

# International Influences and Local Adaptation in Urban Development

## A Research Note from Vinh City, Central Vietnam

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*Abstract: As the built environment of urban areas is the result of interactions between different actors and power relations, researching urban dynamics in Vinh City in Central Vietnam's Nghe An province reveals a rich field of international influences and local adaptations. Since the late 19th century, with the establishment of French Colonialism in Indochina, international influences have been a driving force behind the city's development and have at the same time been adapted to local conditions. Three different economically thriving settlements were merged into the multi-centred city Vinh by the French colonial administration. After its destruction during the French and American Wars, Vinh had been reconstructed with help from the German Democratic Republic. From the 1990s on, international cooperation promoting new priorities of community participation and sustainability in urban development became influential in Vinh City. Using (expert) interviews and participatory observation as well as document analysis and archival research, the author's ongoing research analyses the power relations and interactions between actors shaping the history and development of Vinh City. This research note introduces some of his preliminary findings, aiming at providing an overview of how different actors contributed to the particular development of Vinh City since the late 19th century.*

*Key words: Vietnam; urban development; international cooperation; local adaptation*

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Urban areas are the result of interactions between a large number of actors who try to put into concrete their visions of urbanity, thus expressing ideologies, political, social and personal agendas. The outcome of these interactions reflects the power relations shaping the urban environment. Applying this approach to an analysis of the history and development of Vinh City in Central Vietnam reveals the importance of international actors. Interactions between international influences and local adaptations have been part of urban development in Vinh City since the establishment of French colonialism in the region in 1885. Since then, different visions of urbanity were promoted by changing international actors and against the backdrop of shifting international power relations and politics. These were absorbed into local settings and adapted to social, institutional and political specifics, as well as geographic or climatic conditions.

### Historical background

Before the establishment of French Colonialism in Nghệ An Province, Vinh had been a small but important centre of regional trade and administration. Its importance grew when it became the site of the mandarin examinations in 1770 and with the construction of a citadel on the orders of Emperor Gia Long in 1802-1803 (Chu Trọng Huyền, 1998). In pre-colonial times Vinh had a small population of around 3000 inhabitants, who served the imperial garrison and mandarins as well as transportation, rice export and handicraft enterprises (Del Testa, 2007). Despite their importance, the citadel and the settlement did not gain the status of an urban centre before the French established their colonial rule in Indochina.

In July 1885 French troops landed in the nearby river harbour Bến Thủy. They were quickly able to seize Vinh, from where they set out to suppress resistance in the countryside (Chu Trọng Huyền, 1998). A residence was established in the same month and Vinh soon became the centre of the colonial economy of Nghệ An and neighbouring Hà Tĩnh province (Del Testa, 2007).

### Urban development under French colonialism

In the following years, Vinh and the two nearby settlements of Bến Thủy and Trường Thi each developed as administratively separate centres. Vinh gained the status of an urban centre in 1898 / 1899, continuing its pre-colonial role as the administrative and commercial centre of northern Central Vietnam. Bến Thủy developed as a port that served the colonial economy as a transport hub and an industrial zone. From 1908 onwards, Trường Thi became the site of Indochina's second largest railroads repair workshop. These three separate settlements each thrived on their respective specialisation and had gained the status of separate towns until they were merged to form Vinh – Bến Thủy City in 1927 (Chu Trọng Huyền, 1998).

While urbanisation produced social phenomena found in urban (colonial) centres in general, Vinh's size and position in the colonial urban system resulted in particular urban structures and social phenomena. Firstly, the specifics of colonial cities, such as ethnically-distinct districts or display of the grandeur of the mother country, were not prevalent. This is partly due to the fact that, as a secondary centre, Vinh did not receive as much attention and funds for urban planning and development as Hà Nội (Del Testa, 2007; Logan, 2000). Secondly, as a result of the absence of physical barriers between different ethnic groups in combination with the relatively smaller foreign population the modern state and economy were effectively run by the Vietnamese by the late 1930s (Del Testa, 2007). Thirdly, while Vinh's development relied on a large number of industrial workers, these maintained close ties with surrounding villages. The resulting flows of people and information between countryside and city were critical to the strong communist movement in Nghệ An, culminating in the Nghệ-Tĩnh Soviet Movement of 1930-1931, and playing an important role in the liberation of

the city on 21.8.1945 (Del Testa, 2007; Chu Trọng Huyền, 1998).

### Vinh during the French and American Wars

After 1945, Vinh experienced nearly 30 years of war. In the French war, Vinh's destruction was mainly due to a "destroy to resist" policy Hồ Chí Minh had called for. In the first five months of resistance, 1335 buildings, including 301 multi-storey buildings, were destroyed. After the Geneva Peace Conference in 1954, Vinh was supposed to regain its role as an economic, administrative and educational centre. However, the efforts to rebuild the city were destroyed during bombing campaigns in the American War. Vinh as an industrial centre, with the nearby harbour of Cửa Lò and its location on the Trường Sơn supply route to the war in the south was the target of bombing raids from 1964 on. In response, the city was evacuated in 1965. What could be reconstructed during the war was destroyed in the bombing campaign of 1972. When the Paris Peace Accord was signed in January 1973, Vinh had been nearly totally destroyed (Hoàng Ngọc Anh et al., 2003).



Quang Trung Zone C with the new TECCO Towers, for which residential building C1 was demolished in 2004

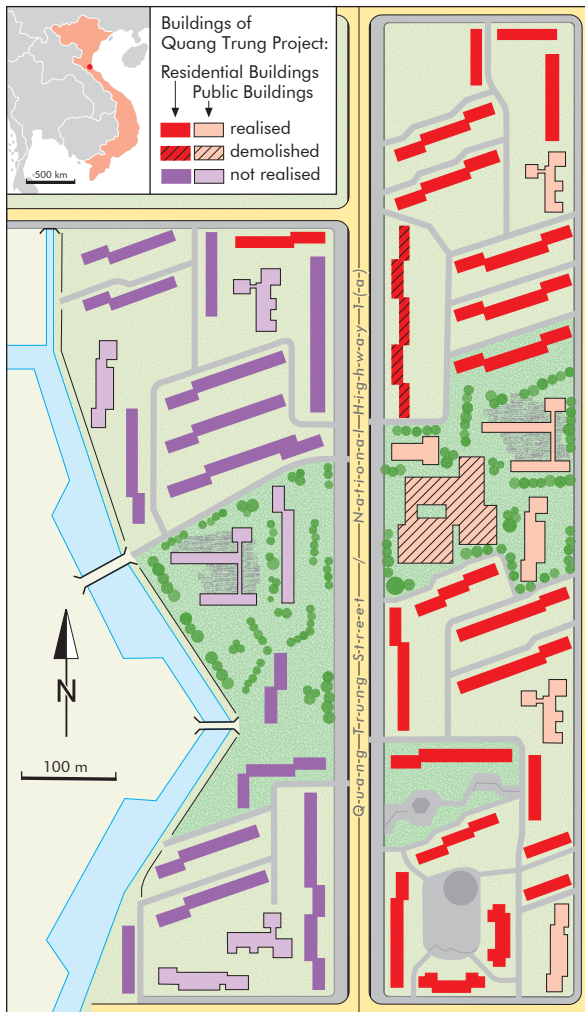


Fig. 1: Plan for the construction of Quang Trung residential area, realised and not-realised buildings. The location of the old citadel is visible in the West.

### Reconstruction as a socialist city

For help in reconstructing cities and infrastructure after the war, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) turned to its allies, the USSR and other socialist countries. As a country with a lot of experience in rebuilding heavily destroyed cities, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) took on the task to rebuild Vinh under the slogan of “international solidarity” (Vietnam-Ausschuss, n.d.).

In 1973 a bilateral process started that included fact-finding missions and the establishment of working committees, culminating in an agreement to rebuild Vinh City signed in October 1973. It included the drafting of a “General plan for building the city”, the construction of several industrial plants, training of cadres in the construction sector, as well as the provision of building materials and machinery. The agreement envisioned a period of four years to complete these tasks (Liên hiệp, 2011). The official vision of the future city was clear: “Vinh of tomorrow will be a socialist city” (Vietnam-Ausschuss, n.d., 33).

son was to be allocated 4m<sup>2</sup> of living space. Quang Trung was supposed to house about 15.000 persons in 2.480 apartments (Liên hiệp, 2011).

GDR-DRV cooperation in the construction of Quang Trung produced particular results compared to housing estates erected with help of socialist countries in other Vietnamese cities (Schwenkel, forthcoming; Marr, 2006; Đặng Thái Hoàng, 1999). First of all, learning from previous projects the Vietnamese request for delivery of pre-fabricated building parts was rejected and the construction of Quang Trung was embedded in the plan for a regional building material industry (Schaefer, 2011). Secondly, plans and designs for Quang Trung (and the General plan for building the city) took climatic conditions into account, such as the “Lao wind”. Vietnamese planners and architects also incorporated elements of Feng Shui into the works (Interview Ngô Văn Yêm, 10 November 2010; Mönnig, 1989). Thirdly, the ideas of modern socialist living were mainly applied to the incorporation of residen-

The plan for reconstruction reflected historical structures and characteristics of Vinh. When Vinh’s former inhabitants had returned to the city after the bombing had stopped, old streets, remaining burned-out buildings and the citadel’s remains served as points of reference for spontaneous construction and were incorporated into the plan (Mönnig, 1987). Vinh’s history as a city that was formed from three different settlements was also taken up. While the citadel area and Bến Thủy regained their role as commercial centre and port, Trường Thi was to become the location of administrative buildings.

A major part of the cooperation was the construction of the Quang Trung residential area.

The area was planned to consist of 36 five-storey residential buildings as well as educational, entertainment, communal and cultural facilities. Apartments of different sizes were designed according to the prevalent family structure with households of up to eight persons; each per-

sonal buildings with cultural, sports and public facilities into integrated urban space. Most apartments were designed to be inhabited by only one family, and had private facilities for cooking, washing etc. “Most notably, it was strongly influenced by East German principles of the built environment that in the 1960s embraced a new ‘culture of privacy,’ as well as independent living” (Schwenkel, forthcoming).

While some adaptations to local conditions were intentionally designed, the new residents also modified the buildings and area to their needs. Nearly all open space between the buildings was turned into vegetable gardens and additional housing and storage space was created through make-shift loggias.

However, this phenomenon could be limited in comparison to other cities by designing a base storey for these functions (Mönnig, 1989).

Despite its housing function, the Quang Trung project also served political purposes. It was a showcase of what solidarity between socialist countries could achieve, as well as of the bright future a modern socialist state promised its people. Its location on Highway No. 1 was chosen as a symbol of hope for the successful liberation of the whole country (Mönnig, 1987).

Although the project of Quang Trung was successful in its goal to provide housing for many people in only a short time, the project faced a number of problems. Because of economic difficulties, cooperation had to be extended for two years until 1980. In the end, only 22 of the planned apartment buildings could be built, housing close to ten thousand residents (Schwenkel, 2010). Although the apartments were equipped with a plumbing system, this did not become fully operational until the 1990s, partly due to a lack of water and electricity. Until then, people used to carry water from outside wells to the upper floors (Mönnig, 1987; Interview Ngô Văn Yêm, 12 August 2011).

The General Plan for the construction of Vinh accomplished its goal of projecting the general development of the city, and has since been serving as the basis for development plans of the city. The Quang Trung residential area, however, did fare worse. With economic difficulties persisting throughout the 1980s, the buildings state deteriorated quickly. Additional reasons were the partly poor quality of construction material, hurried building in order to satisfy

demand, insufficient and uncoordinated maintenance work. Unsuitable habits of inhabitants, such as raising animals and cutting wood in the apartments, as well as the harsh climate also contributed to the deteriorating quality (Interview Ngô Văn Yêm, 12 August 2011). Despite these difficulties, GDR-DRV/SRV (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, successor of the DRV since 1976) cooperation was praised as exemplary for the creation of urban space in both countries until the late 1980s (Mönnig, 1989, 1987; Trung Huy Chinh, 1985).

Apart from the Quang Trung area, in the 1970s and 80s housing in Vinh was usually provided by state companies or agencies for their workers and employees. Those who could afford it were able to build their own houses with permission from the authorities. Urban development policies concentrated on transportation infrastructure and administrative buildings. The number of people building privately rose as the economy recovered in the late 1980s. From 1990 on, state agencies and companies started to sell houses and apartments that had previously been rented out to employees and workers. After the end of GDR help in urban development in 1981, no international cooperation was carried out in this field until the mid-1990s.

### International cooperation after the Renovation reforms

International cooperation in the field of urban development picked up again in the mid-1990s, in a very different political situation. The Vietnamese *đổi mới* (renovation) reforms of 1986 had created a situation in which new international agencies with new approaches to urban development entered the country.

In 1997, Vinh was selected for the Localising Agenda 21 (LA21) project of UN Habitat (Verschure & Tuts, 2004). The project introduced to Vinh priorities and processes in urban planning and management that had by then gained prominence in international cooperation. The World Summit in 1992 had promoted sustainable development and the participation of communities in planning and management under the name Agenda 21. Article 4 of the Habitat Agenda, adopted at the Habitat II Conference states: “Democracy, respect for human rights, transparent, representative and accountable government and administration in all sectors of society, as well as effective participation by civil society, are indispensable foundations for the realization of sustainable development” (UNCHS, 1996). In practise, this change of ideas signifies a shift away from a focus on technology in development cooperation towards urban planning and management on the basis of participatory processes.

Implementing this approach, the LA21 project faced difficulties. Vinh’s authorities were not used to the new ways of planning: “Seminars took the role of brainstorming sessions and the new ideas brought forth by foreign experts were politely listened to and welcomed while simultaneously kept at arm’s length from the existing planning complexities” (Shannon & Loeckx, 2004, 133). However, the project succeeded in opening up discussions about the city’s future to more stakeholders than the top-down planning process that is usually followed in Vietnam. All of these stakeholders were part of the existing structures of the state or its mass organisations (Shannon & Loeckx, 2004). One visible result of these discussions was the revision of Vinh’s “General Plan for Urban

Development 2000–2020“. However, the project’s publication states that such plans represent “Unrealisable dreams [that] are projected upon the territory in a fashion that often has little to do with the existing typo/morphology and landscape” (Shannon & Loeckx, 2004, 123).

While the new ideas of the LA 21 project were hard to realize in the 1990s, the contemporary possibilities for participatory urban development are better. Especially the Grassroots Democracy decree (decree no. 29/1998/ND-CP issued in 1998, replaced by Ordinance no. 34/2007/PL-UBTVQH11 in 2007) improved the environment for international cooperation with a focus on decision-making processes and community participation.

Currently Vinh is involved in numerous projects promoting the application of best practice models, people’s participation or horizontal exchange with Vietnamese and foreign cities.

Most notably, one urban upgrading project carried out in Vinh is currently promoted as an example of how cooperation between the people and authorities can result in outcomes that are advantageous for all stakeholders (T.L, 1 December 2010). This project was carried out by the residents of Cửa Nam ward’s Hữu Nghị communal living area (khu tập thể (KTT) in Vietnamese), under the framework of the Asian Coalition for Community Action program (ACCA). ACCA brings together existing community development fund (CDF) groups or helps to establish new ones. On each administrative level, a CDF board decides on loan applications from member groups. Currently, nine cities in Vietnam are part of the program that is carried out in 15 countries. It was initiated by



Informally erected birdcages to extend living space area



One of the „Culture Houses“ in Quang Trung

Source: All photos by Tim Kaiser 2010/2011

the Bangkok-based Asian Coalition of Housing Rights (ACHR). In Vietnam the program is coordinated by the Association of Cities of Vietnam (ACVN).

KTT Hữu Nghị was built in the 1970s for the employees of the Cửa Tiền Company, which later became the Hữu Nghị Company. Like in most of the communal living areas in Vinh, the buildings' quality deteriorated over time. These areas are to be demolished or rebuilt under a provincial plan (UBND Tỉnh Nghệ An, 2007). With the help of ACHR and ACVN, the residents were able to convince the authorities to allow them to build smaller houses than provincial regulations allowed for. A number of residents would have to relocate if these regulations would have been applied. As far as possible, all works were carried out by residents themselves, material of the old buildings was reused and new material bought jointly to reduce costs. Thus, compared to conventional ways of rebuilding KTT, costs were much lower. The CDF group of KTT Hữu Nghị used the residents' own funds and a loan of 50.000 USD provided by the city's CDF to finance the project (Interview Lê Việt Hùng, 28 June 2011, Interview Tăng Thị Đương, 30 June 2011).

While new concepts of urban development are introduced to Vinh through international cooperation, these concepts are also adapted to local conditions. As mentioned above, all of the new actors the LA 21 project introduced to discussions on the development of Vinh were part of the extended structures of the state. This phenomenon is often found in cooperation projects with a focus on public participation. Participation is usually channelled through mass organisations, notably the Women's Union (Parenteau & Nguyen Quoc Thong, 2005; Interview Frank Pogade, 11 February 2011). Many of ACCA's CDF groups are saving groups managed by the Women's Union. Despite the program's intention to break up hierarchical structures, these continue to dominate decision making processes. While CDF boards in other countries also consist of community representatives, the boards on the various administrative levels in Vinh consist of members of the respective people's committee and the Women's Union (ACHR, 2002; ACCA, 2009; Interview Tăng Thị Đương, 30

June 2011). While close cooperation with authorities is necessary for a project's success, it also enables these to ensure that the borders of participation defined by the state are not crossed.

## Conclusion

This research note is only a first step in analysing the driving forces of urban development in Vinh City. However, it shows that international actors influential to the city's development changed over time due to international politics. It also shows that changing international discourses on urban management and planning are reflected in the city's landscape. Whether these discourses promoted the construction of a socialist city or people's participation in public urban life, they have always been adapted to the existing realities of the city.

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