



VIETNAM

Calendar of events

"Bui Xuan Phai - Love for Hanoi" - Award for "Hà Nội: CAPITAL City"

Michael Waibel on what he finds fascinating about Vietnam's capital.

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Congratulations: Michael Waibel was awarded the "Bui Xuan Phai - Love for Hanoi" Prize for his photo book "Hà Nội: CAPITAL City"! The book was developed in close cooperation with the Goethe-Institut Vietnam, and contains more than 600 photographs. They show life and urban development in the city from a number of spatial and social perspectives. In our interview, he talks about what he finds intriguing about Hanoi and how the city has changed during the years.

1. How long have you been involved scientifically with the urban development of Hanoi and what do you find fascinating about this metropolis?

The first time I visited the city was in 1996, when I was searching for a suitable topic for my dissertation. I immediately fell in love with Hanoi. What I found most impressive was Hoan Kiem Lake with its turtle tower and the surrounding park. For me, the lake is clearly a representation of Hanoi's very heart and soul. That's why I chose to put an image of the lake on the book cover. Even today, whenever I'm in Hanoi, I try to drive a motorbike around Hoan Kiem Lake at least once a day. The 1000 year anniversary of Hanoi in October 2010 was especially moving for me: The streets all around the lake were blocked for traffic, and ten thousands of people, many of them clearly visiting from rural provinces, had gathered to enjoy the special atmosphere of the place.

The inspiring mix of different architectural styles is also always exciting: relicts of stately grandeur from the imperial era, the vast three-lined boulevards from the French colonial period, ostentatious villas in quiet gardens, numerous peaceful pagodas, innumerable buildings from the peak of socialist planned economy, and only few modern high rise buildings.

Next to that, the hustle and bustle in the delicately structured Old Quarter was fascinating, too. In every small alley, another class of goods is sold and sometimes even still produced on the spot. After my first visit, it was clear to me that I would focus on Hanoi for my dissertation research. I decided to examine the economic and socio-spatial change in the Old Quarter following the market-based reform acts on national level. I took great interest specifically in the role of private tradesman, their individual economic strategies and the consequences for the area of the Old Quarter concerning architecture.

2. Hanoi is changing rapidly, which can also be seen in your book: Where is this change in the city most visible and tangible?

There's many layers to the changing Hanoi. In 1996, when I first visited, the major part of the metropolitan population was still comparatively poor. There were hardly any cars, only few restaurants or shops for electronic devices. I can't even recall seeing a single traffic light. Today, the transport infrastructure is extremely overstrained, there's traffic jams all the time and Hanoi has turned into a place of consumption. At the same time, it's important to point out that most people have a better life now than before.

Concerning construction, there has been an immense agglomeration of buildings, both in width and height. This process started in the inner city and, after the turn of the millennium, increasingly spread out in the city's outskirts where housing estates were established. Luckily, the construction of high rise buildings is mainly centered on the outer areas of the city. It would be a good idea for Hanoi to follow the path the city of Paris chose, and not allow any high rise buildings in the inner city. Sadly, many historical buildings were lost during the process of urban transformation. The demolition of buildings from the colonial era, for example, proceeds undiminished. Often, buildings are deliberately or undeliberately neglected for so long that a professional renovation is not possible anymore and demolition seems inevitable.

There is a lack of awareness about preservation of historic buildings, but also a lack of financial resources. Quite often, the pressure to exploit a place economically is simply too high, too. In some cases, however, there has been model restauration and transformation of old colonial villas into novel, commercially profitable forms of use. The book's chapter "Change over time" documents all the complex layers of changes in the city.

3. In your book, you show the city not only from above, using spectacular drone recordings, but

also from the inside, through the portraits of very different people living in Hanoi. Is there a "typical Hanoian" and if so, how can he (or she) be described?

It was very important for me to show the everyday life and living environment of the Hanoi people in its whole range from poor to rich. A city is far more than just a collection of buildings, it's significantly shaped by its inhabitants. I am, by the way, a strong advocate of bottom-up urban development and citizen participation, keeping with the motto "cities for people". I see a lot of potential for this in the rather authoritarian Vietnam.

4. And the last question: In recent years, you have come to Hanoi several times. Do you have a favorite spot in the city?

Throughout the years, I was able to discover many interesting places in Hanoi. Next to the Hoan Kiem Lake and the area around the cathedral, I also like the Long Bien Bridge very much and the river island below it. Since there is hardly any risk of flooding, thanks to the dams at the upper course of the Red River, this area could well develop into a recreational and cultural area, a "*green lung*" for Hanoi. I can imagine open air concerts or mountain bike tracks. There are no limits to imagination.

Already today a lot of urban agriculture takes place there. In terms of sustainability, this is more than favourable because of the proximity to the market that is Hanoi. In my free time, I also like to drive along the dikes into the rural environs. Within only few kilometers, you enter a completely different world, it's fascinating. The streets next to the dikes could also be made more attractive to bicycle traffic in the medium term, and closed for automobiles. This would be another step towards more sustainability. One of the best measures the Hanoi city administration took during the last years was the construction of a round walk around West Lake. You can already see many bicycles there. Bicycle traffic in general is experiencing a renaissance at the moment – still as a luxury version, but hopefully it will become more common in the near future. In my opinion, this would help make Hanoi a more livable place.

Press release: