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Large-Scale Urban Planning, Culture & Environment: A Case Study in Saigon South Urban Area

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Large-Scale Urban Planning, Culture & Environment:

A case study in Saigon South Urban Area

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Vietnam: Culture, Social Change and Development, SIT Study Abroad, Spring 2013
Abstract

The incredible urban growth of Ho Chi Minh City has prompted urban expansion into the newly developed District 7. The Phu My Hung urban area is an attempt to create a parallel city to Ho Chi Minh City along the guidelines of master plans submitted in 1993 by Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill; Kenzo Tange Associates; and Koetter Kim & Associates. The final master plan for the area incorporates elements of sustainable development, walkability, heightened connectivity, and connection with nature. Twenty years after the onset of the Phu My Hung urban area creation and, specifically, Saigon South conception, this paper is an attempt to examine the motivations and effects of urban and architectural design in the area. This paper studies the habits and customs formed by the residents of Saigon South as well as the environmental impact on the area. It attempts to examine these phenomena through the lens of how design choices attempt to shape themselves around culture and environment or to create a new culture and environment. Results from quantitative simple survey data, and informal, formal, and focus group interviews suggest that design choices that implement previous elements of culture and environment have been most successful in creating a new culture for the Saigon South area and have had a positive impact on resident’s perception of the environment.
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I must also express my deepest gratitude and appreciation for the help of Ms. Winnie Hsu, International Marketing Specialist at Phu My Hung Corporation. I owe even the initial concept for this project to her helpfulness. He has acted as an excellent liaison between Phu My Hung Corporation and myself and has provided a connection without which this project would have suffered dearly. Thank you also to Mr. Axel Korn, Director of Korn Architects. Mr. Korn helped walked me through the architectural design features and provided expert and candid testimony on the accomplishments and pitfalls of designing in Saigon South.

Thank you to Hoa Sen Director of International Relations Nguyen Luu Bao Doan for agreeing to be my Program Advisor, Connecticut College Professor of Economics Don Peppard for helping me design my survey, and Hamilton College Professor of Economics Christophe Georges and Hamilton College Professor of Art History Rand Carter for working through scholarly concepts on urbanism and urban planning with me.

Finally, to my parents: thank you for your support through all of my studies and curiosities, wherever they have taken me.
Introduction

**Vietnamese Urban Growth and Saigon South Urban Area**

Vietnam has seen an incredible period of urbanization since political reunification in 1975 and economic reform in 1986. This urban growth has resulted in large urban areas such as Ho Chi Minh City, where population grew from around two million in 1975 to in excess of 7 million by the 2009 census (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2010). One Washington diplomat suggested that Ho Chi Minh City and the surrounding area could see an incredible increase in population in the near future—perhaps to 20 million residents. The rapid growth of Ho Chi Minh City despite seventy percent of the Vietnamese population living in urban areas suggests that the urban area may be overwhelmed.

Understanding that Ho Chi Minh City needed to expand, the People’s Committee of Ho Chi Minh City awarded Phu My Hung Corporation a contract to develop the river basin area south of Ho Chi Minh City in 1993. This area, also known as Saigon South, was to be a “parallel city,” formed in close spatial relation to the existing urban area of Ho Chi Minh City. Drawing on support from the nearby Tan Thuan Export Processing Zone, Saigon South wanted to establish an internationally oriented residential and mixed-use area to provide additional living space for the quickly growing Vietnamese middle and upper classes (Vietnam Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, 2009). Phu My Hung Corporation organized an urban design competition for the Saigon South area. The elected plan from Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM)—one of the foremost leaders in urban design and planning—spawned 21 separate areas and a total of 2,600 hectares in District 7 of Ho Chi Minh City (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1995). Phu My Hung Corporation also incorporated elements of the Kenzo Tange Associates and Koetter Kim & Associates design plans and incorporated members of each of those teams. According to the combined plan, Phu My Hung sought to avoid urban sprawl, instead creating a compact and focused urban fabric within an environmental framework. Implicit in

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1 Phu My Hung is a joint venture company between Taiwanese corporation Central Trading & Development Group (CT&D from here on) with 70% capital contribution and the Vietnamese Tan Thuan Industrial Promotion Corporation (IPC) with 30% capital contribution. This contribution from IPC—an organization operating under the People’s Committee of Ho Chi Minh City—was mostly in the form of the undeveloped real estate (Waibel, The development of Saigon South New Urban Area, 2004).
these goals and woven throughout the rest of the master plan are three objectives: creating walkable neighborhoods, introducing apartment- and condominium-style living as a desirable housing alternative, and incentivizing community involvement and organization.

**Research Objectives**

Twenty years after the initial design competition for Saigon South, it is important to reflect on these goals and challenges. Critics have both praised and maligned Phu My Hung for creating an internationally oriented urban environment that seeks to cater to expatriates and the newly created Vietnamese upper and middle classes. I seek to understand a different aspect of the development. The research described here presents the architectural and urban planning choices involved in Phu My Hung and the effects of their implementation on the area’s residents. Phu My Hung seeks to overcome both cultural and environmental obstacles to create a unique, urban cultural area within an environmental framework. I hope this research may shed light on the area’s successes and failures regarding these goals, and the planning and design choices that caused them.

**Research Questions**

1. What elements of area’s culture and the natural environment informed the urban plan and architectural design of Saigon South?

2. How have urban planning and architectural design in Saigon South encouraged or discouraged residents from adopting the key components of promoting walking, making apartment and condominium living desirable, and establishing a robust community?

3. How have urban planning and architectural design in Saigon South contributed to resident’s opinions on their environment and social community?

**Methodology**

This research takes a dual-perspective look at the Saigon South development: both from the motivation behind the design and the impact it has on residents’ lives. Therefore, this research has involved gathering information from individuals who worked on the Saigon South design and individuals who currently reside there. As Phu My Hung urban area is a large-scale, master-planned urban
area, it has also been essential to research concepts of top-down and bottom-up urban planning and the theories of urban planning that drove much of the Saigon South Master Plan. Extensive research went into developing a lens through which I could view the development of Saigon South and the current state its residents face. While I draw extensively on outside research to establish the requisite lens, I have gathered the majority of my data from primary sources. I gathered this data in four different ways:

1. **Survey of Phu My Hung Residents**

   Part of my research was to gain an understanding of how the Saigon South design affected residents’ habits and customs within, and perceptions of their living area. In an attempt to gain insight into Phu My Hung residents’ perceptions of and habits within the Saigon South urban area, I distributed and collected simple surveys to and from willing residents. These simple surveys include brief questions regarding walking habits, green space use, opinion of their neighborhood environment, and opinion of their neighborhood social community. I distributed these surveys through the first floor of the Crescent Mall location within Saigon South to residents of various ages and genders, with an attempt to limit their distribution to adolescents. I attempted to ensure that survey respondents had not witnessed other individuals taking the survey in order to avoid answer bias. I distributed the surveys in both Vietnamese and English and employed a translator to prepare and interpret the Vietnamese surveys. I also used asked each respondent if he or she was a resident of Phu My Hung urban area as a screening question to ensure responses only from Phu My Hung residents. I have included copies of the English and Vietnamese translations of the simple survey questions in Figure 1 in the appendix.

2. **Focus Group Interview with Phu My Hung Residents**

   I also sought greater depth to the answers provided in the survey. In order to gain some understanding of the interplay between variables the survey results provided and the design choices for Saigon South, I required an understanding of how the residents felt various factors contributed. In this vein, I led a semi-structured focus group interview with five (5) residents. Four of these residents were female and one was male. The focus group interview participants were all adults. This interview covered the topics of cultural shift, community involvement, obstacles to daily life, transportation habits, safety, and suggestions for new design implementation. It also covered perceived benefits and detriments of Saigon South
residence. I conducted this interview in a restaurant in the Crescent Mall in Saigon South. I conducted the interview in English and, where language barriers arose, in Vietnamese with the help of a translator. The questions I prepared for this focus group interview are in Figure 2 in the appendix.

3. Phu My Hung Representatives and Design Partners

I also sought to understand the other side of the urban area perspective from those who were responsible for its planning and construction. Those who designed and implemented the plans for the Saigon South urban area can provide the greatest detail on the motivations for design choices and difficulties they faced in their implementation. I spoke with Winnie Hsu, an International Marketing Specialist from Phu My Hung Corporation and Axel Korn, the Director of Korn Architects, each multiple times throughout the course of my research. I took a walking tour through Phu My Hung with each of them—focusing on the urban layout and objectives of Phu My Hung Corporation with Ms. Hsu and the architecture of several notable buildings with Mr. Korn. On this second walking tour, two junior architects from Korn Architects also joined me. I also formally interviewed Mr. Korn regarding motivation for his architectural design and his comments on the accomplishments of Saigon South design and planning. The questions I prepared for this interview are included in Figure 3 in the appendix.

4. The Saigon South Master Plan and Urban Area

Saigon South, for the most part, followed the Saigon South Master Plan to inform its development. Recommended building floor-to-area ratios, sidewalk width, neighborhood layout, and road plans are all featured in this document. Of course, over the course of its twenty-year development, Saigon South developers and redevelopers have strayed from the suggestions on several occasions. It is important to have a systematic and analytical view of the current space (including floor-to-area ratios, sidewalk width, roads, etc.) to contrast with the original ideas for the urban area. In many cases, inconsistencies between the original concept and the present state have lent crucial understanding of corruptions and corrections of the initial concepts. I have taken note of the initial intent expressed in the master plan as well as several of these deviant cases in an attempt to gain perspective on their causes and effects through previous literature and other primary sources.
Background

Studying Phu My Hung urban area through its planning and residents’ lives requires an understanding of the history of Phu My Hung, challenges faced for Phu My Hung development, major theories on large-scale urban planning, neighborhood walkability, and sustainable urban development. These factors, concepts, and ideas shape the current state of Saigon South and provide understanding of design choices and resident responses.

Phu My Hung Urban Planning Motivations and Challenges

The Saigon South Master Plan relies on a series of planning concepts upon which developers would construct the Phu My Hung urban area: compactness and focus, an environmental framework, a cultural recreational plan, an order of movement, and walkable neighborhoods. As previously mentioned, it seeks to avoid urban sprawl while still providing relief to the density of urban development (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1995). In areas of the plan, it suggests “Creating a Cultural and Recreational Parkway,” “Developing a Scenic Riverway within an Environmental Framework,” and “Creating a Compact and Focused Urban Fabric.”

During my interview with Mr. Axel Korn of Korn Architects, a firm responsible for the design of several buildings and areas around Phu My Hung, he explained that they faced several difficulties in these challenges. Environmentally, the urban planners for the Saigon South area had to create a new urban area on uneven river basin with complex tidal flows. They had to create an area that would thrive in the incredibly hot and humid climate of Southeast Vietnam. They also had to create the new city from an area with little infrastructure or connectivity. Mr. Korn suggested that the task from the beginning was building for the environment—issues ranging from incredible tidal shift to rising sea levels—and building for the cultural idiosyncrasies of the Vietnamese. These cultural barriers included challenges to promoting walking, making apartment-style living more attractive, and incentivizing community organization and involvement.

Ecologically Sustainable Development

The area for Phu My Hung sits on top of Vietnam’s third largest river basin, the Dong Nai River Basin. Constructing the area in this land has presented several vulnerabilities unique to Phu My Hung associated with the climate and, specifically,
climate change. Ho Chi Minh City is one of the five cities voted most likely to be severely affected by climate change by 2070 (Stern, 2007). Sea level in territorial waters surrounding Vietnam has increased 5cm over the past 30 years and area experts expect it to increase an additional 5cm each decade (MONRE, 2003). Water levels in and around Ho Chi Minh City are also subject to the Asian Monsoon system. Phu My Hung has had to plan for increasing water levels and large tidal shift. Skidmore, Owings & Merrill included, as part of their master plan, a simulation-based analysis for how to construct the urban area to minimize flooding (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1995). Korn Architects has responded by constructing buildings between 1.5 and 2.0 meters above current sea level, which could be too modest but is still conservative compared to other Vietnamese housing developments. Although the coastline is 30 kilometers away, water levels rise during high tide, when water pathways reverse.

One of the tenets of the Saigon South Master Plan was also to create walkable neighborhoods. This aspect of the design accomplished two goals at once: walkable neighborhoods were more appealing to international residents and encouraging walking as a mode of transportation could make the Saigon South development more ecologically sustainable. Motivating walking in an increasingly sedentary area presented a challenge (Nguyen, Hong, Hoang, Nguyen, & Robert, 2013; Chu, 2003). Sudhir Gota, et al. suggest one can assess walkability—and thus the incentive for residents to walk—through the following criteria: walking path modal conflict, availability of walking paths, availability of crossings, grade crossing safety, motorist behavior, amenities, disability infrastructure, obstructions, and security from crime (Gota, Fabian, Mejia, & Punte, 2011).

Other areas of Ho Chi Minh City (and Vietnam in general) have struggled to maintain walkable neighborhoods. The Clean Air Institute suggested that Ho Chi Minh City had among the worst walkability scores for educational areas and public transportation terminals, while scoring highly in residential and commercial areas compared to other Southeast Asian Cities (Fabian, Gota, & Mejia, 2011). This report specifically reported motorbike parking along sidewalks as an obstacle to walking in Ho Chi Minh City and suggested clearing sidewalks would be crucial to promote walkability in the area. The Asian Development Bank praised Ho Chi Minh City for walking amenities such as shading for pedestrians (Leather, Fabian, Gota, & Mejia, 2011). This report also suggested that pedestrians in Ho Chi Minh City benefitted
from above-average security, but suffered from above average obstruction and walking path modal conflict. Essentially, while walking paths are present in Ho Chi Minh City, obstructions disincenvitize walking. The authors suggest that overcoming this challenge would incentivize walking in the urban area.

**Internationalization of Urban Design**

Moreover, Phu My Hung had to overcome another challenge to be economically successful: they had to appeal to international investors and perspective residents. One United States diplomat suggested that developing Phu My Hung required a certain amount of concessions from the Vietnamese Government. While the issue of power and electricity provision in Phu My Hung, Tan Thuan EPZ, and Hiep Phuoc Industrial Park through the Hiep Phuoc Power Company came under controversy with the involvement of Vietnam Electricity (EVN), the People’s Committee of Ho Chi Minh City made other concessions to attract residents and investors (Diep, 2011). The Master Plan specifies opening up a “one-stop shop” for investors and perspective residents. Phu My Hung has followed through with this proposal, enabling residents to overcome many of the difficulties of investing in or purchasing real estate in Vietnam. Investors responded favorably. When Phu My Hung first introduced condominium projects in 1999, they sold 70- or 80- square-meter units for between $18,000 and $22,000. By 2008, the price of a similar condominium was in the $150,000 range (Nguyen L. A., 2008). Similarly, following the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, a villa in the Phu My Hung urban area sold for $120,000. By 2008, a similar villa would sell for around $1 million each.

The area’s architecture reflects the construction of the Saigon South area. Authors have suggested the privatized development planning has resulted in an internationally standardized, consumer-oriented architecture targeting higher income groups. Peter Gotsch and Michael Peterek argue that the economic development of Vietnam and the desire to become integrated into the global economic flows have driven the Saigon South development despite “enormous demographic pressure,” (Gotsch & Peterek, 2002). My conversations with Ms. Hsu, International Marketing Specialist for Phu My Hung Corporation, also lend credence to this idea. Phu My Hung adopted many aspects of the urban plan to attract international businesspersons and the emerging Vietnamese middle class. The Master Plan suggests developing the high quality residential area to “provide comfortable and
familiar working and living environments” to the returning Vietnamese trained overseas (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1995). Michael Waibel writes that the area’s visitors and residents also desire an internationally standardized aesthetic. He suggests residents view the area as “a spatial reflection of their own economic rise within a society that was predominately poor only two decades ago,” (Waibel, The Crescent District in Saigon South, 2010). Mr. Korn suggested that the modern and postmodern architectural styles (he specifically mentioned Bauhaus architecture) his firm chose as motivation for its designs captured the sensibility of the neoliberal and globalized design that embraced modernity.

**Top-down and Large-scale Urban Planning**

Saigon South is an urban area that developers have constructed from a completely undeveloped area along the guidelines established by an international urban planning firm. In this way, it runs the risk of solely relying on top-down urban planning methods according to international urban planning theory that has been largely untested in Southeast Vietnam under this specific environment and culture. Large-scale public housing projects in Southeast Asia have generally been implemented through government top-down initiatives, whose effectiveness have now come under scrutiny (Takahashi, 2009). Participatory planning and smart growth urban planning have been two attempts to involve the community in the strategic urban management process (Fisher, 2008). Korn Architects and Phu My Hung Corporation do not employ a strategy of seeking out and testing with would-be residents, but they do communicate with sales and engineering departments to gain better understanding of what types of areas see commercial success and which face serious problems.

Linda Lees delivered an address to the American Creativity Association International Conference in Singapore underscoring the importance of integrating culture into new urban areas (Lees, 2012). In the speech, she referenced a Vitality Index survey that measures the health of an urban area according to the integration of resident opinion into urban planning among other factors, including public access, parks, public spaces, waterfronts, desire for connection, and lively neighborhoods. These concepts have helped guide this research and have found reinforcement through the following results.
Quantitative Research and Simple Surveys

Description of Quantitative Data

The sample data set gathered from the simple surveys contains 29 responses (n=29). Of these, five (5) responses are incomplete and so are not included for cross-variable analysis, leaving 24 viable responses. The full (n=29) sample contains 14 ‘male’ respondents, 15 ‘female’ respondents, and 0 ‘other.’ Of the 29 respondents, 18 answered that they were Vietnamese under nationality. Even so, respondents selected from a wide range of nationalities, including Canada, Japan, Malaysia, Netherlands, Poland, South Korea, United Kingdom and United States. The median household contained four (4) residents, with an arithmetic mean of 3.34. The median household income was 749,377,392 dong (around $35,970 as of currency exchange rates on 20 May 2013). This rate is quite far above the median household income of Vietnam. The level of education among sampled individuals also trended quite heavily towards higher levels of education. 25 of the 29 respondents reported obtaining at least a college or equivalent degree, and three (3) reported obtaining a postgraduate-level degree. This sample, therefore, presents a great deal of challenges when attempting to compare the results of this survey with similar surveys in Vietnam. In that vein, I will attempt to limit such comparisons and focus—except in some circumstances—and rely on comparisons within the data set.

Mean green space use was 3.71 times per month, or a little less than once weekly. Mean estimated daily walking distance was 2941 meters. This figure can only give us a very tentative comparison to walking habits in the rest of urban Vietnam. One previous study asked adolescents to report biweekly walking habits through two surveys, the International Physical Activity Questionnaire (IPAQ) and the Physical Activity Questionnaire for Adolescents (PAQA). Supposing that the average individual may walk at 4.95 kilometers per hour (TranSafety, 1997), individuals reported walking 968.57 and 704.29 meters in the IPAQ and PAQA, respectively, while the accelerometer captured a median 1005 daily meters (Lachat, et al., 2008). While perhaps an unfair comparison, the reported median walking distance of 2941 meters among the Phu My Hung residents surveyed was much larger than the amount suggested by each of the estimations for urban youth adolescents.

Questions relying on respondent judgment were quite optimistic. While the median perception of neighborhood environment and neighborhood social
community (on a scale from 1 to 5) was 4 for each, the arithmetic mean for perception of neighborhood environment and neighborhood social community were 4.12 and 3.69, respectively. Perhaps it is worth noting here that individuals, on average, found the environmental aspects of their neighborhood more rewarding than the social aspects. As I will discuss later, I found this aggregate opinion echoed in detail through focus group and in-depth interviews.

**Data Analysis**

Of the results from the 24 complete survey responses, the variable most correlated with other responses was residents’ neighborhood social community rating. Together, respondent rating (from 1 to 5) of neighborhood environment, the distance a respondent reported walking daily, and the frequency with which a respondent reported using park spaces helped to explain an average of over 55% of their neighborhood social community rating ($R^2 = .554$). Although multiple of the regressors helped to explain the residents’ perception of neighborhood social community at various levels of significance, their perception of the neighborhood environment has the most statistically significant effect on the outcome, significant at the $\alpha = .01$ confidence level. Each additional increment (on a scale of 1 to 5) of a resident’s perception of neighborhood environment explains an average of a .595 increase in their perception of the neighborhood social community. Later I will explore why residents may find their neighborhood social community more rewarding if they also enjoy their neighborhood environment. Average daily walking distance was also statistically significant at the $\alpha = .10$ confidence level, with a negative correlation. Each additional kilometer walked contributes an average decrease of .102 in the sampled resident’s rating of neighborhood social community. Average monthly park space use did not contribute to a statistically significant degree. I have included below the results of the simple regression (Table 1) run on the data set through Microsoft Excel’s Analysis ToolPak Add-in.
Robustness

In order to gain a better understanding of if perception of neighborhood environment had a secular correlation with perception neighborhood social community (as opposed to another, underlying variable driving both factors), I attempted to control for several factors. These factors include household income, gender, education, and a dummy variable representing if the respondent is of Vietnamese nationality. Even controlling for these additional variables, neighborhood environment rating is still a significant contributor at the $\alpha=.01$ confidence level, although daily walking distance does not appear to have a significant effect. Interestingly, when household income, gender, education, and the Vietnamese dummy variable are controlled for, frequency of green space use also contributes significant at the $\alpha=.10$ level. However, frequency of green space use has a slight negative coefficient, suggesting that individuals who use communal park spaces frequently are less satisfied with their communal environment. One theory to help explain this is that the survey relies on the respondent’s definition of park spaces.

While speaking with the focus group, I found that several individuals felt that communal park-like areas within their apartment complexes—e.g. shared outdoor swimming pools are garden decks—were not park spaces, but rather simply features of the apartment. Perhaps individuals who do not attend park spaces in other

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**Table 1**

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neighborhoods are more likely to spend time within their own apartment or condominium complex communal spaces. Later, I will discuss the feasibility of increased communal building space use contributing so heavily to neighborhood social community (see Neighborhood Community and Apartment Housing).

Discussion

**Neighborhood Walkability and Walking Habits**

The walkability of neighborhoods has been a Phu My Hung objective from the start. Although limited and difficult to draw comparisons, the quantitative data above seems to support the claim that guests have responded by walking more. However, as Mr. Korn pointed out, promoting walking—even within neighborhoods—was not without difficulty. Dominance of motorbikes as a form of urban transportation and cultural traditions of avoiding sun exposure both contribute to reluctance to adopt walking as a primary mode of transportation. In order to encourage walking, Phu My Hung planners needed to address these two obstacles. The Crescent Bridge area is one interesting result of the Master Plan’s attempt to overcome the cultural barriers. This footbridge connects the Crescent Area—including some of Saigon South’s nicest restaurants, Crescent Mall, and Crescent Plaza—to sprawling gardens and residential areas. Mr. Korn recounted that the bridge met some opposition from individuals who felt that a bridge that did not allow motorbikes would not receive any use. In response, Phu My Hung designed a bridge that would be a sight itself—featuring an LED-lit waterfall and lined with LED lights on the ground. This *Cầu Ánh Sao* (Starlight Bridge) is now a tourist attraction especially, as the members of the focus group did not fail to mention or smirk at, for romantically inclined young guests.

In places where making the walking path a tourist attraction was not possible, Phu My Hung could only hope to make the area as safe and appealing as possible for pedestrians. At one point on my walking tour with Mr. Axel Korn and two other architects from his firm, we entered a low-density residential area. One of the two younger architects turned to me and pointed toward the security guard outpost. “Did you ever read Jane Jacobs’ *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*?” he asked. When I responded that I had, he suggested that one reason Saigon South will
always be a great urban area was because of how safe the area is. The plentitude of guards would make the city very safe.

The young architect did get something right: Phu My Hung goes to great lengths to keep the area guarded and maintained. The 100,000- (potential) resident area that covers 2,600 hectares also employs an estimated 1,200 security guards and other maintenance personnel (Vietnam Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, 2009). Around one third of these workers have been in-sourced from other areas. This ratio of 83 residents per personnel employee dwarfs even police-heavy metropolitan areas. Indeed, at each entrance to the less densely populated areas I passed, I saw at least one security officer in a small guard post. Nearly all of the apartment complexes employ securities guards in the lobby.

The focus on security of the area did not go unnoticed or unappreciated by those Phu My Hung area residents with whom I spoke. One individual, a middle-aged-to-elderly American male, mentioned feeling safe immediately and repeated the sentiment throughout our conversation. He also mentioned that knowing he was safe contributed to his enjoyment of the natural area, in which he frequently met friends while playing Frisbee in one of the many parks. He also rents a “shop-style apartment” on the base of the apartment building, and routinely opens his doors to fellow residents to teach an English class for his daughter’s schoolmates. The four female residents I interviewed echoed the importance of security and their feeling of safety. They said they felt safer walking in Phu My Hung because there is less crime than there is anywhere else near Ho Chi Minh City.

Of course, the lack of crime was not the only element of safety with which these residents concerned themselves—obstacles also played a very large role in the discussions. One resident, a Professor at a Ho Chi Minh City University, mentioned that while she felt comfortable walking in most parts of Phu My Hung, the heavy traffic and busy streets of Ho Chi Minh City prevented her from walking around her workplace. She was especially complimentary of the earlier years she spent in Phu My Hung. She suggested that she always felt safe walking and using park spaces because there was a beautiful environment, little congestion, few crowds, and—quite importantly—narrow streets.

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2 For comparison, New York City employs 34,500 police officers for a population of 8,244,910 at a ratio of nearly 239 residents per personal employee (New York Police Department, 2013)
However, several of the residents with whom I spoke suggested the increasingly frequent construction of multi-lane roads made walking more difficult. The members of the focus group unanimously agreed that many of the newly constructed wider roads were obstacles to commuting on foot. They all recalled having to cross one wide road, the eight-lane Nguyên Lương Bằng, over the course of two stoplight cycles. Even so, one resident suggested that the crosswalks and stoplights did not guarantee—or even imply—unimpeded walking. Lack of adherence to traffic laws and very little driver predictability made crossing some of the wider streets nearly impossible. One resident lamented seeing schoolchildren attempt to walk home alongside wide and increasingly busy roads.

Another advantage of the narrow alleys found throughout Ho Chi Minh City is that they provide a great deal of shade and the walking pathways can actually be quite cool during hot days. In certain areas of Phu My Hung, tall, leafy trees may substitute for the function of the buildings, bringing shade in which residents and visitors may walk to their destination. These trees and the shade they provide is a crucial element of creating truly walkable neighborhoods in the master-planned city. Wide streets can promote walking in the evening, when temperatures fall with the sun, but during the day, the lack of shade and cool areas prevents residents from taking to their feet. Unfortunately, the increasing street width—perceived by the focus group interview participants as a signal of prosperity and adoption of a new aesthetic—meant less of a daily commute could be in shade.

The widest street in the area is the 14-lane Nguyễn Văn Linh Parkway. This road is in the original Master Plan as a crucial component necessary to link Saigon South with the rest of Ho Chi Minh City. Mr. Korn also suggested this road could have been a result of government intervention in their demands for a Master Plan and over-planning to connect the Tan Thuan industrial area to other locations around Ho Chi Minh City. This parkway acts as a barrier between neighborhoods, discouraging individuals from crossing on foot (or by any means of transportation). Of course, the Nguyễn Văn Linh has not taken the shape that SOM suggested in the original master plan. The long-term goal for the Nguyễn Văn Linh Parkway is still to introduce ways for residents to cross the parkway. Members of the focus group agreed they would greatly appreciate a simple footbridge over the parkway—provided, of course, it could also have shade.
Another interesting challenge for Phu My Hung is that sidewalks in residential areas are not guaranteed to remain sidewalks when homes are owned or redeveloped. Figure 4 shows a street merely a few blocks from the center of Saigon South. As can be seen, one redeveloper has replaced the sidewalk in front of the house with a small garden. Another has placed a large banner advertisement blocking the entire sidewalk. Even where left alone, the sidewalk is not wide enough to accommodate both a tree and a pedestrian. In this battle for space, it seems trees are emerging victorious, as plants grow through the sidewalks and the few pedestrians walk in the street. Mr. Korn suggested that this sidewalk width was a large oversight in the urban planning. Interestingly, although this repurposing has seemed to be a major challenge for the design teams with whom I spoke, the sidewalk obstruction did not seem to bother the focus group interview participants. They suggested that they all walked on the street in these areas, even if the sidewalk was clear.

Mr. Korn suggested that the Saigon South area does best to promote walking when it integrates nature into the design. The Vietnamese cultural value of close interaction with nature and the environment brought many individuals to enjoy the park spaces along streets or paths. By constructing urban features—such as The Canal park, a street median lush with green plants and a stream running along its length—that recognized and aligned with cultural values, designers were able to promote walking. Indeed, when I visited The Canal park at 6:00 PM one Thursday, many residents walked along the trees or loitered on park benches in the street median. One individual had pulled up a lawn chair to watch the traffic flow by.

**The International Aesthetic and Neighborhood Environment**

Among the most positive simple survey results were the residents’ opinions of their neighborhood environment. Individuals seemed to appreciate their surroundings with little impact from other variables, including income, education, nationality and gender. Non-residents with whom I have spoken over the past month have also seemed to enjoy the area. My first night at the hotel in Ho Chi Minh City, I asked the receptionist—a young woman in her mid-20’s—if she had been to the Phu My Hung Urban Area. She said that she traveled there from time to time with her friends to admire the area. More specifically, she said she went there to admire how the wealthy lived. She and her friends would go there by motorbikes at night so that they
could admire the new skyline while enjoying the fresh air and quiet atmosphere. Most of all, this woman said, she liked to go down to imagine herself living there one day. I have found this admiration of the low-density, international design echoed several times during individual interviews and in academic journals about the Phu My Hung area. Phu My Hung Corporation states that the Crescent Mall, a grand feature at the center of the urban area, is, “A further step of the direct fulfillment of the promise made by Phu My Hung to the Ho Chi Minh City citizens to improve the quality of living,” (Phu My Hung Corporation, 2010).

Mr. Korn suggested, however, that the guests really admire the implementation of carefully built and maintained houses, roads, and park spaces. Phu My Hung is an example of an international standard master plan coming to fruition in Vietnam. He suggests that the guests admire the international standard more than they do the wealth, as my previous meeting suggested. As mentioned previously, Mr. Korn suggested that the modern Bauhaus architecture captured the sensibility of neoliberal globalized design. In this way, the architecture of Saigon South is an attempt to bring an internationally standardized design to the area despite objections originating in culture and environment.

As a demonstration of this point, redevelopers have substituted their own view on international and consumer oriented architecture. Many developers have abandoned the plans for modern architecture in favor of traditional French Colonial architecture. French-inspired villas dominate many of the neighborhoods. Even houses that developers constructed in the initial style have since been rebuilt, even though the neighborhoods are only a decade or two old. Perhaps this redevelopment is an expression of preference for European colonial style. Perhaps the influence of the foreign culture flowing back into Vietnam expresses itself in the façades of these villas. Even establishing the sought architectural uniformity has also come with some difficulty in the Saigon South area. While the Master Plan calls for low-lying villa houses to include red clay tile roofs, uniformity of red tiles has been hard to find in Vietnamese production capabilities. Colors of the villa roofs now range from bright orange to deep brown on roofing tiles, as illustrated in Figure 5 in the appendix.

Even within buildings, four of the residents in the focus group interview mentioned that they needed to refurbish their apartment spaces before moving in. One individual recounted that her apartment included a kitchen that was too small for her cooking needs (which included techniques atypical for Western-designed
kitchens), an excess of bathrooms, and lack of space in her bedrooms. Another resident suggested that the balcony space had been constructed in such a way that she could not grow plants, which prompted her refurbishing. The one resident who did not mention having to refurbish his apartment had rented a “shop-style” apartment on the first floor, which included minimal previous construction or room layout.

Elements of design that found motivation in both the local culture seem to have kinder reception. Mr. Korn mentioned that his process of designing the buildings started with examining functionality within an apartment as well as the exterior view of the building, creating something appealing to entice visitors and prospective buyers. One example of understanding how the needs of the “inside” may relate to the outside appearance of a building is the prevalence of single-room air conditioner units. To compensate for resident propensity to purchase these units, Korn Architects designed hidden grates in an alcove of the exterior of the Riverside apartment buildings that could hide the units’ exterior. Figure 6 displays these grates. This functional architecture is an excellent example of recognizing cultural practices to preserve the aesthetic appeal and marketability of the building.

Additionally, cultural idiosyncracies helped inform some of the design elements. Many of the apartment units now feature larger, so-called “wet kitchens” with balconies attached. The kitchens were new design elements for the Western architecture firms; rarely before had they designed for the needs of families that purchase live chickens to start the cooking process. Balconies also ended up being quite attractive features for the apartment living systems, so that individuals could embrace connection with nature. Mr. Korn suggested that sales and marketing departments had given excellent feedback for these areas. The majority of the residents in the focus group seemed to agree, and reported that their favorite feature of the apartment was their balcony.

Moreover, working with the surrounding architecture resulted in desirable environment and living space. Figure 7 in the appendix shows the swimming pool of the Grandview C apartment building in Saigon South. This swimming pool sits on the second floor of the apartment complex, flanked on either side by high walls. Several stories above, the apartment building runs over the swimming pool, creating a roof. The pool also faces a waterway in the near distance. On the three occasions that I saw this area, it was always populated with swimmers enjoying the feature. The two
flanking walls were able to funnel wind from the surrounding area to provide a breeze over the pool, capturing the words *Feng Shui*—literally ‘Wind’ and ‘Water.’ The roof overhead was able to provide shade from the sun. Thoughtful planning integrating this apartment feature into the environment helped it to become a successful and desirable urban feature.

**Neighborhood Community and Apartment Housing**

Of the quantitative survey results, residents’ opinion of their neighborhood social community was closest to middling. It is possible that the initial challenges Phu My Hung faced could contribute to these feelings. One of the largest challenges to creating a new urban fabric with open spaces that avoided urban sprawl was to incentivize “building up” for residential development. Ho Chi Minh City residents considered apartment housing to be dormitory housing—the poorest form of living. Mr. Korn and Ms. Hsu both commented that Vietnamese potential residents saw apartments and condominiums as forcing isolation from a social community. One of the greatest challenges was to incentivize members of the new Vietnamese middle class to move into apartment and condominium buildings.

However, despite skepticism from many of the urban planners, adding communal facilities to the apartment complexes made them more attractive. Shared swimming pools and gymnasiums gave residents a chance to interact with each other and avoid the isolation that apartment-style living threatens. Four of the five focus group members suggested that they had met some of their good friends through social interactions in these shared communal spaces in their apartment and condominium complexes. They explained that they all sought these facilities when seeking an area in which to reside. The immensely social and community-oriented aspects of Vietnamese culture contribute hugely to the success these shared facilities, incentivizing apartment living.

The low-lying villa neighborhood areas offer an interesting contrast. The young architect from earlier—the Jane Jacobs fan—also highlighted how open and wide the streets were relative to the height of the low villas. This combination allowed for a maximum level of natural light to reach the very open area; if there were criminals present here, they would not feel claustrophobic. However, the young architect’s words here seem to carry some unintended irony. Jacobs did suggest that secure areas were completely necessary for urban areas to thrive. However,
she also suggested that street lighting had only a minor role in the liveliness and safety of neighborhoods. Instead, she argued that relatively densely populated areas created livelier and safer environments by virtue of additional foot traffic and community (Jacobs, 1961). Although the street lined with villas was quite open and pretty, I do not recall meeting a single individual while walking several blocks along it.

The residents with whom I spoke echoed my skepticism. The members of the focus group, including one female resident who had lived in a villa-style house along a similar street, all suggested they felt safer in apartment and condominium complexes than in other styles of housing. The guards who frequently sat at the base of apartment buildings provided an additional level of security, deterring criminal activity. The woman who had lived in a villa complained that she needed to find a house sitter whenever she had left her house, something she had not felt forced to do since moving into an apartment building. Perhaps equally importantly, one resident expressed that living in close proximity to other residents she trusted made her feel safer. The young architect’s idea that wide streets with low-density and low-height buildings would make residents feel more secure went unsupported by any of the residents with whom I spoke. In an interesting twist on the originally perceived challenges, the residents all commented that they felt safer with the help of the stronger social community that apartment and condominium living provided.

**Variable Interplay and Common Threads**

That residents’ opinions on neighborhood social community are heavily correlated with other variables is also quite interesting. Specifically, why is it that residents who have favorable opinions of their neighborhood environments would be more likely to favor their social community as well? One possibility is that areas that excel in providing excellent neighborhood environment also provided the greatest opportunities for social interaction. Members of the focus group frequently mentioned meeting with friends in communal park space to enjoy the

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3 Perhaps the comedy of this architect’s reference was that *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* is, more than anything, an excoriation of the traditional top-down urban planning methods that dominated the period in which Jacobs was writing. It argues that a method of planning that takes motivation from theoretical framework is inferior to one that notes the needs of its residents and plans accordingly.
natural surroundings or meeting in the Crescent area. It is also quite possible that individuals who take greater pleasure (and thus, perhaps, have greater awareness of) their environmental surroundings also have greater access to neighborhood community. One of the focus group interview participants commented that he had met several of his good friends either using the area’s mass transit options or playing Frisbee in the park.

The members of the focus group also made two interesting notes: apartment style living provided greater opportunities to get involved in communities and the area around apartments were also better maintained. This was largely because apartment buildings came with their own staff that looked after the area’s grounds: shared facilities, building cleanliness, and even sidewalk space. Residents suggested that it was much easier for each resident to pay a maintenance fee than to organize a community effort to keep the area clean. While this sentiment suggests that Phu My Hung still has great distances to go in their attempt to incentivize community action, it does provide a recommendation that centrally controlled maintenance plans may be preferable in order to keep the environment pleasant.

Moreover, in this statement is imbued perhaps the most obvious instance of retained culture affecting residents perceptions of their living environment. This concept has repeated itself many times throughout the course of my research. Streets in Saigon South that replicate those found in Ho Chi Minh City (e.g. narrow streets where individuals may choose not to use sidewalks) and account for environmental factors (e.g. tall buildings and trees providing shade) have best accomplished the walkability goals. Incorporating elements of nature into architectural design has produced some of the most desired building spaces, establishing a link to the environment and the cultural appreciation of nature. Including communal and shared apartment spaces—in a sense, allowing for the traditional elements of community even in non-traditional buildings—have made apartment and condominium complexes among the most desirable spaces in Saigon South. Urban planning and architecture throughout Phu My Hung that have contoured around culture and environment (rather than attempted to change it) have best accomplished the goals of the Saigon South Master Plan.
Conclusion

Ongoing urbanization throughout Vietnam and the urban growth of Ho Chi Minh City will require additional expansion of the surrounding urban area. Phu My Hung is an attempt to construct an internationally oriented new urban area—Saigon South. This research has provided both a quantitative and a qualitative look back on Phu My Hung Corporation’s attempts to construct this area according a set master plan that attempts to overcome cultural and environmental challenges. However, results from the quantitative and qualitative research data support the idea that integrating culture and environment into the urban landscape is the most effective tool in creating a vibrant new city center.

This research also questions the introduction of internationally standardized planning and architecture into the Saigon South area. Extensive redevelopment and resident preference both suggest that developers risk monetary loss from introducing potentially unwanted urban and architectural features. Further research in the consumer preferences of urban Vietnamese and international residents would help cement ideas of the inclusion of cultural preference for new development. Additionally, research into other areas of master-planned urban development in Vietnam such as the Binh Duong New Urban Area and Thu Thiem New Urban Area would help to corroborate the findings of this paper or to suggest they are isolated occurrences.
Works Cited


Appendix

Figure 1 – Copies of Vietnamese and English translations of simple survey questions

Bản khảo sát cư dân tại khu đô thị Phú Mỹ Hưng

1. Giới tính:
   a. Nam    b. Nữ    c. Khác
2. Trình độ học vấn (vui lòng điền cấp học cao nhất mà anh/chị đã hoàn thành):
3. Thu nhập hàng năm (VND):
4. Quốc tịch:
5. Số nhận khẩu trong hộ:
6. Anh/Chị vào công viên khu đô thị Phú Mỹ Hưng bao nhiêu lần một tháng?
7. Anh/Chị đi bộ bao xa (km) trong một ngày?
8. Anh/Chị đánh giá môi trường trong khu dân cư bao nhiêu trong thang điểm từ 1 tới 5? (1 là rất tệ, 5 là rất tốt)
9. Anh/Chị đánh giá cộng đồng trong khu dân cư bao nhiêu trong thang điểm từ 1 tới 5? (1 là rất tệ, 5 là rất tốt)

Survey for Phu My Hung Residents

1. Gender
   a. Male    b. Female    c. Other
2. Level of education (Please write the highest grade you have completed):
3. Yearly Household Income (in Vietnamese Dong):
4. Nationality:
5. Number of individuals currently residing in household:
6. How many times per month do you use green (or park) spaces in Phu My Hung Urban Area?
7. How far (in kilometers) do you estimate you walk each day?
8. How would you rate your neighborhood environment on a scale of 1-5? (1 is very poor, 5 is very good.)
9. How would you rate your neighborhood social community on a scale of 1-5? (1 is very poor, 5 is very good.)
**Figure 2 – Copy of prepared questions for focus group interview with Phu My Hung Residents**

1. How do you like walking within your neighborhood and Saigon South?
2. Do you enjoy the using green spaces and parkways in Saigon South?
3. In what ways do you interact with your neighbors and neighborhood community?
4. In what ways do you use communal areas in your apartment complex or neighborhood?
5. Do you involve yourself in community efforts to improve your neighborhood?
6. How do you enjoy the appearance, design, and environment of your neighborhood?
7. How do you feel about using the Nguyen Van Linh Boulevard?
8. What do you find pleasant about the Crescent Area? What do you find unpleasant?

**Figure 3 – Copy of prepared questions for interview with Mr. Axel Korn, Director of Korn Architects**

1. How did you and your firm become involved in the design in Saigon South? When did your involvement begin?
2. What elements of culture and the environment informed your design choices for buildings in the Saigon South urban area?
3. What challenges did you face in designing and implementing your artistic and architectural vision for the area?
4. What have you considered successes in terms of your design and its reception by residents? What elements of your design would you have changed?
5. What have you considered successes in terms of Saigon South’s urban planning and its reception by residents? What elements of this design would you have changed?
6. What benefits and challenges does the Nguyen Van Linh Parkway present? What are your thoughts on the area’s connectivity and mass transit?
Figure 4 - Photograph of developers repurposing sidewalks

Figure 5 – Photograph of variety in red brick roof tiles
Figure 6 – Photograph of grates covering the single-room air conditioner units

Figure 7 - Photograph of Grandview C swimming pool