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Interview with Michael Waibel editor of Ho Chi Minh Mega City

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In an interview from Hamburg, the editor of the new book *Ho Chi Minh MEGA City*, Michael Waibel talks about how urban development here could surpass Singapore and how things like Saigon Pearl are getting in the way. By Lien Hoang.

Could you start with a summary of the book?

The book has been developed in the context of a research project funded by the German government. ... The background of this initiative is to support city governments in their urban development in a more sustainable way before they become a mega city. And the threshold for a mega city is usually 10 million inhabitants.

Mega city?

It's a very common term in the scientific community dealing with urban development and architecture. We've perceived a sharp increase in the development emergence of mega cities in the past decade, and this is mainly happening in Asia.

Why is this significant?

There are two opposing views related to mega urban development. Some say it is going along with disaster, ungovernability, environmental problems, poverty, social fragmentation, social polarisation. Others see it more as a chance, the coming together of different stratas of society, as an incubator of innovation, as a chance to live a better life than in the countryside and get a better education, healthcare, access to cultural opportunities.

One chapter talks about a mega village, what is that?

This mega village approach is focusing on neighbourhood life in the *hem*, alley areas. There you have low-rise neighbourhoods but high population density, and you have — from our perspective from the west — a quite high quality of life. You have interaction between people, you have a mixed-use neighbourhood. These are all things which we lost a little bit in the past 40 years in American or western European city development but which we try to revitalise now in Europe again.

People here live their lives out on the street, but as Vietnam becomes richer, aren't they spending more time in private?

It's going in the same direction as in the US. Many of the chapters [in the book] highlight the quality of that neighbourhood life, the quality of the public space and social interaction between the people and the social ties. We want to say to policymakers that these areas are not slums, these areas have their qualities.

Is the city moving in the opposite direction, though?

Policymakers follow the example of Singapore, and we say, don't do it 100 percent. You can do it a bit but please also acknowledge the inherent values of the neighbourhood.



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You've said people don't realise there's this private and public living.

Living in public place is often a sign of poverty, because people don't have enough space inside their houses so they have to live part of their lives outside. It's a bit dangerous to romanticise this kind of small alley life in the *hem*.

What do you think is a good balance between the modern city versus these hem?

Something in between the *hem* alleys and Nam Saigon, Phu My Hung area maybe. I was very critical of Phu My Hung 10 years ago. But it has developed better than expected because you have some small-scale structures, quite a lot of trade in the street, quite a high quality of urban green environment. But 10 million inhabitants of Ho Chi Minh cannot live the life people have in Phu My Hung for ecological reasons because this is generating too many emissions.

Right, there's a chapter talking about the urban heat island?

We have the phenomenon that in the city centre the temperature is up to 10 degrees higher than in the suburb areas like Phu My Hung. So if you want to make sustainable urban development you have to keep in mind there are natural ventilation corridors you have to keep open. And Saigon Pearl is doing exactly the opposite, blocking one of the most important ventilation corridors along the Saigon River.

What challenges in the city stand out?

Of course traffic is a tremendous challenge. If I were a policymaker I would make car possession as expensive as possible because cars take a lot of space. So we should stick to two-wheel traffic but make it more climate-friendly. Try to promote [electronic] bikes, for example, make them more fancy. E-bikes should not only be used by teenage girls who want to avoid wearing a helmet. You should give economic incentives for e-bikes. You should install some kind of filters for the exhaust of the motorbikes.

How important is flooding here?

We will see increasing sea levels as a consequence of climate change. [But] up to now, the increasing number of flooding events has almost nothing to do with climate change but with deficiencies of urban planning. We have a loss of retention areas, we have very high groundwater levels, and we do not have enough spaces where rain can be absorbed.

What surprised you in working on this book?

The city is consisting of so many different districts and neighbourhoods. People live a very different life in the big city, old people live another life than young people, rich people live another life than poor people. I was not aware about the degree of diversity, which is really, very high, which makes Ho Chi Minh City a fascinating city. And I know almost all of the cities in Asia, I know Shanghai, I know Beijing, Bangkok, Jakarta, Phnom Penh of course, and other cities. And I would say Ho Chi Minh City, in spite of environmental pollution, in spite of traffic jam, it has still really a very high quality of life.

Ho Chi Minh MEGA City

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