on public opinion, as well as the credibility attached to the sponsoring organization's international standing, played an important role in the decision of public authorities to stop the plan (Ibid.).

Since then Healthbridge has continued to work on urban planning issues, notably by promoting knowledge about urban policies in other countries or cities. Their *modus operandi* is, in other words, to promote translocal learning processes (McFarlane 2011), organizing workshops and publishing reports on different aspects of public space policy such as pedestrianization, fresh markets or parks. Their reports use before-and-after images to show in particular how other cities have found successful solutions to questions of public space (figure 5).

During the second controversy in 2009 over Unification Park (this time involving the construction of a luxury hotel) and then in 2010 and 2011, the NGO organized three further workshops on public space in Hanoi.³⁷ Each workshop brought experts and examples from abroad and discussed possibilities for how Hanoi could learn from this exposure. For example, '3D planning & design', as implemented notably in Toronto, was presented in the 2010 workshop, and arguments developed during the workshop were then used by the Committee on Social Affairs of the National Assembly to comment on the 2008 Hanoi master plan³⁸.

³⁶ Public space policy in many countries is the result of such cultural change rather than top down principles trickling down from central government.

³⁷ In 2009 HealthBridge co-organised a workshop entitled 'Hanoi, A livable city for all' with the Global Research Center of Hawaii University and the Association of Vietnamese planners, in 2010 a workshop entitled 'International experience on organising walking spaces in big cities' and, in 2011, a workshop entitled 'Creating great public space in Vietnamese cities' both co-organised with the Urban Development Agency.

³⁸ The arguments of the National Assembly on the Master plan were then published in the media.

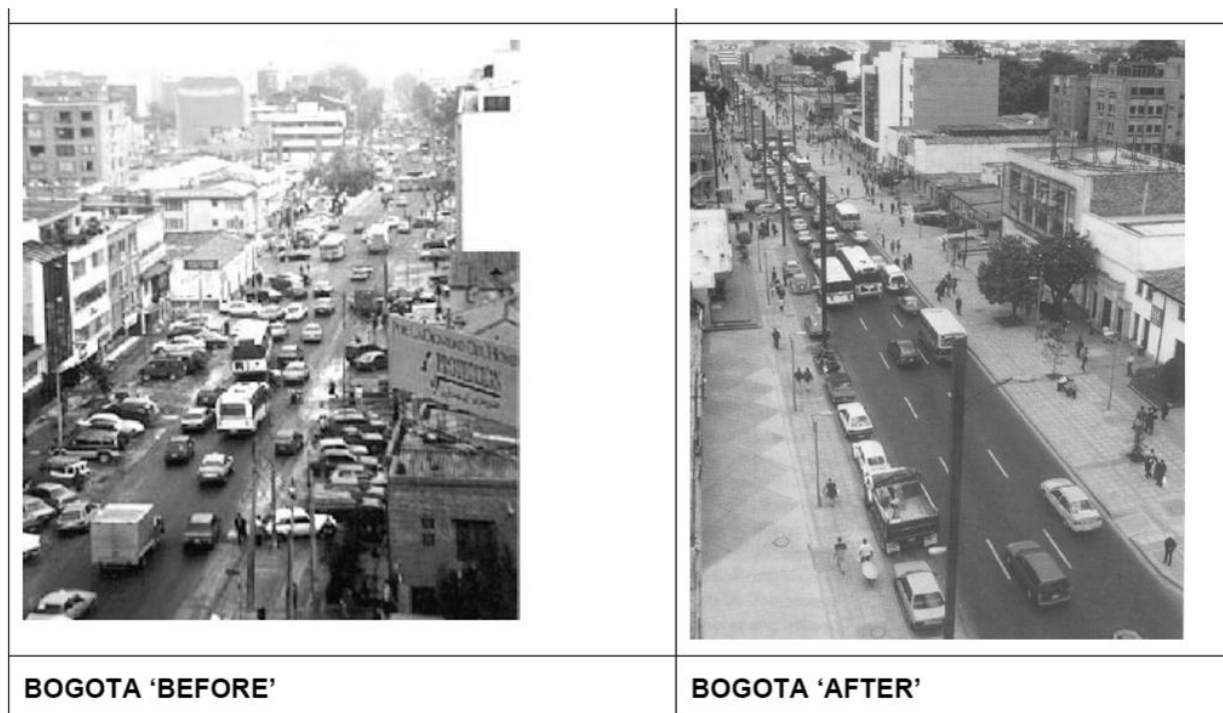


Figure 5: Comparing Bogotá Before and After (Source: Geertman 2010)

Finally, HealthBridge also played a strategic role in introducing Hanoi to the work of Danish architect Jan Gehl, the pioneer of public space design. Though he has been called as a consultant in many cities throughout the world, Gehl is still strongly associated with the pedestrianization of the city of Copenhagen, where he was involved at an early stage in the 1960s (Gehl 2010). In 2008, Gehl made his first visit to Hanoi to lecture at the Hanoi Architectural University. HealthBridge then decided to translate his book *Life Between Buildings*, initially published in 1971, into Vietnamese. Gehl returned to Hanoi for the launch of the Vietnamese version of the book in 2009, when he also gave his views on the master plan to the public authorities. In this book, Gehl promotes a new perspective on urban design which starts from the 'void' of public space rather than from the buildings, as is usually the case. His take on public space is therefore one that focuses on material forms and the process of their design. In Hanoi the book was diffused mainly through networks of professionals and its impact has mainly been within academic milieus.³⁹

In the wake of examples brought by the Canadian NGO, Hanoi professionals and city officials have been comparing their city with others and imagining it, or parts of it, morphing into Berlin, Bogotá, Toronto or Copenhagen. These examples indicate different pathways for the future of Hanoi's public spaces, and support the imaginative projections of Vietnamese professionals, government officials and through the media, of larger sectors of the population.

Through these different forms of connection to elsewhere - mobile policies, topological relations and inter-referencing - Hanoi has in recent years been informed by different perspectives on what public space is and could be at different scales of intervention, from the large metropolitan one to that of the space between buildings. In our conclusion, we will reflect on what exactly circulates in these translocal exchanges and on the politics of this circulation.

³⁹ Interview with Nguyen Quoc Thong who supervised the translation and publication of the book, in Hanoi, August 24.

CONCLUSION: THE POLITICS OF POLICY CIRCULATION

The structural conditions for the development of public space in Hanoi are clearly unfavorable. The city's population density is very high, the private sector puts great pressure on scarce available land for construction, and the State is reluctant to create spaces that could potentially foster political contestation. Nonetheless, some form of public space policy in Hanoi is today in the making, especially under the influence of non-state actors.⁴⁰ The contours of such a policy are, however, still very uncertain. To put it in the terms of the sociology of social problems, we are in the phase of a construction of a new public problem (Gusfield 1984).⁴¹

In this situation of uncertainty, what is today 'on the table' is a series of different ideas, references, policies and negotiations with different actors.⁴² The question now is what will be made of these different virtual policies. In what follows, we will sort out different forms or 'substances' of public space and address the question of the regulation of public space use.

Various ontologies of public space. Inescapably, with a polysemic term such as public space, ways of understanding the question are bound to be very diverse. In the master plan conceived by the US-Korean consortium PPJ, the substance of public space is the green corridor. In the understanding of planners and city officials influenced by the courses and writings of Michael Douglass, it is the spaces and places of civic life, where political matters can be discussed and opposed.⁴³ Gehl's public space is quite clearly material (though his interest lies in the vivid public life it may foster) and is approached as a matter of architectural and urban design (Gehl 2010)⁴⁴. Finally in a more diffuse way, and for instance in Healthbridge's approach to public space, it is also conceived as the spaces and places of social interaction.

This ontological plurality on issues of public space is present everywhere, not only in Hanoi. In a place where policy is in the making, it will be interesting to follow the 'career' of this problem: how will the sorting between these different understandings be effectuated? How will the voices of official discourse and the practices of regulation weight the balance between them? Will the present conception of public space as rates of green space per capita be simply maintained and reinforced as it fits traditional forms of urban planning in Hanoi? The latter is likely. It is less likely that freely accessible public/civic spaces will be developed, as this alternative may be incompatible with an authoritarian and neoliberalizing city such as contemporary Hanoi.

⁴⁰ Apart from those already mentioned in the paper, the Catholic Church has also recently been playing an important role. Residents have challenged the government's attempts to use Church land for development, eventually leading to the conversion of some of these areas into public parks (Wells-Dang 2010, page 100).

⁴¹ This appeared clearly in the previously mentioned 2011 Hanoi workshop. Vietnamese participants were uneasy with a concept of public space they felt was too vague and too broad. Governmental officials asked speakers on their side to restrict their interventions to parks and plazas.

⁴² For the sake of the analysis, we have insisted on their translocal character. In all the processes described, Vietnamese actors are of course very present and active as well. The large majority of Healthbridge's employees are Vietnamese for instance, as well of course as the civil servants in the Ministry of Construction.

⁴³ Douglass is careful distinguishing between the civic space he is interested in from the larger categories of public space and sphere (Douglass 2008).

⁴⁴ It is interesting to see in this recent paper by Gehl the influence of his travels to Vietnam (he mentions the virtue of traditional shophouses) and how they feed his reflection on public space.

Regulating public space. Public space use in Hanoi is primarily regulated by informal norms. A great deal of activity which would be prohibited in most countries of the North is allowed in Hanoi, and when conflicts arise between users, they are generally settled by discussion and compromise. Informal regulation is a central condition for the multifunctional and event-rich public life still found in Hanoi's traditional neighborhoods. It is also related to the activity of shop-owners, sidewalk eateries, and street vendors. Such activities create public space which is both lively and chaotic, forcing pedestrians to navigate the encumbered sidewalk.

In the best-practice cities put forward by foreign or local experts in Hanoi, public space is primarily promoted as pedestrian and non-commercial. Their conception and planning usually supposes a tight control of commercial and other sorts of private activities in public space. Applying such regulation to Vietnamese public spaces is very likely to destroy precisely what makes them vibrant and interesting.

The development of norms regarding public space use should therefore carefully 'indigenize' foreign references. In particular, the implementation of rigid norms regarding commercial activities would be especially problematic. Currently, encroachments on public space include those of small-scale commercial activities (like barbers) that many specialists would like to see maintained, and by large shops (like electronic dealers) that are generally considered more problematic. Strict regulations of the 'benign privatization' performed by homeowners would also reduce public life in the streets of Hanoi. For the time being, the regulation of public space favors its gentrification, as street vendors are considered by the authorities as unwelcome because they convey the image of a backward and underdeveloped country. How and for whom Hanoi's public space will be regulated is therefore crucial for its future development.

Rather than focusing on market-oriented policies and considering different approaches to urban policy circulation as mutually exclusive, in this paper we have investigated the different types of connections involved in the making of a potentially social-oriented urban policy. What our study shows is that when observing a phase of urban planning when policy is not yet stabilized and 'blackboxed' we are in a position to identify a series of 'loose threads': virtual policies suggested by a set of different connections to different elsewhere. This form of analysis opens a space for critique as it shows the existence of, or potential for different routes in the ongoing assemblage of an urban policy (McFarlane 2011, page 167). More generally, our study shows how contemporary urban policymaking is often engaged with many different locales at once. In contrast with studies of more stabilized policies, we do not simply see one policy model travelling between two points, but a plurality of connections between different places. These travels can also follow quirky routes, as exemplified by how the British green belt policy arrived in Hanoi after being filtered through the Seoul green belt experience. Methodologically, there is a large repertoire of ways to apprehend different types of circulation, and all these ways should be employed to understand the full range of relations at play. What we see emerging from our analysis, then, is a quite complex geography of urban policymaking.

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