The production of pluralistic spatialities:
The persistence of counter-space territories in the streets of Hanoi - Vietnam

Manfredo Manfredini*, Anh-Dung Ta**

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1. Introduction

Hanoi is a heritage city currently under a profound social, economic and cultural transition. It is the second most populous city in Vietnam with more than 7.5 million in 2015 (dbndhanoi, 2016). Living conditions are particularly problematic due to the high population density (up to 404 persons/ha) and a scarce public-space availability (Boudreau et al., 2015). Hanoi's heritage reflects an important history. The city, chosen as the capital by King Ly Thai To in 1010, during the feudal period (1010-1873) developed dual forms: the Royal City – the political core of the reign, and the Commoner's City - the prime social and economic centre of the country (Phe & Nishimura, 1990; Turner, 2009). The latter, later known as the Ancient Quarter (AQ) - the kernel of the modern city, is situated on the Red River – the main stream of the Gulf of Tonkin. Due to its strategic location, between the river and the Royal City, it became a prime trading place, conferring Hanoi its old toponymical identification: Ke Cho (marketplace). The functional organisation of the AQ was articulated in clusters. These related to the guilds that gave name to the streets, as reported since the first comprehensive description made under the Le dynasty in 1464 (Phe & Nishimura, 1990). The national relevance of the AQ as a market place still remained after the relocation of the capital, in 1802, when new traders arrived in the Commoner's City (MoC, 1999; Phe & Nishimura, 1990; Turner, 2009). An important transformation of the city occurred during the French domination (1883-1945). With the aim of transforming Hanoi into a «first class city» (Turner, 2009, p. 1209), the whole city was reconfigured and expanded with a major addition to the south. In the AQ, many buildings were demolished to improve the urban image and favour the development of the new economic model (MoC, 1999). A general improvement of infrastructures included the provision of streets with sidewalks, lighting and drainage (Turner, 2009). When the war against the French temporarily ended in 1947, a sudden abandonment of buildings was followed by re-occupancy by returning Vietnamese soldiers' families whose houses had been bombed and demolished. The socialist era, which started in 1958 (Turner, 2009), transformed the AQ into a prevailing residential district, merging the local productive activities into cooperatives (Chi, Nga, & Anh, 2011; JICA, 2007; Turner, 2009). Only with the *Doi moi* (renovation) started in 1986, could the state introduce economic reforms that open the country to the market economy, legally recognising private entrepreneurship (JICA, 2007; Turner, 2009). As a consequence, there was a boom of business practices in the AQ that in few years included 5000 business households (Chi et al., 2011).

To date, residential overcrowding in the AQ is extreme, with an estimated per capita living area ranging from 0.5 to 1.8 m2 (Loan, 2004). The population density reached 823 people per hectare in 2010, and the government has proposed a plan to reduce the number to 500/ha by 2020 (Tu, 2015). Due to the lack of residential space, many houses that were formerly occupied by one family have been split and become shared residential clusters for three or four different households (Loan, 2004). This originated from several immigration flows directed by the state. This policy could be seen as, on one hand, a kind of reward for the war efforts allowing people from the countryside to head to the city, and on the other hand, a solution to the gap in labour division in the AQ (Turner, 2009).

2. Sidewalks and the conceived public space in contemporary Hanoi

Encroaching street space in Vietnam cities is commonplace. The *messy* and *disordered* condition of streets reflects a complex set of consolidated unwritten rules, often preserving common rather than individual rights, promoting mutualism over privatisation. These territorial occupations and associations support a complex embedded lifestyle with a long civic tradition. Their origins have been found in rural settlements, where peasants consider the space facing the street as extension of the house, regardless of its legal status (Cerise & Maximy, 2010). In the AQ, local people and grassroots organisations tactically occupy large part of the sidewalks to perform diverse activities according to their needs and desires. These practices range from basic domestic doings such as eating and cooking, to complex social and commercial activities. In preparation for the 1000-year Hanoi anniversary, at the end of the first decade of the new century, the Vietnamese government adopted a strategy – termed *Hanoi-civilised city* – to improve the appearance and organisation of the city (Coe, 2015). This strategy is articulated in three areas: (1) Collectivism, emphasising collective over private goods; (2) Modernity, aimed at enhancing standards of living; and (3) Nationalism, directed at strengthening endogenous culture identity (Coe, 2015). The strategy, also considering health and transport issues, did not include precise legislative instruments but guided a series of initiatives that had a major impact on the AQ (Coe, 2015). Streets are of utmost importance in this campaign. In particular, it includes policies to eradicate the pervasive practices of informal occupation (Kim, 2015). These practices, from the state's perspective, are considered hindrances to both economic and cultural development (Coe, 2015). They counter the concept of *civilisation*, disrespecting rights of use of public space and threatening the boundary between the public and the private (Harms, 2009). A policy enacted in 2008 declared street vending as an obsolete activity and banned it from the central district. In addition, at the beginning of 2016, the state carried out an experiment to homogenise advertising boards on an important street in Hanoi. This experiment was a test of a coordinated urban image scheme for the entire city, aimed to limit the diverse and chaotic appearance of street frontages. In the first quarter of 2017, new actions to implement the sidewalk clearance policy were taken to sweep away the messy, dirty and unorganised character, and reduce traffic congestion and accidents (Long, 2017). The material clearance of many streets has been effectively accomplished in April, but their reoccupation immediately restarts.

The following part of this paper discusses the theoretical and methodological frameworks

and the analysis of a research aimed to decipher the complex integration of socio-spatial and cultural aspects that support the formation of such informal spatial production. It considers the streets of the AQ as representative of unique Vietnamese urban resiliency, where distinctive informal processes of territorialisation have developed spaces of resistance to inappropriate transformations.

3. Network and fluid space: Space and time dynamism of relational chains

Actor-network theory (ANT) provides a theoretical approach to decipher the ongoing process of permanent reterritorialisation happening on the sidewalks. As posed by Latour (2005), ANT is an approach that is able to address systems in a permanent state of becoming. It is concerned with the establishment of links in socio-spatial networks, investigating the stabilisation/destabilisation of social phenomena. Such networks are constituted by patterns of heterogeneous materials, where all distinctions between social and material entities – i.e., human and non-human – are flattened (Law, 1992; Murdoch, 1998; Sayes, 2014). Social phenomena are not limited to a single type of spatiality, rather they could be reflected through various kinds (Law, 2002; Law & Singleton, 2005; Mol & Law, 1994). The first one is region space implying that social activities might be physically bounded (Mol & Law, 1994). Since social networks are not always confined by spatial configuration, a second type of space is identified: the network space. The space of a network is both Euclidean and non-Euclidean to host the stable structure of a web of heterogeneous relations (Law, 2002; Law & Singleton, 2005). To capture social phenomena that happen, while the social network hidden behind them is variant, a type of social space is proposed: the fluid space (Law, 2002). The notion of network and fluid space accords with Murdoch's (1998) idea about spaces of prescription and negotiation. Spaces of prescription are the spaces of routinary sets of heterogeneous relations. Star (1991) provides an example of a McDonald's characterised by its standard chain of functions to illustrate these spaces. However, as Star argues, spaces of standardised networks are always challenged; for instance, in the case of a McDonald's, there might appear a customer who is allergic to onions, totally distorting the current stable networks. This causes the McDonald's to negotiate and become space of negotiation. The ideas of network/prescription and fluid/negotiation space are important in this research. Particularly, the former refers to routinary territories. The latter, on the other hand, pertains to temporal territories - territories of lived experience related to specific events that are eventual, unpredictable and surprising.

4. Defining the framework

Based on a preliminary fieldwork (Manfredini & Ta, 2016) this research adapts Kärrholm's (2016) methodology for the empirical investigation, taking social relations, spatial aspects and cultural impacts - crucial factors of a heritage city like Hanoi - into consideration.

Social relations: the analysis of the AQ sidewalks is articulated in four processes of territorialisation: *strategies*, *tactics*, *appropriation* and *association*. Territorial strategies are plans and intentions of the opposing actors that control accessibility and uses of a territory. The government vision is to remove the aforementioned *improper* activities off the sidewalk, promoting a clean and well-organised space for pedestrian flows, while local habitants frequently occupy the sidewalk to operate their doings with impermanent and dynamic territorialisation that resist the

inadequate governance. Territorial tactics are practical ideas that actors use to implement their strategies. Also, here, actors have opposing approaches: on the one hand, public officers act to implement the state's strategies, on the other hand, residents and store owners arrange their stuff in front of their private spaces. Territorial appropriations concern people's practical methods and activities to occupy and control their territories in relation to their strategies and tactics. Territorial association covers social alliances, disputes and negotiations as to perceptions on particular places pertaining to specific functions and conventions that influence territorial claims.

Cultural aspects comprise two levels: (1) the broad scale (institutional level), where the collective meanings are considered in terms of local history, culture and tradition; (2) the individual level, that refers to perception, elaboration and attribution of meanings by single local inhabitants.

Physicality of produced territories: the analysis of the physicality is articulated on two levels of territorial stabilisation: *Network* and *Fluid*. Network stabilisation refers to the conformation process of permanent association of physical objects that sustains a repetitive territory. As Kärrholm (2008) argues, as more and more objects have been added, supporting the same story, the network space becomes stronger. Fluid stabilisation refers to physical attributes that contribute to temporary territories or fluid spaces. The material attributes comprise both the sidewalk's physicality (such as a hook, a tree, a doorstep, a wall) and physical tools used by local inhabitants (like stools, boxes, hooks, motorbikes). If we look at the journey of a street vendor, we will notice that he/she might occupy different spots on the sidewalks. Although human and non-human objects related to these various places are not the same, the street vendor still succeeds in generating his/her territorial effect. The reason is that although places are variant, their physical settings are from the same *family* or the same *sort*. *Territorial sorts* cover this aspect, addressing how different sidewalks' physical settings of diverse places (where the street vendor occupies) might share «a family resemblance» (Kärrholm, 2008, p. 1917) and lead to the vendor's successful occupancy. On the other hand, *territorial bodies* address how the same physical tools utilised by a street vendor might play similar or different roles in distinct territories stabilising a territorial effect.

5. Empirical findings

The research approach was set up in a way that theoretical and empirical components would not be separated but rather interrelated, since each could develop and illuminate the other. The researcher entered the setting with the model proposed by Kärrholm in mind, however the researcher let the goings-on of the fieldwork determine the data rather than them being solely based on Kärrholm's scheme. The proposed framework was gradually clarified, going along with empirical findings that attempted to decode three interrelated dimensions of the AQ territories: the social relations, cultural factors and the physicality behind the formation of sidewalk territories.

5.1 Social relations & Cultural aspects

The researcher categorised four groups of actors to decipher the social negotiations and cultural impacts that lead to sidewalk occupancy: (1) unofficial businesses of stationary and itinerant traders; (2) traditional craft and new businesses; (3) local residents; and (4) wholesale market units.

5.1.1 Stationary and itinerant informal businesses

Figure 1. Itinerant barber service on Hang Cot Street (left). Stationary tea stand situated in front of a modern shop (right), © Dat Nguyen

Informal businesses refer to unofficial business activities operated without a valid license. They include both itinerant and stationary street traders, covering a wide spectrum of activities for the provision of goods, such as fruits and newspapers, and services, like food, tea and vehicle reparation. These are mainly micro-businesses that provide vital sources to low-income and unemployed people. Most of these informal businesses are synchronised with bodily rhythms of both residents and visitors. They satisfy a wide range of needs within a close distance, often delivering their goods and services to other businesses or customers in their vicinity. It is common that a resident having a cup of tea and playing chess at a tea stand, orders a fried chicken from the next food stall, vegetables and fruits from traders passing by, and at the same time, asks a shoe shiner to polish his footwear.

Most fixed traders are usually Hanoian residents (Turner & Schoenberger, 2012). With more than 30% of the AQ's residents having no permanent job, these activities are often what their lives are based on, especially the retired (JICA, 2007). They normally have a kind of relation with ward officials (either by paying kickbacks or having a close relationship) to assert their claims on the sidewalks. In an informal conversation, a stationary tea stand owner declared that to have the right to use this space it is essential to be in good relation to the *right person*, who in most cases is a senior ward official. He maintained that, since different ward official teams have assigned patrol schedules for the same sidewalk set, it is not possible to *take care of* all those team members to ensure that business activities run smoothly. Tea stands are the most popular informal business with about 5 to 15 tea-selling outlets per street (JICA, 2007). Their social role is borrowed from traditional life in rural villages. There, they are prime spatial references situated right at the village gates, where peasants gather daily to have a break after farm work. In Hanoi, tea stands are located at key movement nodes, where local residents can sit together to play chess, chit-chat or smoke rustic water pipes.

Itinerant street vendors are usually residents of rural areas (Jensen & Peppard, 2003). They have peculiar tactics to occupy the sidewalk, since most of them cannot afford ward officials' *demands* (their daily income is just around 1.2 or 1.3 USD; Jensen & Peppard, 2003). These actors seek sympathy from surrounding people and residual space vacancies to occupy. As a fruit seller at Luong Ngoc Quyen Street shared with us, he often asks «house owners for help, allowing me to

stand here in early morning when the shop is still closed, and sometimes I give the shop my fresh farming products to show my gratitude.» The roving vendor is often located along the borders of administrative wards, where it is easier to avoid sanctions, since ward police do not have the right to intervene outside their territory. Due to their mobility and relationships, the impermanent vendors are key in informing other vendors about official patrol routines.

5.1.2 Traditional integrated activities and emergent businesses

Traditional craft industry plays a specific role in the AQ, and it remains the symbol of the relationship between local residents and their craft villages in rural areas. During the past, residents from the same villages gathered in the same street, producing and selling the same products (JICA, 2007). People working in the same trade sector joined in the same guild, each of which had different regulations to protect the interests of the community and its members (JICA, 2007). Typical traditional craft products were embroidered cloths, carved artefacts, jewels, etc. The habit of incorporating the front sidewalk space originated to expand exposure. In the past, local households not only sold, but also produced and manufactured, their products. Since the width and height of civil houses was restricted (due to the feudal regulations), houses were forced to develop in length to satisfy both residential and commercial demands, forming the so-called *tube house*. Sidewalk retail saves inner spaces used for complementary uses, typically storage and manufacture, and is common also for new businesses that have replaced the integrated production and retail model with a mono-functional one.

5.1.3 Compensatory territories of local residents

Residential overcrowding is another cause of the irregular use of sidewalks. The very limited domestic space led to a phenomenon of partial inversion of private and public spaces (Manfredini & Ta, 2016). While the private space is transformed into a quasi-public realm, hosting some productive and relational activities, the public (i.e., the sidewalk) is quasi-privatised by the migration of homely activities: preparing and consuming food, hand-laundering and educating children. These activities are impermanent, but hold fixed places. Their locations tend to be close to the embedded traders' territories as they normally have neighbouring relationships. They often promote intergenerational and inter-household relations, favouring mutual exchanges and support.

5.1.4 Distributed wholesale market units

Figure 2. Fresh produce street vendors outside a wholesale market (left), bamboo pole store on Hang Ma Street (right).
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The recent transformation of the traditional market model has also contributed to the informal territorial appropriation of sidewalks. Hang Da market, a large market located in HAQ, was redeveloped in 2009 with the creation of a modern *French Style* shopping centre. The new structure, although providing space for the former fresh market, has excluded the former traders and their customers (Geertman, 2010) and does not allow the usual access, with bicycles and scooters, to the food market, which is located on the basement or semi-basement levels. As a result, beside failing to attract the intended traders and consumers (Duc, 2014; Geertman, 2010; Long, 2014), this redevelopment has triggered a dispersion of fresh produce businesses that have relocated in various places on the streets of the district, where it is convenient for customers to shop.

5.2 Sidewalks' physical settings and vendors' tools

In terms of territorial physicality, the research investigated the impacts of both the sidewalks' spatial settings and the material tools exploited by people on territorial stabilisation. Two kinds of territories have appeared on the sidewalk: the routinary and temporary.

Network stabilisation of routinary territories: shop owners and stationary traders regularly operate their activities on the sidewalk, forming dynamic network spatialities. These actors utilise both movable and fixed material objects. Movable items are mainly made of light materials, which are easily and quickly spilled out and tucked away. Out on the pavements, tables and benches are often made with plastic bottle crates and cartons, and canopies with canvas and bamboo structure. Also, clusters of basic colourful plastic stools and umbrellas are scattered near pop-up cafés and tea stands. The construction of these impermanent settings uses often fixed elements, such as electric poles – used to stabilise canopies with ropes, or to hang tea cups and noodle bowls. Local residents even nail small tacks/pins or hooks on tree trunks standing on the pavement to hang light bulbs and spread tents when needed. Also, existing walls are used to support advertising posters or hang bits and pieces necessary to the business operations.

Sort and body stabilisation of temporary territories: observing the daily routine of an itinerant street vendor, we notice that his/her territory is in steady metamorphosis and transition. He/she occupies various sidewalk places, adopting spatial configurations that differ according to circumstantial or accidental conditions. Although human and non-human actants of each instance can be very different, the street vendor still succeeds in producing territorial associations and stabilisations that are relevant in the AQ context. This occurs because these configurations are from the same sort and have key similarities. For instance, stall locations have the same provision of shade and shelter from rain and heat. As stated by some itinerant vendors, they look for places where «mua khong den mat, nang khong den dau» (rain cannot touch your face; sun cannot touch your head). Front shop spaces with canopies and trees are ideal. Itinerant vendors carry things by pushcarts, yokes and baskets or use motorbikes and bicycles. From place to place, the use of these objects changes in accordance to each specific instance, redefining their role in the differentially repeated system of relations, materials, social and cognitive.

6. The Hanoian sidewalk ballet

In the AQ we found empirical evidence of a distinctive combination of mobile and continuous embedded reterritorialisation effects. These effects, whilst profoundly tightening socio-spatial relations, increase territorial production of networked topological geographies. They result from active forces of territorial recombination that cross the boundaries of the multiple apparatuses and scales of body, sidewalk, street, ward and city. The steady reconfiguration and instability of these hyper-rooted socio-spatial chains of associations and the scalar shifts of the emerging topological relations pose the sidewalk of these district as prime example of inclusionary agonistic and more-than-relational urban public space, where inhabitants have unrestricted right to participate in the production of their own territory in the city.

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* Manfredo Manfredini, Director, Senior Lecturer, School of Architecture and Planning, The University of Auckland, New Zealand.

** Anh-Dung Ta, Lecturer, Faculty of Architecture and Planning, Hanoi University of Civil Engineering, Vietnam.