

People of HCM Mega City

by Astrid Schulz

In 2013, with a big round birthday on the horizon, I decided I'd like to buy myself a very special present. When the opportunity to spend 3 months in Vietnam came up, purely for the sake of creating art and photography... well, I just jumped at it.

On a previous visit to the country I'd found out about an artist group in Hue, Central Vietnam, founded by twin brothers. When I heard they were organizing an ongoing artist residency for national and international artists, I thought what a tremendously exciting opportunity this would be. I put in an application form and happily for me, I got accepted. Even though the residency was only for two months, I booked my return ticket for three months later, thinking 'You never know what else might come up'.

And, yes, something else did come up; the chance to participate in a photo book about Ho Chi Minh City!

With sponsorship from both the Goethe Institute in Hanoi and some corporate sponsors based in Germany, researcher Michael Waibel decided to put a book together, describing the recent developments in Vietnam's biggest and fastest growing city. Together with his partner Hilbert Henning, he started collecting images from the past and also to take many new photographs, for the purpose of comparison and for documentation. As the team was concentrating on Ho Chi Minh City's urban developments, he began to realize they had very few images of its people.

And that's where I came in. Through a recommendation, Michael found out that I was going to be in Vietnam, just in time to take photographs of the citizens of the city, in order that he could add another chapter to the book; however, I only had one week to complete this assignment before my residency started and I didn't know anyone in Ho Chi Minh City. I considered how I would be able to get this organized, especially from London.

If it hadn't been for the warmhearted and generous people of Vietnam's south, and from social media, I'd have been lost. But it was as if I was guided by an invisible force, which brought me good fortune. I wrote emails to strangers, posted requests on 'Internations', Couchsurfers' and 'Facebook', and was pleasantly surprised at how much feedback I got back. Some of the people from these networks even recommended their friends and family members. Suddenly my diary was quite full. It was like a >



Tower block apartment, District 7. Nguyen Ha Thuy Tien was born in HCMC and works for a Social Media Company. She is fully embracing the new opportunities and modern lifestyle. Amongst her hobbies is rock climbing in a sports centre in District 3. However, she is also reflecting on the Western influences that are slowly changing people's behaviour. Some become more open-minded, others lose being in touch with their health.



Tower block apartment in An Phu, District 2. Andy has been raised and educated in the US, but recently decided to relocate to HCMC, where he works as an architect. He feels that Vietnam is behind with its infrastructure and has to catch up with the rest of the world, so has decided to take part in creating a master plan for improving the environment. Andy finds it very rewarding to take an active part in the new developments of the city.



< miracle; I got the impression that people were proud to be in this book and to represent their city.

Coming back to the book, I thought about taking a closer look behind the façade, in order to explore how people use their personal space. I decided to compile a questionnaire, asking people to comment on their impressions and on their connection to what they call home. The outcome is a collection of fascinating insights into homes and workplaces from rich to poor, from younger to older generations and from migrants to those who had lived here all their lives and helped to shape this city.

Many people describe Ho Chi Minh City to be full of opportunities, which only the Asian market can bring. The younger generation especially, embraces the modern lifestyle: the newly created shopping malls, the Western style coffee shops and various other options for entertainment, provided they can afford them.

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Whilst on the road (or to be more precise, on the back seat of a motorbike), I was getting a good impression of what it means to live in a so-called 'megacity' - yet on leaving the busy and constantly blocked main roads and turning into the small alley-



ways of naturally grown neighborhoods, I would sometimes get the feeling of stepping back in time.

I had various people to help me with transport and language barriers. With the feedback from my questionnaire, and the help of my translator, I was able to gain a really good insight into people's lives. For instance, I learned that there are many migrant workers still moving into town in the hope of improving their lives. Their dreams are simple and their lifestyle is based on the one they had in the countryside. All they wish for is to save enough money to buy a house or run a business. After that, if they make more money, they may rebuild, enlarge and modernize; it may even become possible to travel abroad. But until then a lot of dedication is needed and it needs the entire family to be involved. There is neither time nor money to enjoy District 1, in the city centre - or for visiting the parks.

For those who have managed to accomplish their goals, life becomes more diverse. Whilst the older generation still prefers to spend time at home with their families and neighbours, the young ones are getting ready to break with traditions. There is a new direction, a new sense of freedom as their world begins to open up, offering choices and opportunities. For them, it is exciting to be able to participate in the megacity's new lifestyle.

The book is now complete and has been published by Times Publishing House (ISBN 978-604-936-338-2). In February, there were launch parties - one in Hanoi and one in Ho Chi Minh City - but sadly without me. Meanwhile, I am sitting back at my desk in London and planning my next adventure... And so is the publisher, he is thinking of doing a similar book about Hanoi. Perhaps I will have the pleasure of doing it all over again.