



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF WAIBEL

Michael A. Waibel and a corner of HCMC viewed from Thuan Kieu Plaza in District 5, HCMC

- **Name:** Michael A. Waibel
- **Job:** Researcher and lecturer
- **Nationality:** German
- **Time in Vietnam:** Since 1996
- **Current residence:** Germany

A German's Coffee Table Photo Book

By Trung Chau

Dr. Michael A. Waibel, a university lecturer in Hamburg, Germany, paid a visit to Vietnam for the first time in 1996 to seek facts for his doctoral thesis. He began studying the socio-economic revitalization of the old quarter driven mainly by local shop-owners in Hanoi. Waibel was also interested in the urban spatial transformation as a consequence of the introduction of the nation's Doi Moi (renovation) policy. In 2001, Waibel published his doctoral thesis and in 2004 became involved in a large project funded by the German Government to help develop housing for low-income people in HCMC.

Having shuttled between Vietnam and Germany over the past 18 years, Michael A. Waibel has seen rapid urbanization in major cities in Vietnam. Through his photo books, he wants local urbanites to heed the cities they are living in. This year, the German scholar will continue to work on a new one about Hanoi after the first on HCMC.

Mega-cities

In 2008, Waibel's project was fine-tuned to increase adaptive capacity in the context of climate change. Thereby Waibel became a coordinator of a work package to promote climate-adapted housing and energy-efficient buildings in Vietnam. As more than half of end-users' energy consumption in Vietnam relates to residential buildings, this is a very important sector to deal with. "Thanks to support from the Vietnam National En-

ergy Efficiency Program (VNEEP), the European Chamber of Commerce, the HCMC Department of Construction and other stakeholders, our team developed two handbooks trying to convince the urban population to implement more sustainable measures in houses," he says. "The key target group of this bottom-up approach has been the emerging urban middle class population because of their sharply rising ecological footprint among others due to the switch from motorbike to car and to the construction of new houses."

Waibel says during the manifold study trips to Vietnam, he perceived rapid urban spatial changes. This has prompted him to gather materials for coffee table photo books. When he was working on the first photo book, he persuaded Henning Hilbert, a coordinator at Vietnam-German University and long-term resident of HCMC, who shared his love for this bustling city. Waibel was also able to gain support from the German Cultural Goethe

A DAY OF MICHAEL A. WAIBEL

Usually my days in Vietnam are densely packed with numerous activities. Last year in spring, I had a short-term appointment as lecturer at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in HCMC. There, I gave a lecture about urban green governance at the Faculty of Geography and at the Faculty of Urban Studies. In the afternoon, I usually had meetings with representatives from companies in the field of energy-efficient buildings, trying to convince them to contribute to the Handbook for Green Products and Services I developed at that time. I also regularly met with an urban planning student to do the layout design of this handbook. Shortly before sunset, I often climbed on high-rise buildings to take photos from there for our photo book "TP. HỒ CHÍ MINH MEGA CITY."

Institute and several German companies. The 300-page photo book “TP. Hồ Chí Minh MEGA CITY” was published in February this year and the response was generally enthusiastic.

Waibel says he will come back to Vietnam this July to continue to work on the second photo book about Hanoi, to coordinate an international conference on behalf of the Goethe Institute and to give lectures to energy governance in cooperation with a colleague from VNEEP. These are part of the German’s general plan to continue to do research in Vietnam.

Alley neighborhood culture

During his 60-plus visits to Vietnam in the past 18 years, Waibel met many passionate and cheerful Vietnamese eager to contribute their share to make Vietnam a better country.

Germany may learn something from the pragmatism and optimism of the young generation of Vietnam, Waibel says, adding that he is still fascinated by the dynamism of urban development – though not always for the good – and by the vivid life in public space.

Talking about wishes after implementing the projects, Waibel says by means of the photo book, he wants urbanites to be more sensitive about the cities they are residing in. They should get a comprehensive view about the spatial and social range and diversity of the mega-cities. This will contribute to an increased feeling of responsibility toward the city. In his opinion, a sense of responsibility is the basis for more sustainable behavior and development in general.

“Overall my wish is that Vietnam doesn’t make the same mistakes as happened in the course of economic take-off of other countries but instead learn from them and leapfrogs environmentally-polluting development stages. There is still a long way to go in this regard, obviously,” Waibel says. “I would hope that policymakers of HCMC should not take Singapore as a unique role model but try to develop their own urban identity based on their own strengths. The latter could be the compact low-rise, high-density small alley neighborhoods which offer an amazing high degree of quality of life and of livability.”

