

Opposing Aspects Of A “Megacity”

The contrasts inside HCMC as presented in a big photo book

By Nguyen Vinh

Panoramic views of new yet desolate residential quarters in Thao Dien placed side by side with shabby houses on the bank of the polluted canals in districts 4 and 8; cleared plots of land on a once-swamp area to become soon high-rises versus the messy affairs of centuries-old quarters; and a cyclo driver soaked in sweat as opposed to the flamboyant owner of a brand-new Audi—all are described by Michael Waibel and Henning Hilbert as the opposing aspects of HCMC in their book entitled “TPHCM - Megacity,” by Times Publishing House and Goethe Institute), which was available in mid-February.

Dr. Michael Waibel from the geography faculty of Hamburg University joined hands with Henning Hilbert, a current lecturer at the Vietnam-

ese-German University, in a project bearing the same name with the large-sized book. The two co-authors tied together 18 photographers, local and foreign alike, who are living in HCMC, in their project featuring 300 selected photos on today’s HCMC.

In fact, Waibel began to work on this project in 2002 when he had in his hand the first digital camera aiming to take record of the changes in urban development in both Hanoi and HCMC. Waibel has viewed current topics—for instance, climate change, habits and behaviors of the middle class, environmental protection and energy conservation solutions—as a biologist of urban ecology.

Meanwhile, Henning Hilbert, who used to teach in Bangkok and work in Seoul, has found in Saigon the distinctive development different from other cosmopolises. As a coordinator at the Vietnamese-German University over the past 13 years, Hilbert



MICHAEL WAIBEL

A view of the city’s skyline from Thuan Kieu Plaza in District 5

has observed and jotted down the changes in Saigon. What he has taken heed most relates to congestion and organization of urban traffic, particularly, lifestyles and daily activities of low-income inhabitants in the suburb.

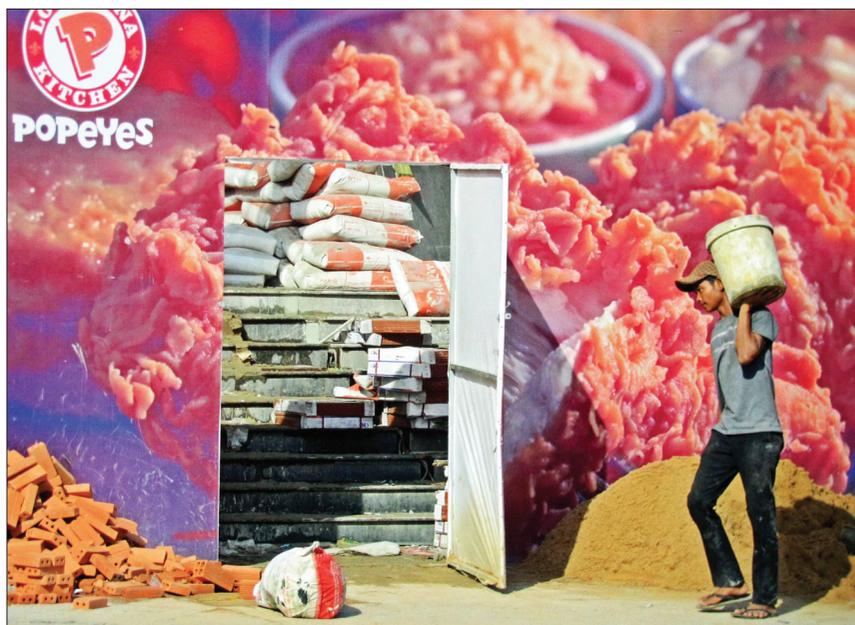
The two co-authors and other members of their group share a common view: they have noticed the contrasts in development. Inside the dynamism and the sheer inner force is outstanding distress; and from the promise of urban prosperity emerge forecasts of uncertainty, first, in environmental problems.

From the angle of urban culture, Dr. Almuth Meyer-Zollitsch, director of Goethe Institute in Vietnam, contends that the globalization process has brought about dramatic changes to HCMC. However, he says, in many places and many small alleys, much of the rural lifestyle has been retained.

According to Hilbert, the changes may give dwellers a feeling of suffocation: edifices mushrooming abreast of messy townhouses, expressways emerging amidst existing residential quarters and beautiful commercial complexes reminiscent of those in Singapore. On the city’s outskirts, immense residential areas are not rare. Yet they are deserted. Who will live there?

The allure of HCMC lies in the co-existence of the opposing aspects. Stalls of pho (local noodles) in front of gaudy outlets of fastfood chains, a luxury car surrounded by rows of motorbikes and digital billboards on top of old houses—that’s one of the ways Hilbert has experienced the lifestyle in HCMC after many years living here as Saigonese.

It is mixed with a bit of disarray, yet, basically the city always goes forward, says Hilbert.



HENNING HILBERT

The fastfood popularity. A restaurant soon to be opened in Phu Nhuan District