

# The Crescent District in Saigon South

## A showcase for post-modern urban development in Vietnam

Michael Waibel

„The Crescent – an iconic waterside project located in the heart of Phu My Hung’s international commercial and financial district, is a fitting symbol of some of the finest architectural works in Ho Chi Minh City.“  
taken from the web-site of the project: [www.the-crescent.com](http://www.the-crescent.com)

Vietnam’s metropolises have witnessed two major inter-linked developments during the past decade: First, the widespread erection of comprehensively planned new urban areas in the urban periphery; second, the gradual emergence of an urban middle-class population. The latter soon became the most important driver for advancing suburbanization processes into new urban areas. Meanwhile, residential suburbanization is followed by large-scale retail development driven by global players. The Crescent commercial and cultural district located within the largest new urban area of Vietnam, Saigon South, is a perfect showcase for these phenomena.



All photos by Michael Waibel 2009/2010





The Crescent project is part of the commercial centre of Saigon South, a mixed-use urban development area covering 3,300 hectares of former wetlands about 4 km south of the city centre of Ho Chi Minh City. The projected population of Saigon South for the year 2020 ranges between 500,000 and 1,000,000 people. So far, around 200,000 inhabitants have moved into the most internationalized urban landscape of Vietnam. Typically for new urban area development in Vietnam, it is being implemented through a public-private partnership model: The Phu My Hung Corporation (PMH) is a company founded as a joint venture between the Taiwanese corporation Central Trading & Development Group (CT&D) and the Vietnamese Tan Thuan Industrial Promotion Corporation (IPC), the latter being under control of the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City. PMH had already been awarded the contract for the development of Saigon South in 1993.

In the case of the Crescent Project, which started in 2008, PMH has taken the leader as the main developer, too. The project basically consists of several elements from the toolbox of post-modern urban development. High-end residential and office spaces can be found as well as spectacular urban design gadgets, such as the so-called "starlight" pedestrian bridge that sports an illuminated artificial waterfall. The starlight bridge ends at the most exquisitely designed restaurant of Ho Chi Minh City, the "Cham Charm", owned by self-made millionaire Khai (owner of the Khai-silk empire). It can be seen as a typical example of historical eclecticism and of the re-invention of tradition by imi-

tating older forms – in this case, Cham architecture.

The 700-metre long promenade along the waterfront, the so-called Crescent Walk, is supposed to serve as stage for events such as fashion or cultural shows. This can be interpreted as a sign of the orchestration and increased commercialization of the built environment. Further, PMH is regulated by omnipresent billboard signs, indicating an increasing transition from public to private space. The Crescent Walk leads to what the developer expects to become the first international-standard shopping mall in Vietnam, the so-called Crescent Mall. This project alone has a total investment volume of more than US\$100 million. The Crescent Mall is intended to develop into Vietnam's largest shopping complex after its scheduled completion in the end of 2011. It will comprise more than 200 shops, a huge supermarket, an international cuisine food court, a multiplex cinema, and further entertainment spaces. The U.S.-based company Savills Vietnam made a successful bid as its manager and exclusive leasing agent.

The production of such post-modern urban spaces is usually contested. Critics point out that standardized global products created by global companies serve globally homogenized tastes there. In this way, the Crescent Mall development would contribute to the erosion of local difference. Not surprisingly, the self-perception of the developer is different, as following quotation from their web-site shows:

**"Crescent Mall is a further step of the direct fulfilment of the promise made by Phu My Hung to the Ho Chi Minh City citizens to improve**

**the quality of living."**

Also, not much criticism is expected from the side of the targeted customers. Quite the contrary: It is safe to assume that the Crescent project is highly welcomed by the members of the new middle classes of Ho Chi Minh City. They most likely regard it primarily as a symbol of their city's world-class status ("it looks just like in Singapore") and, probably most importantly, as a spatial reflection of their own economic rise within a society that was predominantly poor only two decades ago. At least, this should be the case if their societal prestige and class identity-creation really is solely built upon consumption. Indeed, post-materialistic or alternative lifestyles are currently difficult to find among them. The experience of other Asian countries shows that new middle classes often do not want to endanger their newly gained status by being different from the mainstream. Civil society development in Vietnam is still at the beginning, in general. Following this line of argumentation, the new middle classes neither care if the development of the Crescent will contribute to a fragmented city form, nor does it matter to them if their consumption behaviour leads to a sharply increased ecological footprint. All these issues have been highlighted in a very hypothetical way, of course. It just shows that the lifestyles of the new urban middle class population in Vietnam, their consumption patterns, and their aspirations towards a more pro-environmental behaviour are still largely a black hole from the perspective of social research.

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