



COURTESY OF MICHAEL WAIBEL

# To Become A Livable And Inclusive City

Michael Waibel, a senior researcher and project leader in urbanism at the Department of Geography of the University of Hamburg, has returned to Vietnam to introduce the third edition of his photo book series *HCM: MEGA City*. On this occasion, Dr. Waibel granted the *Weekly* an interview.

**Q: What do you think about changes in HCMC after your return to Vietnam?**

A: Indeed, I have observed several changes happening in recent years. First, the construction of Metro Line No. 1, the main axis of public transportation reaching from the east to the west of the city, is now in full progress.

Second, Vingroup has massively transformed the waterfront along the Saigon River in Binh Thanh District and in District 1. Vinhomes Central Park is being erected on the site of a former container terminal next to Saigon Pearl residential development and Vinhomes Golden River is being erected on the site of the former Ba Son Shipyard. The demolition of the Ba Son site is a substantial loss for the whole of the city in my opinion.

Third, I observe the rapid development of the Thu Thiem peninsula. That site shall develop following the example of Shanghai's Pudong Central Business District. Major infrastructure works are taking place there at the moment. The construction of the several ring roads is in full progress. The construction of the first luxury residential area, Sala, has almost been completed.

All those changes have been extensively documented within the new book. But there is another more hidden fourth change worth mentioning. This is the widespread demolition of the extensive stock of French colonial villas. This is another significant loss of the urban heritage. To some extent, I have a certain understanding that private households sell their villas because they can simply make

a fortune out of it. In the past, other cities in Europe have also lost a big amount of their traditional housing stock due to modernization and economic takeoff. But my understanding becomes very limited if villas in possession of the State or State-owned companies get sold to make short-term profits. The (local) State should lead by example; it should have a more long-term vision and feel more responsible to preserve its unique urban heritage.

**Balancing development and preservation is always a headache in any city. What are your views?**

Obviously, it is very easy to criticize phenomena such as the ever-increasing traffic congestion, urban flooding, urban sprawl, loss of colonial heritage buildings or property-led development driven by huge companies. But looking back 20 years, in 1996 when I was in Saigon for the first time, it was a poor, run-down city with a derelict housing stock and a limited choice of decent restaurants. I can only admire the huge progress the city has made since that time. In the course of my daily work, I constantly meet enthusiastic, well-trained and very knowledgeable professionals at various departments, both at city and at national level. That is why I am generally optimistic about the future of the mega city – despite all deficiencies.

What I definitely miss is a long-term urban vision. Of course, HCMC should become a world-class city, modern and globalized. But, in my opinion, its main focus should be to become a livable and inclusive city, offering a high quality of life for

**A traffic circle on Ton Duc Thang Street in District 1, HCMC**



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all its inhabitants with its various backgrounds, a city of which its inhabitants are being proud of and a city which is proudly exhibiting its colonial and harbor heritage. The implementation of this vision should not be developed in a top-down manner but at best case organized as an open process of communication in-between as many stakeholders as possible.

**How could you describe the “mega city” at the photo book?**

First of all, I would like to mention the fact that about 80% of the photos within the current edition have been newly made in comparison to the first edition. Basically, it is not an updated edition but a new book of its own.

Highlights of the chapter “Views From Above” are certainly a big amount of aerial photos made by means of a flying camera (flycam). This opened the way to new, formerly unseen perspectives of the city.

In regard to the chapter “Architecture and Housing,” I invited several pioneering Vietnamese architecture firms to introduce their innovative projects. These fine examples of progressive architecture are not only aesthetically pleasing but also climate-adapted and energy-efficient. Hopefully, they will serve as inspiration and role model for others. Within the chapter “People of the City,” professional photographer Astrid Schulz from London made about 40 intimate portraits of urban citizens of all social classes, old and young, modern and traditional within their private living or working environment. She added this with short narrative bio-notes of the portrayed people in this way to create a fascinating mirror of current urban society. Within the chapter “Soul of the City,” I looked for the identity of this dynamic city and invited several professional photographers to submit picture compilations.

**What messages do you want to deliver through this book?**

Given my background as a researcher, one important aim is to create a lasting document of current urban development. Thereby, I follow a holistic approach and try to grasp the mega city in its whole spatial and



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**Young women pose in front of the Notre Dame Cathedral in downtown HCMC**

social bandwidth. For example, the photos cover the whole spatial range of the city, from the city center to the rural periphery.

Due to my academic work in Vietnam in the past, I would also like to advocate for green architecture. That is why I invited young and innovative Vietnamese architecture firms to introduce recently erected climate-adapted and energy-efficient housing projects as mentioned above.

In addition, I would also like to connect the contents of the books with the most important stakeholders in the field of urban planning and architecture in Vietnam. That is why I sought official endorsement from many relevant institutions, among them are the Vietnam National Institute of Urban and Rural Planning, the Vietnam National Institute of Architecture, the HCMC Institute of Development Studies, the HCMC Department of Construction, the HCMC University of Architecture, the HCMC University of Social Sciences and

Humanities and the Vietnam Green Building Council.

Finally, I would like to raise public awareness about issues of urban development, in general. The urban citizens of the mega city should know their city better and they should become more proud of their city. If people are proud of their city they behave in a more responsible way versus the city. This might eventually contribute to sustainable urban development.

**How can the ideas from the book be accessed by insiders and people?**

A famous proverb in Germany has it that a picture is saying more than 1,000 words. Before, I have been publishing academic papers within a small scientific community only. This current book reaches out to a wide audience. I firmly believe that photos depicted within the book contribute to a better understanding of the urban development and the urban society of HCMC. The book can be bought at Artbook store and through Ashui.com.

**Please elaborate on your future projects in Vietnam?**

My next project in Vietnam will be publication of the second edition of the “Hà Nội: CAPITAL City.” The first edition received the prestigious “Bùi Xuân Phái - Vì tình yêu Hà Nội” Award in September 2015 but it is a three-kilo-coffee table book, so it is too heavy and too expensive for most of the Vietnamese. That is why I would like to publish a more portable lightweight edition with the same format like the current MEGA City edition. For this project I am still looking for corporate sponsors. For their support, they would receive a certain amount of customized copies with their company logo on the front cover. I think such a book is a perfect gift for customers and business friends.

**Reported by Trung Chau**



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