

Afterimage: Seeing Ho Chi Minh City, Looking to Houston

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Modernization and economic development have specific spatial consequences on the built environment. The mass consumption of space, residue of use, and planning as a real estate tool are conditions of the contemporary city as a function of global capital. Large physical or formal analyses of urban contexts lack the capacity to capture the intangible forces by which urban centers develop. An examination of the effects of capital on the city provides a deeper understanding from which to operate as designers in urban contexts.

Ho Chi Minh City is on the cusp of development, in contrast to cities in China where plans and economic progress have long been underway. The extremely rapid urbanization, similar in character to cities in China and India but over a shorter time-frame, provides an important lesson for architects and planners everywhere.

Ho Chi Minh City shares a few physical attributes with the Gulf Coast and Houston, which allows an initial accessible reading of the two cities in tandem. Weather is remarkably similar six months of the year and the cities share the same topography. This may partly explain why Houston holds one of the largest Vietnamese populations in the US, but it does not explain the structural similarities between Ho Chi Minh City and Houston which will be described later in this paper. A review of historical and economic frameworks for understanding rapid urban growth helps an observer of Ho Chi Minh City to apprehend patterns and systems in the unplanned and ill-formed contemporary city. An understanding of the movement of goods and capital is needed in order to make sense of the world built

by those who consume them. In the intense physical space of Ho Chi Minh City, one can see the conditions of economic growth described by historians. The exercise of mapping the flow and expression of capital in an extreme Southeast Asian city enlightens a similar study of subtler American urbanism: Ho Chi Minh City and Houston become increasingly connected. First, useful frameworks for the local space of global capital from a historian, and economist, and a social critic provide structure for looking at the city.



MODERNIZATION

In [Modernization](#), Richard Brown discusses the subtle uneven effects of modernization of on American life.¹ Modernity here is the process by which an earlier problem of tradition is overcome by technology. Improving production is the most important tenet for modernizing local life. Technological advances in transportation and production converged in the

United States in the 1820's, leading to unprecedented progress with respect to the rest of the developing world. Most of these advances directly affected rural life, but their affect was to consolidate agricultural practices enabling a larger and specialized urban population. As an example, the steam engine, Erie Canal, and the cotton gin radically altered the way of manufacturing as well as the way of moving from the point of manufacture to the consumer. Streamlining the manufacturing process allows for the mass production of goods, but it also splits the labor force. Now specialized, an individual is only responsible for part of the assembly process. Rural communities disappear as other urban centers grow to accommodate the infrastructure for moving goods along a line. Tension grows wherever the modernization process meets resistance from a local tradition. For Brown, The American Civil War was a direct effect of the unevenness of modernization, highlighting the extremity of uneven development occurring over the course of 200 years.

TIME AND SCALE

Modernization and economic growth take time to evolve in any given culture. Rostow, writing in *The Stages of Economic Development*, lists separate, linear stages of growth, lasting 40-60 years each—tradition, preconditions for take-off, take off, drive to maturity, and high mass-consumption.² Although the work was meant to describe the new American economy, a reading of the specific stages provides another way of understanding the recent and rapid urban growth underway in Southeast Asia. The stages, although presented in linear fashion, present an uneven landscape ripe for accelerating consumption of space and capital.



Classic economic development takes place over the course of separate phases lasting 30 to 60 years in a somewhat linear, although uneven, fashion after the industrial revolution. The contemporary city today, however, is a conglomeration of Rostow's phases, either existing simultaneously, or skipped altogether. While "tradition" may have been jettisoned and Ho Chi Minh City may be in the classic "take off" phase, the economy is already in a state of high mass consumption. The drive to maturity only exists as an instant desire. Preconditions in the city include a large population under 30 years of age, new urban infrastructure for water and electrical use, and a flat landscape. The "take off" condition is the moment the city overcomes the single issue keeping the city in place along the delta throughout its history— the geography and weather of the Mekong Delta. Modernization provides the ability to surpass this important impediment to growth.

CAPITAL

Development and flow of capital depends on several critical conditions outlined by David Harvey in *The Space of Global Capitalism*: infrastructure for production and consumption, coercive laws of spatial competition, production of scale, and geographical division of labor.³ These conditions are universal and are seen in any country seeking trade. The difference today is the absolute dependence



on the structure of the city on these functions at the expense of the livable sustainable city. David Harvey's text provides a link between the study of capital and a study of an urban context.

HCMC

A city of extreme unplanned expansion and geographical flatness, Ho Chi Minh City is by no means a model for urban development. Capital and finance provide a common point of departure while conditions specific to the city shape the physical form of the residue visible to those who live and work in the city.

Ho Chi Minh City development is in a state of visible flux, and as such provides an important view of the rapidly changing urban environment. The local built effects on display may mirror those developing in new urban centers in China, but the speed of change and singularity of HCMC with respect to the rest of Vietnam make it even more important to study. While the urban transformation of parts of China is almost complete, the transformation is in full display in the business center of Vietnam. The Mekong delta provides a backdrop for the transformation from an agricultural economy to one based on finance and manufacturing. The original relationship of city to water is simply a mathematical impediment to physical and capital growth. Once overcome, planning, as a financial instrument, leaves large spaces of waste. The waste comes in the form of actual space of the city as well as an accepted attitude of the city as unplanned or seen as outside the realm of control. The detritus is unimportant while groups benefit from an expanding economy. As economies slow, the waste comes up front for all to see and inhabit, no longer connected with the years of benevolent growth and exacerbated by a newfound loss of control of the urban context.

Until the 1980's, the space and size of the city has been kept in check by conflict and geography. Between 1700 and 1975 the population rose from .5 to 2 million inhabitants. As a traditional colonial city, the European urban structure is laid over an urban center reliant on the Saigon River and canals surrounding the city. Colonial planning provided the preconditions for development while the river and climate provided the biases and boundaries for growth. These structures have existed simultaneously for 200 years, both serve as traditions to be broken for the global city.

Today the Saigon River winds back and forth next to and through the middle of the city, its extreme oxbows providing a semblance of a natural edge for development. The river and its canals are HCMC's infrastructure. An accelerating population growth now approaching eight million, the city's population, after centuries of stability, has risen 400% in 30 years. New building technology and infrastructure provide the conditions necessary for "take off", or, greater uneven urban development given the incredible population growth. These new developments, largely large scale infrastructure, give the city its components for a classic uneven geography although its physical landscape is altogether even.

A new highway system replaces a water based infrastructure. The city is in the process of burying or filling the network of canals, which in the past served as a necessary transport and drainage system. The new construction is also displacing lower income families who have lived along the water edge. The port, once embedded in the fabric of the local culture, is being consolidated to an area 50 miles south of the city. Previously uninhabited space along the Saigon River is being developed in large single plans. Thu Thiem is one example of a new CBD planned along the river in a space that is now only agricultural. Soon to be filled with 10-40 story buildings, this extremely low lying, flood prone area will be connected to the traditional city center by a series of 6 bridges and an underground tunnel, where only one bridge currently exists. These projects point to a city unencumbered by its natural setting. Modern technology solves the problem inherent in its formation along the river.



HOUSTON- Business, Energy, Health

Conditions of global capital and uneven geography make their way into the American Landscape as well as rapidly developing world economies and spaces. Although the conditions of development were modeled after a younger and slower capitalist economy and later transposed to other global cities where the unevenness of development is exaggerated, stages of development are jumbled, many local (Houston as an example) economies and cities also show a creeping accepted uneven sensibility.

The local effects of a global economy on rapidly developing cities, drawing relationships between the flow of capital and its aversion but reliance on informal density, newness, and consumption of space, exist in Houston as much as any other city.

Preconditions for rapid development of Houston in the 1950's are similar to the background for Ho Chi Minh City's development today. New technology overcomes the local environment- air conditioning for Houston, its mass consumption today in Ho Chi Minh City. A growing, young, post-war population, then (Houston) and now (Ho Chi Minh City) applies pressure for growth.

The city has the ability to absorb other cities obstructing smooth growth, a classic function of uneven development. Kingwood Texas is the latest example of a previously existing community with its own infrastructure consumed by the City of Houston. Once natural physical impediments to growth are overcome, the city has no boundaries.

Given the ability to expand at will, the density of the flat city spikes up and down 30 miles away from the Central Business District. While the city becomes more diverse culturally and economically, business still centers on the energy sector, despite the fact that the production of energy has long left Houston. Centers for business and the energy sector spring up 20 miles away from the city center avoiding complex sites and expensive real estate. Addicks, Park 10 business parks along I-10 and the Westchase District are two examples of a large scale urban business development 20 or more miles away from the center of the city.

Healthcare is also specialized and consolidated in the space of the city. Seeking space and competition,

hospitals grow next to each other to create the largest healthcare center in the country. A visitor walking through the Medical Center could easily mistake this area of town for a traditional downtown, although the only functions here are hospitals.

The city defends a laissez faire attitude toward development- no rules, only market forces affect where people live and work. Surprisingly, similar functions of the city aggregate to form specialized zones- business, energy, shopping. Even museums in Houston have their own district.

RESISTANCE

A return to, or insertion of, local conditions, ecology and environment affecting contemporary life offer a method of working with the global city and its uneven geography. Huyssen points to an emerging resistance to modernity in thought, culture and political science.⁴ One can imagine the Saigon River and the entire Mekong Delta as providing a resistance and return of the local.

in Houston the pressures of immigration and diversity force a resistance of the city of capital. Corridors along Bellaire, Gulfton, and Hillcroft provide for initial images reinforcing the established uneven development, until one recognizes this unevenness inhabits a flat spot in the urban sprawl (not density). The bayou system is another network, long engineered over and forgotten, that can provide local conditions of resistance.

In the struggle for modernization and development, the case for the city as an accumulation of loosely joined spaces of uneven geography is a dominant



structure of the city. Given this newer order, largely unseen, accelerating in size and scope, one must find ways of inhabiting the communities directly affected by global capital. An introduction of newer and traditional ecologies and the everyday structure of life is one way of working within the system to affect change.

ENDNOTES

1 Brown, Richard, *Modernization: The Transformation of American Life 1600-1865*, 1976, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 66-70.

2 Rostow, W.W., *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 78-95.

3 Harvey, David, *Spaces of Global Capitalism: A Theory of Uneven Geographical Development*, (London: Verso, 2006), 94-105.

4 Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1986), 172-176.