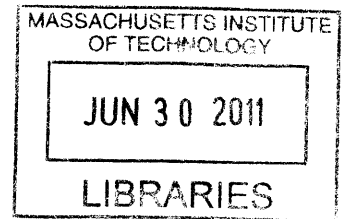


**Drawing the Line:  
Spatial Street Vendor Management in Ho Chi Minh City**

By

Courtney Sung

B.S. in Planning  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
Cambridge, Massachusetts (2010)



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Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master in City Planning**

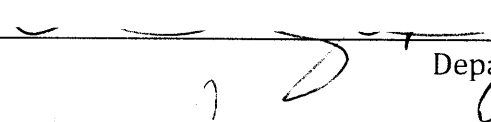
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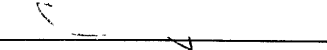
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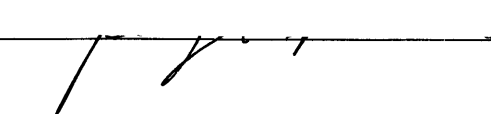
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## **ABSTRACT**

A lack of consensus exists among urban planners and government officials on what to do with the complex issue of informal street vending and sidewalk usage, with cities often turning to ineffective licensing or harmful street clearance. This paper seeks to address this unfulfilling dichotomy by analyzing a tourism proposal for a painted pedestrian path in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, to assess whether this intervention has potential as a spatial management tool for street vendors, given existing sidewalk practices. Since Ho Chi Minh City has taken to clearing vendors in the name of tourism, this proposal uniquely positions itself at the nexus of street vendor management and urban tourism, and hopes to capitalize on two existing forms of management in the city: a painted sidewalk line to regulate vending, and an informal motorcycle taxi union.

To understand the existing system of sidewalk uses, this thesis analyzes official reports and policies, utilizes interviewing and mapping fieldwork conducted in Ho Chi Minh City with street vendors, and examines data from news articles and tourist surveys. These three levels of research reveal significant mismatches in policy goals and existing practices, such as the government's targeting mobile street vendors when they take up significantly less space than business spillover and sidewalk cafes, and the government's attitude of clearing the streets for tourists when in fact tourists comment on Vietnamese street life and street food more than any other experience.

Given these mismatches, it seems that this visual line has potential to both include street vendors and organize sidewalk life into an appealing tourist experience. However, the goal or purpose of the intervention will ultimately determine its impacts on the city with respects to displacement and gentrification. Through identifying the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, this thesis is able to propose strategies and planning tools to mitigate the impacts of this intervention, and argues that a visual tourist intervention of this nature could in fact present a viable street vendor management model.

**Thesis Supervisor: Annette M. Kim, PhD**

Title: Associate Professor of Urban Planning

**Thesis Reader: Tunney Lee**

Title: Professor of Architecture and Urban Studies and Planning, Emeritus

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **Terms and Abbreviations**

**HCMC** - Ho Chi Minh City

***xe ôm*** – motorbike taxi, also known as Honda-om

***hang rong*** – roaming street vendors

***don Gành*** – bamboo poles/basket carriers

***nón*** – cone hats

***cyclos*** – rickshaws, three wheeled vehicles

***Đổi Mới*** – also known as the “Renovation,” market liberalization policies enacted in 1986

**VND** – Vietnamese đồng, the currency

**People’s Committee** – level of government/executive council.

**Districts** (quận) – highest level of administrative division in the city. Districts are divided into wards.

**Wards** (Phường) – administrative subdivisions within Districts.

**Decision 74** - key policy enacted in 2008 by HCMC People’s Committee stating that all uses of roadways and sidewalks need to have approved licenses, even temporary uses

**MIT slab** – MIT sidewalk laboratory, research group directed by Professor Annette Kim



## **I. Introduction**

"The purpose [of the ban on street vending] is to make sidewalks available for pedestrians and improve the face of the city. Foreign tourists will be happier and appreciate our management."

*Hanoi's mayor, People's Committee Chairman, Nguyen The Thao<sup>1</sup>*

"The government can't wipe out sidewalk sellers like the Westerners have because everyone [in Vietnam] is so poor. They can say so, but they can't do it..."

*Drinks vendor, Ho Chi Minh City, January 2010*

## **Background**

Urban planners and government officials lack consensus on what to do with street vending, especially within rapidly urbanizing cities. From ineffective licensing to heavy-handed street clearance, the struggle to maintain a vibrant yet controllable street life has yet to land on a realistic solution. Is it possible to have planning interventions trying to manage street activity, instead of eradicating the life on them? Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam presents an opportunity to analyze a planning proposal using a spatial management approach, combined with tourism, to its street vending situation.

Ho Chi Minh City, still popularly known as Saigon, is often described as the "Pearl of the Orient" with its spacious, tree-lined boulevards, balmy weather and French colonial architecture. This cosmopolitan hub of Vietnam has experienced remarkable economic growth and in recent years, increasing attraction as a luxury destination. Yet what visitors remember and residents note as the aspect truly definitive of Vietnam and HCMC is the

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<sup>1</sup> "Vietnam capital plans to ban street vendors." AFP. 2008

ubiquitous, bustling street activity and sidewalk life found on the largest roads and smallest alleys.<sup>2</sup>

**SaigonTourist Travel Service:**  
“The city is considered the economic capital of the country and keeps booming with new hotels and businesses. Yet “The Pearl of the Orient” still retains its charm with shaded boulevards, pavement cafes and French-European-styled buildings.”



**Figure 1: Street life in District 1, Ho Chi Minh City**

To be a pedestrian in Ho Chi Minh City is to embark on a vibrant obstacle course unlike any other. The sidewalk is for much more than transport in this city; the sidewalk is a marketplace, workshop, billboard, parking lot, yard, community center and café all rolled into one, a truly used and experienced public space.<sup>3</sup> Colorful goods spill out of storefronts onto the streets, while motorbike taxis (*xe ôm*) and informal street vendors in iconic cone hats (*nón*) toting famous street food with bamboo poles contend for the remaining pavement space alongside numerous sidewalk cafes and bicycle repairmen.<sup>4</sup> While informal street activity is found throughout the world, Vietnamese street activity is

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<sup>2</sup> “One cannot claim to have known a culture until one has understood and seen the lifestyles of the people. It is always a joy to stroll around the bustling crowded city streets... buying fruit from street vendors (sic) and eating the meals cooked by the people!” – GuideVietnam.com

<sup>3</sup> “...the sidewalk, a public space, became a yard for families.” - Koh, David. 2007. *The Sidewalk as Civic Space: History and Dynamics in the City of Hanoi*. In *Globalization, the Rise of Civil Society and Civic Spaces in Pacific Asia Cities*, by Mike Douglass, K.C. Ho, and Giok-ling Ooi. London: Routledge. 1

<sup>4</sup> “Food is everywhere in Saigon, and the street is the place to eat well - if you know how.”- Gross, Matt. 2005. “Going to Ho Chi Minh City.” *The New York Times*, April 24.

unprecedented and widely documented. People have commented, “buying and selling on Vietnam’s city streets is part of Vietnamese culture.”<sup>5</sup> A visitor unused to this type of street life activity is simultaneously excited, intrigued and overwhelmed.

This description of street life is not meant to romanticize the hard work that is street vending and the downsides to this type of activity. While many experts agree that this type of extraordinary entrepreneurial activity is the result of the *Đổi Mới* (“Renovation”) economic reforms of 1986, which opened up the markets to private enterprise, many of these vendors end up pursuing vending for lack of other employment.<sup>6</sup> Vendors must endure harsh weather conditions, lack of permanent space, heavy goods, inconsistent revenue, and insecurity from being illegal. Moreover, crowding the sidewalk in this manner can often trouble urban administrators with unhygienic food preparation, evasion of taxes, reduced pedestrian space, trash, and in HCMC’s case, high numbers of traffic accidents – 940 people died from traffic-related accidents in the city in 2010.<sup>7</sup> Complete lack of management is not the right answer.

In response to these concerns, the Vietnamese central government and Ho Chi Minh City People’s Committee have been reacting strongly in recent years. In 2008, the capital Hanoi banned street vendors from 62 streets within its city center, and Ho Chi Minh City implemented a law (Decision 74) requiring licenses for all temporary uses of the sidewalk – effectively banning most of the spontaneous life. Both governments claimed that this move

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<sup>5</sup> Tran, Mai. 2010. Institutional Inconsistencies and Microentrepreneurial Intent to Quite a Business: Street Vendors in Vietnam. B.S., Western Kentucky University.

Dana, L. P. 1994. “A marxist mini-dragon? Entrepreneurship in today’s Vietnam.” *Journal of Small Business Management* 32 (2).

<sup>6</sup> “...before economic freedom, the sidewalk had been relatively free of civil activity, by the late 1980s such activity became a daily sight of Hanoi City, and a daily pain for Hanoi’s urban administrators.” Koh 2007, 1

<sup>7</sup> “HCMC Ignores Cholera Threat Brought By Street Stalls.” *Thanh Nien Daily*, 2008

“Road accidents kill 940 in Ho Chi Minh City last year.” *Thanh Nien Daily*, 2010

was to reclaim the sidewalk for pedestrians, especially tourists, and to improve city aestheticism. The deputy chairman of a ward's People Committee even condemned vending from a normative cultural standpoint, saying that "encroaching on sidewalks to hawk goods and park vehicles...[are] 'typical' uncivilized acts."<sup>8</sup>

Clearing these informal actors away can be disastrous on multiple levels. The informal economy often fills gaps in what governments have failed to provide efficiently, such as low-skill employment opportunities, consistent service delivery, and affordable goods, services and cheap construction. Eradicating these aspects would destroy significant options, especially for the urban poor.<sup>9</sup> Also, one could normatively argue that there are valuable urban interactions, traditions and dynamics found in the street life of some cities that would disappear with clearance.

Ironically, this type of brute-force, restrictive policy is also rather ineffective when enacted in isolation, not paired with assistance to those losing their jobs. As a professor at HCMC's University of Social Sciences and Humanities writes, "Vendors will eventually end up returning to the very sidewalks where they were chased away...That's their sole livelihood and meal ticket."<sup>10</sup> The enforcing authorities express frustration as well, with one deputy police chief saying, "All we have done is just to slap them on the wrist. We go on

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<sup>8</sup> "HCMC making efforts to usher in 'civilized lifestyle'", *Thanh Nien Daily*, 2008, quote by Nguyen Hai Quan, deputy chairman of Ben Nghe Ward People's Committee in District 1

<sup>9</sup> "City governments tend to impose policies and rules to restrict informal activities with the main purpose to improve urban law and order," he said..."However, it needs to recognize that the informal sector contributes remarkably to a city's employment and economy. Informal businesses are not only the main supply system for a city's poor but also important supply system for everyone else in the city," UN Resident Coordinator in Vietnam, Bruce Campbell. - "Pain of the Nation," *Thanh Nien Daily*, 2009

<sup>10</sup> "Out on the Street," *Thanh Nien Daily*, 2011

patrols, every day, just to show the sidewalk vendors that we are on duty.” It seems that the “...law has done little more than to squeeze police and vendors alike.<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 2: Cleared sidewalk on Dong Khoi street, District 1**

This story is all too familiar. In an effort to organize the city and present a better image to the world, planners and officials turn to licensing or bureaucratically intensive forms of regulation. Yet, locals, vendors, enforcers and even foreign tourists have expressed disappointment at this clearance, and the policy has not actually achieved its intended outcome. Is there, perhaps, a need for a different paradigm – one utilizing more visual, spatial approaches?

Fortunately, there have been several recent developments showing some promise for the future of street vending and sidewalk activity in HCMC. Given that street vending is still occurring despite the ban, certain wards and districts in HCMC have been experimenting with informal motorbike taxi organizations<sup>12</sup> and interestingly, painting a

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> A surprising development, given that unions and associations are typically prohibited by the People’s Committee

line down the sidewalk delineating where store activity, vending, and motorbikes should stay, and what part of the sidewalk pedestrians can use. This type of grassroots innovation has fascinating implications for city-wide management.

On the top-down level, the HCMC government also seems more open to new ideas to address the street vendor-tourism tension. Inspired by pedestrian streets in other (European) cities, several government agencies have started investigating the possibility of implementing a pedestrian path appealing to tourists. The HCMC Department of Architecture approached the “MIT slab” research group (Sidewalk Laboratory), directed by Professor Annette Kim, to propose a potential pedestrian path throughout the city in January 2010.<sup>13</sup> This attitude shift is an opportunity to capitalize on an existing management feature of the sidewalks – the painted line – and to utilize HCMC’s unique street vending culture. It allows us to think creatively about how tourists can experience a city and how to integrate and manage the informal economy of street vending. What could this line mean as a spatial planning intervention with implications for street vending, sidewalk activity, local culture and tourism?

### **Research Question**

The purpose of this thesis, therefore, is to look critically and think analytically about this proposed spatial intervention, understanding what issues it might address, how it might interact with the concerns of urban poverty and development, and what problems we need to think about before it is implemented. As a research question, I specifically want to address how this proposed line will interact with the current system in HCMC, given sidewalk practices, and how we can best implement this line to respect existing forms of

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<sup>13</sup> <http://web.mit.edu/slab>

livelihood and move forward. I hypothesize different outcomes given this intervention and propose complimentary policy ideas and strategies. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to analyze how spatial forms of regulation might apply to street vending activities and to lay out the possible next steps to take in formulating this planning intervention.

## **Methodology and Thesis Structure**

This intervention interfaces with many different arenas in the world of street vending. The research methodology is, therefore, multi-dimensional and consists of three lenses. First, I briefly analyze the informal economy in Vietnam in order to understand the complexities behind and official attitudes toward street vending in HCMC, utilizing reports, official policies and academic research. I then complement this research with personal fieldwork conducted in HCMC over four weeks in January and December 2010, using interviewing and physical observation to identify prominent vendor issues, implementation obstacles and opportunities. To conclude, I examine existing data through news articles and tourist forums to see what type of popular opinion there is toward street life. Understanding the situation from these three unique backgrounds helps to inform comprehension of the existing sidewalk system and provides fuller insight on what stakeholders have tried in the past – from official, vendor and locals' perspectives. This three-pronged research methodology also assesses what strategies have worked or stalled in HCMC, and so is able to identify key opportunities for coordination and implementation.

This thesis consists of the following sections: I first introduce the spatial intervention in fuller detail, identifying what areas of the city it affects and what the motivation is for the proposal. I then review the relevant literature regarding street vendor

management and the interplay between urban tourism and development to identify innovative strategies for the HCMC case and key questions to address. The next section discusses the research findings, followed by an analysis of the potential impacts of this painted line given the research and literature, and a discussion of the implications for implementing this line with suggestions for complementary policies and strategies. I close with conclusions and areas of potential future research.



## II. Intervention Proposal

### Introduction

“We rarely go in a straight line, instead diverting from main streets down an alley or short lane or two for a quieter glimpse of daily life.”

- *Dave and Robyn, describing Cho Lon; EatingAsia and Wall Street Journal CityWalk*

This idea of using a line as a tourism attraction is very simple. It takes the common idea of a pedestrian, tourist trail, which suggests destinations and places for tourists in a city, and features a painted line on the sidewalk to guide visitors along the path. This type of tool can direct visitors to different sites within a city while emphasizing the benefits of a walking experience, which allows visitors to see what the residents of HCMC do on a daily basis, instead of the typical tourist destination-based encounter fueled by coach buses and taxis.<sup>14</sup> The strength of having a visually recognizable, physical path is that it provides visual assistance to people walking the line.

Using a painted line has been successful in a number of other cases, and these examples serve as inspiration. Most notable is the Boston Freedom Trail, a 2.5-mile path that connects 16 historic sites throughout the city of Boston, Massachusetts; established in 1951, this path now attracts over 4 million tourists each year. With a distinctive red brick and red paint line traversing the city, the Freedom Trail offers an exciting opportunity for tourists to explore the city on their own. The trail even has vendors along the path at key points, and so it appears that vending can be a necessary and important part of the pedestrian, tourist experience. Other examples of painted pedestrian trails include the

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<sup>14</sup> “...people and human activity are the greatest object of attention and interest.” Gehl, Jan. 1987. *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company

Salem Heritage Walk, also in Massachusetts, the “Red Thread” of Hannover, Germany, the “blue line” of West Carson City, Nevada and the “turquoise line” for the Presidio Trail, in Tucson, Arizona.

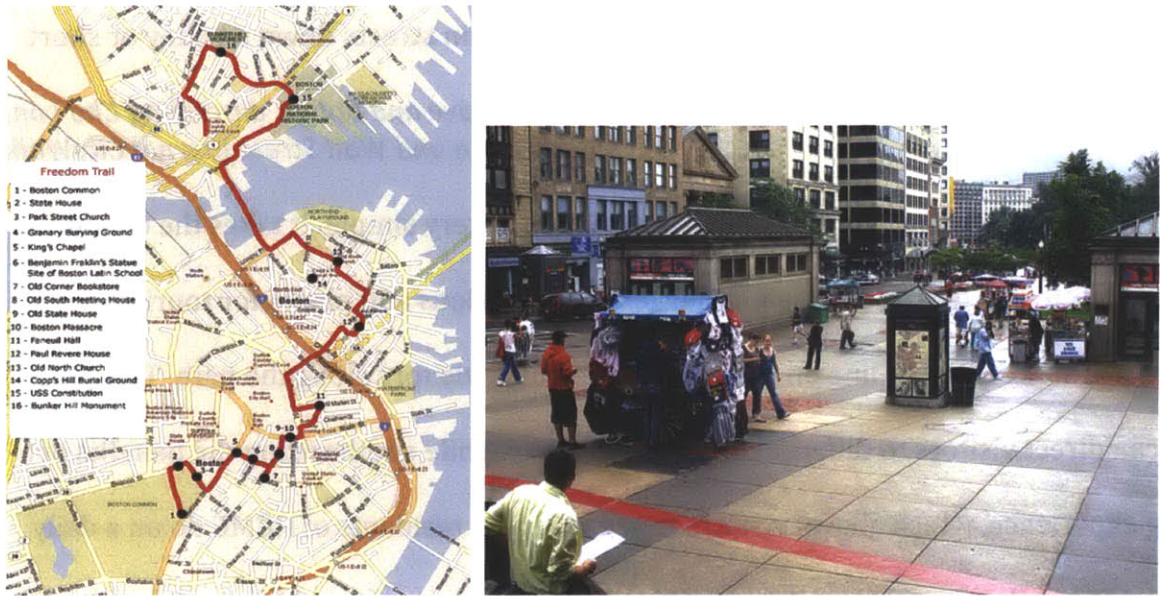


Figure 3: Boston Freedom Trail, MA. Map of Freedom Trail (L) and Inclusion of vendors (R)

This concept is not new, but it has never really been used in this specific context of street vendor management and tourism. These proposals are strictly conceptual and intended to explore the possibilities available, attempting to capitalize on the existing painted line phenomenon and the unique strengths of HCMC to create an exciting experience for both visitors and residents that focuses on the neighborhood level and human interaction.<sup>15</sup> With a line connecting multiple sites, moreover, the path packages disparate sites together into a multi-faceted, significant whole, and leads visitors through unexpected areas. This approach seems very appropriate for Saigon.<sup>16</sup> The emphasis on the

<sup>15</sup> “To be able to move about easily and confidently, to be able to linger in cities... to be able to take pleasure in spaces, buildings and city life, and to be able to meet and get together with other people – informally or in more organized fashion – these are fundamental to good cities...” Gehl 1987, 53  
<sup>16</sup> “Saigon is not a city that you appreciate the beauty of its monuments, but for its unique atmosphere and vitality.” Discover Vietnam, from Associated Content

pedestrian experience, moreover, is a direct request from the HCMC Departments of Architecture and SaigonTourist, who specifically requested pedestrian, tourist experiences.

The proposal features two central districts within HCMC for walking paths: District 1, the downtown area and most visited by tourists, and District 5, a historic part of HCMC home to the largest population of Chinese residents in Vietnam. By providing two complementary options, the whole proposal connects two different parts of the city and ideally, gives a richer total experience.

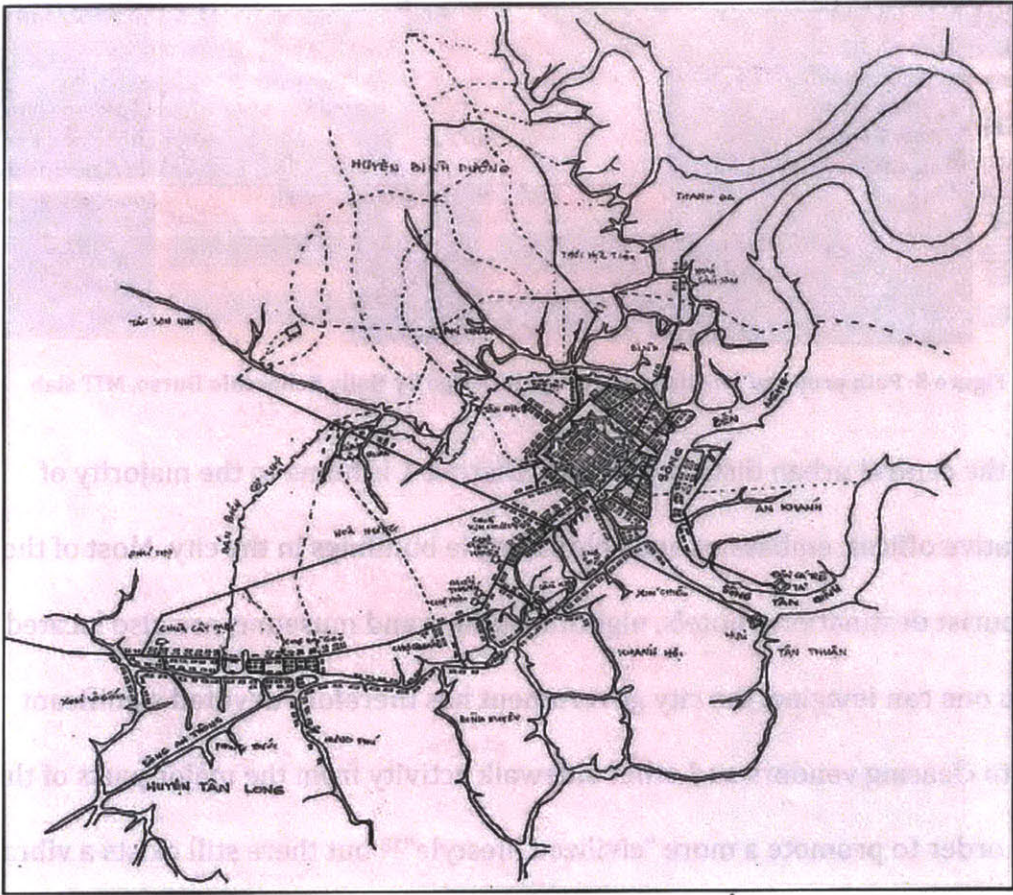


Figure 4: Historical map of Saigon depicting Cho Lon to the west and District 1 to the east<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Wikimedia Commons



# Path Details: District 1



Figure 5: Path proposal for District 1. Graphic design by Holly Bellocchio Durso, MIT slab

As the central urban district of HCMC, District 1 is home to the majority of administrative offices, embassies and colonial style buildings in the city. Most of the most popular tourist destinations, hotels, nightlife options and museums are also located in this district. As one can imagine, the city government has therefore devoted significant attention to clearing vendors and other sidewalk activity from the major parts of this district in order to promote a more “civilized lifestyle”<sup>18</sup> but there still exists a vibrant and exciting street life nonetheless. Given the prominence of this district and its relevance to vendors and tourism, proposing a path for this area is crucial. Our initial proposal starts at the most popular museum in HCMC and ending in a popular shopping area.

<sup>18</sup> “HCMC making efforts to usher in ‘civilized lifestyle,’” *Thanh Nien Daily*, 2008

District 1 contains a wide range of neighborhoods within its boundaries. From colonial buildings, extensive parks and important government buildings to primarily residential, household business dominated areas, District 1 is exciting because it houses so many different urban experiences. This area, moreover, has experienced rapid gentrification and real estate development in recent years, occasionally with disregard for historic buildings, and so it could be valuable to implement a concerted tourism concept to highlight historic and cultural attributes of the district.

*Sites*

The initial proposal has eight major sites identified through tourist research as being the most popular and significant visited sites in District 1. These include:

<p><b>The War Remnants Museum</b></p>	<p>As the museum most visited by Western tourists in the city, the War Remnants Museum appears as the most natural site to figure prominently on the line. It features literal remnants from the American/Vietnam war – aircraft, tanks, bombs, etc. Since it is more remotely located from the rest of the city center, it makes sense for tourists to either start or end their day here.</p>
<p><b>Reunification Palace</b></p>	<p>Next is the “Reunification Palace,” which holds significance to the political history and identity of the city and country. Originally the site of the palace for the General Governor of the French colony “Cochinchina,” this building became the “Independence Palace” for the president of South Vietnam until the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 when the North Vietnamese Army crashed through its gates.</p>
<p><b>Notre Dame Basilica</b></p>	<p>Constructed between 1863 and 1880, this cathedral boasts historical, architectural and social meaning for the city. It is also a very popular photo spot with locals and visitors alike.</p>
<p><b>Central Post Office</b></p>	<p>Renowned as an example of French colonial style, this Gothic architectural building was designed and constructed by Gustave Eiffel. It is the biggest and busiest post office in Vietnam.</p>
<p><b>City Hall</b></p>	<p>Built by the French in the early 1900s, this prominent landmark is home to the HCMC People’s Committee. A</p>

	popular photo spot is with the statue of Ho Chi Minh in front.
Opera House	Now called the Municipal Theater, this beautiful colonial building by French architect Ferret Eugene still functions as a theater today.
Bến Thành Market	Built by the French between 1912-1914, this enclosed market is one of the most famous in HCMC and has become iconic. Crammed with stalls inside, the market is surrounded by even more activity on the neighboring streets.
Lê Công Kiều Antique Street	This short street near Ben Thanh market features almost 60 “antique shops.” While their authenticity is debatable, the street is home to an exciting shopping experience.

### *Areas*

The MIT slab team also experimented with “Areas of Interest,” essentially mini-districts bordering and/or including the sites on the line, based off of our personal observations, experience and research on the city. While these are by no means official designations, the motivation was to provide context to the line, possibly increasing the comfort level of visitors to leave the line and see more parts of the city. For District 1, there are four areas with noticeably distinctive character that tourists might explore.

Colonial District	This area contains the majority of existing French colonial buildings in District 1. Many have been turned into restaurants.
Đông Khởi area	This area is home to a variety of hotels, high-end shops, restaurants and bars. It combines a unique atmosphere of historical buildings and modern activities.
Bến Thành Market area	One of the most popular markets in the city with lots of independent street vendors on surrounding streets, this area provides a better look into the retail sector.
Artisan District	Bordered by the antique street, the “Artisan District” is home to the HCMC

	Fine Arts Museum as well as numerous hardware stores and repair businesses.
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*Q1 at night*

HCMC becomes even livelier at night. With night markets, ample nightlife, and families spending time in the cooler air, this city can offer a very different experience at night. We felt compelled to offer a version of the path appropriate for nighttime in response. The path weaves along popular parks, the Ben Thanh nightmarket, and the river, sites in the city heavily trafficked by residents at nighttime. Obviously, a visual path at night would require some different types of innovation in terms of the implementation, and so this section of the proposal is more conceptual in nature.



# Path Details: Chợ Lớn / District 5

## SAIGON: CHOLON

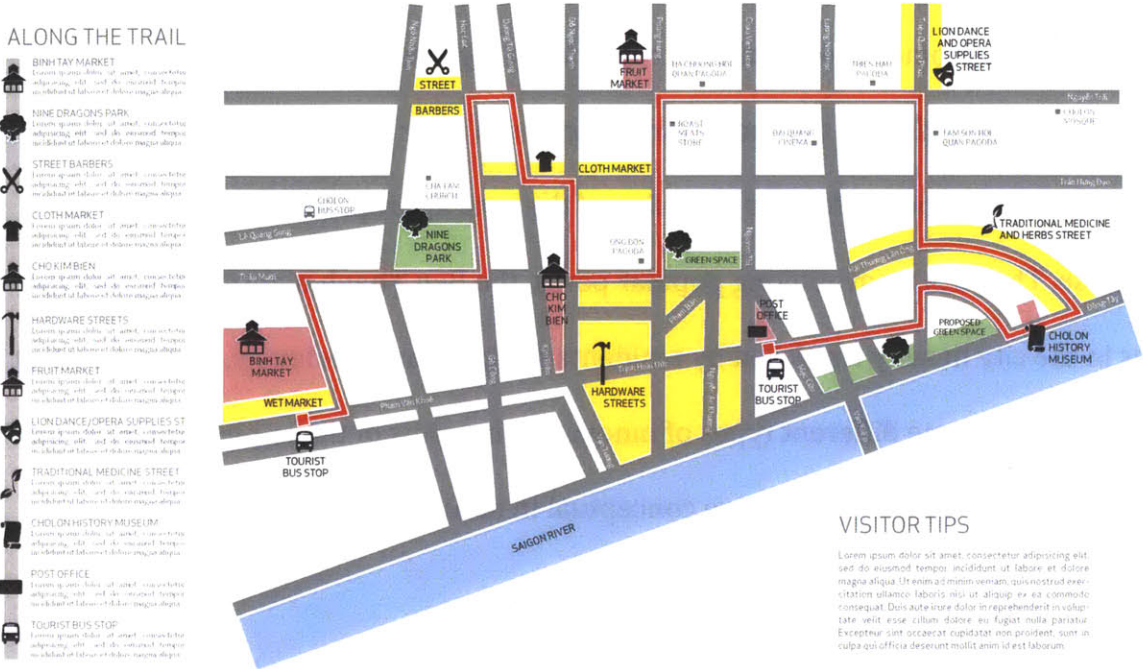


Figure 6: Path proposal for Cho Lon. Graphic design by Tiffany Chu, MIT slab



Figure 7: Cho Lon street, picture by Tiffany Chu, MIT slab



The designation “Chợ Lớn” refers to the largest population of ethnic Chinese in Vietnam, a neighborhood stretching across Districts 5 and 6. One of the earliest settlements in Southern Vietnam, Cho Lon joined the rest of HCMC in 1931 and boasts a unique blend of Chinese and Vietnamese cultures that has been increasingly popular with Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese tourists over the past few years. As one photographer put it, “Cholon is a jewellery box of Chinese style and bustle, an olfactory overload of traditional herb shops and burning incense. Here the streets are filled with amazing sights, sounds, and most of all the rich herbal smells.”<sup>19</sup> Tourists have consistently expressed interest in visiting Cho Lon, and so Cho Lon deserves a tourism attraction to rival District 1. The proposed path in Cho Lon is 2.38 miles long, starting at a wholesale market and ending at a busy post office.

Cho Lon has a more commercial and industrial feel to it than District 1, especially near the proposed line. Practically every storefront has spillover of some sort and features tools, hardware, motorbike parts, and other wholesale retail, while whole streets and blocks are devoted to produce, cloth materials and motorcycle parts. Yet, quiet residential alleys lurk behind the chaos of traditional medicine and lion dance supplies, lending a unique dynamism to Cho Lon. Cho Lon is no stranger to real estate development and gentrification either; many historic walkup homes on Hai Thuong Lan Ong were bulldozed recently to add extra lanes to a busy street, and several overseas investors are beginning to build highrises and shiny malls. Similar to the proposal for District 1, the line could be a tool to promote tourism and focus on preserving certain qualities of Cho Lon.

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<sup>19</sup> *lecercle*, Flickr

## Sites

Unlike District 1, Cholon has fewer colonial buildings and typical tourist sites for attraction; that being said, there are definitely several distinctive buildings and locations representative of the neighborhood. The proposal features notable sites based off of tourist guides, tourist recommendations, tourist reviews and journalistic articles.

Chợ Bình Tây/Wet Market	Binh Tay market is the central market of Cho Lon. Less touristy than Ben Thanh market, this site provides a look into the wholesale retail world of HCMC. Behind the market on Phạm Văn Khoẻ street is a lively, informal wet market.
Đường Tháp Mười	Some consider this street to be the “very heart of the Chinese quarter,” featuring more traditional goods and stores.
Nine Dragons Park	With few green spaces in Cho Lon, this small park provides a unique opportunity to relax from the hustle and bustle.
Cha Tam Church (Nhà thờ Cha Tam)	With historical significance and unique architecture, this important site to the Vietnam War is an often-visited site in Cho Lon.
Trần Hưng Đạo cloth market	This market features rolls of cloth, tailor supplies and also regular produce.
chợ Kim Biên/Hardware Streets	A smaller market compared to Binh Tay, this market caters more toward residents’ needs and provides an interesting look into daily life.
Ong Bon Pagoda (Chùa Ông Bồn)	Cho Lon is well known for its pagodas and Ong Bon is only one of many. This particular pagoda is dedicated to the guardian of happiness and wealth.
Phùng Hưng/ Nguyễn Trãi Fruit market	With a vibrant fruit market and supposedly the oldest roast meats store in Cho Lon, this intersection is unique.
Nguyễn Trãi street	Many pagodas exist on this street as well as the Cho Lon mosque. On neighboring street Trieu Quang Phuc, there are stores featuring Chinese opera and lion dance supplies.

Hải Thượng Lãn Ông Traditional medicine street	Medicinal stores spill over on to this street, featuring a host of familiar and foreign cures.
Post Office	The path ends at a busy post office in the heart of Cho Lon.

### *Areas*

The areas in Cho Lon are less defined than the ones in District 1 and could be developed further, but some initial options could be a “Hardware District,” where the stores feature hand-crafted tools and motorcycle repair parts. The Traditional Medicine Street is also a semi-district of its own as well, as it is already recognized by the city as a legal vending street.

### **Summary**

In summary, these proposals use two features that appear initially appropriate for the site. The first is a painted, visual line on the sidewalk used to direct tourists to major tourist destinations, while bringing them through neighborhoods they might not have initially chosen to walk through. The visual nature of the painted line provides security by providing a clear guide through the city, and manifesting the line in this visual way is powerful because there is a start and end that will encourage people to keep following it. Moreover, this proposal capitalizes on an existing trend of putting lines on the sidewalk, so it should be less obtrusive to residents and locals.

Second is the designation of areas or “districts” off the physical line, in order to encourage tourists to leave the line and explore on their own. Instead of taking taxis from location to location, tourists would be encouraged to walk through less tourist areas and interact with HCMC residents.

*Potential Guidelines*

After walking the Boston Freedom Trail, the Salem Heritage Walk, and through HCMC as a tourist, I feel that there are certain basic guidelines needed to govern the physical design of the line before we even consider the full implications of the intervention. These guidelines apply mostly to the tourist experience.

In terms of physical design, the line should be as simple and straightforward as possible. One of the strengths of the Boston Freedom Trail is that it is linear and has few dead ends. In Salem, the path sometimes split off, or had multiple iterations painted slightly askew, or had dead ends where visitors had to turn around and retrace their path (see Figure 8). These distractions detracted from the experience. Clear signage indicating directions or close sites, which the Freedom Trail has, might help, and physical uniformity of the line throughout is strongly suggested.



**Figure 8: Images from Salem, MA. Multiple confusing lines (L) and dead end (R)**

Additionally, there are experiential guidelines that should be put into place. Rest areas were a big issue in HCMC – there were no clear areas for public bathrooms, benches, or water (which could be provided by vendors!) – and the length of line could be

challenging without the availability of rest areas. Moreover, crossing the street has actually been documented as a significant challenge for tourists in HCMC due to extreme traffic conditions, hence the necessity of “volunteer tourist police” to help tourists cross the road. The current proposals have not been thoroughly vetted for traffic appropriateness, and so this research would need to be done.

With all these things in mind, the next section addresses the existing literature and research regarding the informal economy, street vending management, and the effects of tourism on urban areas.



### **III. Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

There are many related topics that could be covered in this literature review – debates over the causes of the informal economy, urban design and its impact on human experience, sidewalk democracy, the rural-migrant experience, and more. Central to this intervention and thesis, however, are two essential points deserving of full attention from the existing body of research to provide context, insight and theory. The first is street vending management, in order to understand the existing tools in practice and their corresponding effects to best inform the ways this intervention could be used for managing street activity. Secondly, this intervention raises fundamental questions regarding the impact of tourism on the existing urban fabric, with specific concern for gentrification and displacement of existing residents and livelihoods. Turning towards the academic study of urban tourism, I assess some of the studied challenges of urban tourism on existing populations, and identify relevant planning techniques to address them.

#### **Street Vending Management**

The purpose of this section is to review some of the existing street vendor management policies, approaches and innovations, with regards to the context of developing countries. The review is by no means comprehensive, but highlights several relevant and interesting proposals with potential applications for the HCMC experience. Using the examples of India, with a pro-vendor approach in its National Urban Policy on Street Vendors, several African cities (Durban, Johannesburg and Cape Town), and the

Asian examples of Singapore and Hong Kong, I look at strategies that could be effective for HCMC with some accompanying lessons.<sup>20</sup>

### *Regulatory tools*

The conventional approach to street vending is to license and register all vendors. Most researchers agree that this approach is bureaucratically intensive and requires significant administrative capacity – making it unwise for cities with large numbers of vendors.<sup>21</sup> Ofori states, moreover, that while licensing does lessen congestion, it does not accomplish much as a single policy. India has suggested an interesting approach in contrast, which is to automatically register all existing vendors in an area and then restrict future vending – this way, taxes can be collected instead of fines.

In addition to registration, India has encouraged eviction policies to be formalized. This policy is meant to combat corruption among enforcing authorities, providing a clear set of guidelines to follow in terms of seizure of goods, fine structure, and vendor rights. HCMC currently does require vendors to sign an acknowledgement of seizure but most vendors do not know about it and enforcing authorities do not follow it.<sup>22</sup> A standardized eviction policy, at the very least, helps prevent the wanton destruction of goods and corruption among local authorities.

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<sup>20</sup> These regulatory surveys come largely from Sharit Bhowmik's "Street Vendors in Asia: A Review," and Benjamin Ofori's excellent review of spatial regulation in African cities, "The Urban Street Commons Problem: Spatial Regulation of Informal Economic Units in Accra"

<sup>21</sup> Lintelo, Dolf te. 2006. Struggling for space: street vendors in policy and market arenas in New Delhi, India presented at the Researching Contemporary Cities e-Conference; Ofori 2007

<sup>22</sup> "Out on the Street," *Thanh Nien Daily*, 2011



### *Institutional Tools*

In Singapore and Hong Kong, the response to the street vending issue has been to consolidate food vendors into hawker centers or cooked-food centers, similar to American food courts. While removing them from the street can still be harmful, hawker centers provide a similar culinary experience and preservation of livelihood, with the additional benefit of improved regulation of health and management.<sup>23</sup> Singapore has chosen to control their food culture in this way, and these centers are popular among both locals and tourists. Similarly, Hong Kong's cooked-food centers can be found in public housing estates as well as tucked away near luxury malls. Lintelo cautions at moving vendors into markets without meeting with existing market associations, however, as competition can cause discontent between formal and informal vendors. Baroni and Donovan also note that the location of the hawker center is crucial and has significant impacts on the success of vendors, due to disturbance of existing supply chains.

Although Vietnam may not want to hear it, the benefits of street vendor organizations are well documented and address many of the concerns facing street vendors in HCMC today. Sergio Pena analyzes the beneficial functions of vendor organizations, concluding that they are able to negotiate and manage social assets. He also discovers that informal actors often want to be regulated and desire to have institutions to do so. In India, the national policy toward street vendors promotes the inclusion of vendor associations, arguing that they have better understanding of vendors than officials do. NASVI and SEWA, two large organizations for informal workers, have even managed to negotiate for

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<sup>23</sup> M4P 2006, Ofori 2007

healthcare provision and other benefits for vendors. Bhowmik highlights the beneficial effects of street vendor unions in Sri Lanka in their power to organize vendors as well.

The literature on the nature of organizations in authoritarian governments, however, is limited and has little consensus on what can be done in lieu of the traditional street vendor association. And there are negative aspects of vendor organizations and unions as well. For example, while unions may argue for vendor rights, there have been cases of exclusive unions who have restricted access to other minority groups. In HCMC, unions might even end up monopolizing the sidewalk space, and so we need to be cautious of relying solely on vendor organizations. Furthermore, documented evaluation of the effectiveness of street vendor organizations is still being developed, and this area of research could stand to have more critical analysis of the relative merits of organizations overall.

### *Spatial Tools*

Spatial regulatory devices are a fairly recent innovation and promise simpler, more realistic management opportunities. Garnett (2004) writes about the benefits of using land-use planning techniques to order American cities instead of excessive regulation, looking at enterprise zones and zoning tactics. She argues for the spatial approach over bureaucratic methods, saying “Property regulation offers vast enforcement flexibility without raising the same constitutional concerns...” (4) She also argues that deregulation coupled with zoning techniques could in fact “empower our poorest citizens.” (27) However, while the research on spatial tools for developing countries is relatively nascent, non-Western cities have also been experimenting with spatially oriented policies toward

informal street vending. Their methods, moreover, focus more on managing informal activity than American case studies, which tend to focus on small business owners, and so there is ample room for new ideas, experiments and research on the effectiveness of these more appropriate approaches.

Durban, Johannesburg, Cape Town and Mumbai have all been experimenting with the concept of “permitted zones” with varying constructs and results. A permitted zone is a geographic designation where vending is allowed, a departure from the typical licensing that assigns a specific location to a vendor. In India, they use three levels of vending zones, from restriction-free and restricted to no-vending. The goal of this approach is to offer vendors legal status to operate in different areas of the city. In Durban, vendors are granted access to permitted zones by paying for a permit, which provides legality and a basic package of services (water, trash, etc), whereas in Johannesburg, vendors are given trading space in return for agreeing to comply with health and environmental standards.<sup>24</sup> The long-term effects of these permitted zones, most of which were established within the past ten years, have yet to be documented thoroughly, but they offer an innovative approach to managing informal street activity and offer promise toward a spatial management approach.

### *Implementation and Effectiveness*

It does seem that simply relying on one type of policy or one approach to manage street vending is insufficient. Ofori concludes his thesis by arguing that each city needs to design its own package or combination of policies to achieve their goals, and Koh argues that turning to exclusive policies is ineffective and requires supportive complements. In

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<sup>24</sup> Ofori 2007

terms of who should make these types of decisions to determine the combination of policies, Garnett advocates for neighborhood level decision-making for the American example, arguing that neighborhood level officials are best equipped to address the needs and desires of residents and local activity.

## **Urban Tourism**

*"In the everyday lives of most people, heritage is more about identity and belonging at the local scale, part and parcel of perceived quality of life as familiar landscapes, streetscapes, buildings and activities hold together the fragmented fabric of collective memory."*<sup>25</sup>

Tourism is itself a multifaceted domain of research, involving multiple parties, disciplines and concerns. For developing countries, moreover, the focus tends to be on issues of eco-tourism, sustainable development and natural resources. This intervention, on the other hand, is specifically about the impacts of tourism in urban areas, and this thesis is concerned about these impacts on local life and existing livelihoods. To focus this review, therefore, I highlight two different themes regarding urban tourism, namely the study of urban tourism "precincts" or "districts" and their noted effects, and then research on Southeast Asian and Vietnamese identity as affected by tourism. Given the takeaways from these two themes, I catalog several urban planning strategies and techniques used to address them.

The urban "precinct" or "district" tourism literature is relevant for multiple reasons. By advocating this line, we are inherently describing District 1 and District 5 as separate spatial, geographic entities with features attractive to tourists. Moreover, the line touches proposed "districts" – and so it is important for us to understand the impact of designating

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<sup>25</sup> Ismail, Rahil, Brian Shaw, and Ooi Giok Ling, eds. 2009. *Southeast Asian culture and heritage in a globalising world : diverging identities in a dynamic region*. Farnham Surrey England ;; Burlington VT: Ashgate

a geographic area as a discrete area with specific characteristics. To frame the discussion, I draw attention to some potentially negative impacts of urban tourist districts, then results with more mixed character, and lastly positive aspects.

### *Negative*

The major concern of catering toward tourists seems to be a loss of the original neighborhood identity and heritage, and an increasing homogenization of space. Costas Spirou notes that there is an extremely delicate balance to strike between “economic growth, authenticity and sustainability” in developing urban tourist areas, and he warns of “projecting traditional culture through...hyper-commercialization,” because of a tendency to lose original character.<sup>26</sup> Others note that organically developed, slowly evolved urban tourist areas often have more diverse uses within their districts and so maintain more identity than pre-planned districts, which tend to perform as tourist spaces. As Krolikowski and Brown put it, “in the quest to become attractive to tourists, many urban areas have lost what initially made them a focus of interest – the richness of the urban spectacle, with the life of the city, its residents, and their culture at the core of the urban experience.”<sup>27</sup> Some also note that globalization forces operate against the idea of a “sense of place” and ease the likelihood of homogenization.<sup>28</sup>

The extensive documentation of the negative impacts of tourism on existing residents is almost more problematic than the loss of unique identity. Ritchie cites gentrification, displacement, increased prices and unequal economic development as some major observed trends; Hayllar, Griffin and Edwards (2008), by way of Getz, highlight

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<sup>26</sup> Hayllar, Bruce, Tony Griffin, and Deborah Edwards, eds. 2008. *City Spaces - Tourist Places*. Amsterdam ;;Boston ;;London [etc.]: Elsevier, 34

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 138

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

similar issues, with inflated real estate prices, traffic congestion, pollution and loss of leisure places for locals on their list.<sup>29</sup> It is fairly well documented that tourism can often affect and displace the resident population in harmful ways.

### *Mixed*

Meanwhile, there have been some findings that are neither “positive” nor “negative.” The first conclusion is that gentrification is not necessarily negative; Maitland and Newman argue “processes of gentrification can cater for and be driven by visitors as well as locals.”<sup>30</sup> They suggest, moreover, that separating tourists’ and residents’ desires into completely dichotomous extremes is inaccurate and that we need to be careful in assuming that residents always desire different things than visitors.

Secondly, Searle observes that businesses are in a very powerful position “to influence the nature of the precinct development” and direct the visioning and implementation process.<sup>31</sup> While he observed this fact in a free market situation, private sector business is a significant part of life in Vietnam and so this point should be taken seriously when planning for tourism.

### *Positive*

Lest we think that tourism has no positive benefits, there are many strong reasons for the development of tourist districts within cities beyond pure economic development. For example, people can understand and relate to the concept of a ‘district’ or neighborhood, and so precincts may in fact “make a city more legible or comprehensible.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 164, 253-254

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 236

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 209

<sup>32</sup> Ibid 51

Griffin, Hayllar and Edwards give the example of “Chinatown” as being a concept easily understood and grasped by tourists. They also claim that tourists “place value on there being a local presence,” and so well planned districts can provide an opportunity for tourists to “encounter the locals as they really are” – a quality that tourists seek for!<sup>33</sup>

On a relevant point, Ritchie argues that tourist precincts may also have economic benefits for the informal economy, commenting “hawkers, street vendors or itinerant sellers may receive economic benefit from selling goods or services to tourists...in districts” due to increased revenue and customer base. He concedes that this area of research is often ignored and has significant potential when assessing the economic impact of tourist districts.

Lastly, a benefit of our intervention could be the concept of “packaging.” In Page’s “Urban Tourism,” the author suggests that the grouping, “clustered approach” allows tourism projects to have “greater impact.” Given that the monuments in HCMC may not be of the highest profile, combining them all into a unified whole could in fact improve the tourism industry.

### **Southeast Asian and Vietnamese Identity and Performance**

There is a burgeoning body of literature discussing issues of identity and the effects of tourism on heritage for Southeast Asia and Vietnam specifically. While this thesis is not primarily dealing with these concerns, it seems prudent to understand what some of the concerns and challenges there might be in the tourism-identity tension. The literature points out the significant challenge of Southeast Asia as being the necessity to attract

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid 53

“international investors, businesses and tourists,” while simultaneously dealing with complex and fragmented issues of national identity<sup>34</sup> Many Southeast Asian countries, with recent histories of war, social fragmentation and strident economic competition, are dealing with a whole host of concerns during the process of understanding what heritage means for them. One significant factor in this confusion, moreover, is the common perspective that “Westernization” or “Americanization” is a central tenet of globalization.<sup>35</sup>

There is also the unique issue of the Vietnam War (or the American War, as they call it) and its relationship with the tourist sector. Anthropologists have noted the tourism trend in Vietnam (especially the South) is to appropriate “war-era signs and symbols for present-day tourist displays,” and suggest that the development of a tourism market around the “discursive construct of the Vietnam War” has led to a tourism that has very little to do with the real Vietnamese experience.<sup>36</sup> Schwenkel cites her research in HCMC, where mobile street vendors in tourist areas often peddle Zippo lighters or t-shirts with American movie slogans on them, war artifacts that have very little to do with Vietnamese life. The question is: whose Vietnam is being portrayed in the tourism industry in Vietnam – the Vietnam of the people, or a Vietnam based on memories of US forces and people expecting a certain Vietnam? If we are implementing a tourism intervention that affects street vendors, will it result in the turnover of normal vending practices to tourist commodities, as we have seen already?

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<sup>34</sup> Ismail, Rahil, Brian Shaw, and Ooi Giok Ling, eds. 2009. *Southeast Asian culture and heritage in a globalising world : diverging identities in a dynamic region*. Farnham Surrey England ;;Burlington VT: Ashgate

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 115

<sup>36</sup> Schwenkel, C. 2006. “Recombinant history: Transnational practices of memory and knowledge production in contemporary Vietnam.” *Cultural anthropology* 21 (1): 3–30.



## Planning tools

Fortunately, the literature also identifies tools for mitigating these negative aspects of tourism. While we need to understand how tourists experience the city in HCMC specifically to be able to design the policies and governance structures appropriately, there are some initial lessons that can be integrated into the planning for this line.

The first set of lessons deals with building consensus for the vision in an area and ensuring that tourism will benefit the local economy. In the case of Hoi An, Vietnam, they followed the UNESCO “Lijiang Models for Co-operation”<sup>37</sup> which set basic frameworks for identifying stakeholders, determining sustainable financial and management structures, and ensuring the partnership of relevant agencies. Through utilizing these models, Hoi An was able to direct tourism in a way that benefited the local economy. In terms of conflict and dissent, Searle notes that communities with strong need for economic development are more likely to have similar visions.

In order to conserve the original urban character, Heyllar, Griffin and Edwards suggest basic planning tools to control for the qualities: building design standards, land use mix, emphasis on human scale, and appropriate building set back. They highlight the case of Montmartre, Paris, where planners manipulated the access points to manage visitor flow into residential neighborhoods. Spirou suggests encouraging more housing in tourism areas to promote the presence of local residents, as well. Most interestingly, Heyllar et al argue that it is prudent to recognize “when it is best not to manage a particular feature”

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<sup>37</sup> <http://www.unescobkk.org/culture/world-heritage-and-immovable-heritage/culture-heritage-management-and-tourism-models-for-co-operation-among-stakeholders/lijiang-models-for-cooperation-among-stakeholders/>

(such as street entertainment) in order to allow a district to develop a character of its own.<sup>38</sup>

Lastly, in terms of implementation, what emerges from the literature is the need for a champion or leading agency. Without one persistent advocate, all these features are likely to get co-opted by different stakeholders and differing agendas. As planners, then, our job is to identify who this champion could be, or be the champion ourselves.

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<sup>38</sup> Heyllar, et al. 2008, 251

## **IV. Findings**

### **Research Design**

In order to understand how the proposed intervention interacts with the existing systems and practices in Ho Chi Minh City, I broke my research down into three major sections. First, I analyze what the official, top-down attitudes and understandings of the informal economy, urban poverty and street vending are by looking at reports released by multi-lateral international institutions, academics, and Vietnamese government authorities. These sources provide crucial insights to the sources of street activity, and clarify how these influential stakeholders understand and view street vending. In this section I also look at the trajectory of street vending policies in Ho Chi Minh City to see how the government has responded to sidewalk activity and what might be viable steps to take in the future.

I then turn to the physical and ethnographic fieldwork conducted throughout January and December of 2010 to understand how people actually experience the sidewalk and street life in Ho Chi Minh City. This fieldwork takes an inventory of existing sidewalk uses and different types of street life activity, and uncovers the daily life of street vendors and their experience with authorities. Understanding their needs and concerns can help inform this intervention to be truly beneficial for them.

Lastly, I research the way the public has reacted to street vending and tourism by turning to newspaper articles and tourist reviews. Assessing how HCMC residents and visitors view the situation, the government response, and their personal comments on it

clarifies what the purpose of the painted line could be and what steps should be taken to appeal to tourists and locals alike.

The data is limited because all three sources only provide a snapshot into an evolving, changing world of street vending and demographic change. The new generation of Vietnamese youth may, in fact, desire different career paths or have the freedom to choose from more employment options. Nevertheless, by using three levels of analysis to evaluate current sidewalk practices in HCMC, we are able to understand the existing situation, creating a basic framework to inform our intervention that can hopefully adapt to changes in the future.

### **CURRENT SITUATION: “The Official State of Affairs”**

To comprehend sidewalk activity and street vending in Ho Chi Minh City, we need to have a basic understanding of what the informal economy in Vietnam is and its contributing factors, such as poverty and urbanization, in order to design appropriate and effective solutions. In this section, I briefly cover the “official state of affairs” as understood and reported by multi-lateral institutions such as the UN, World Bank, and ILO, academics, and government authorities. I address the following questions on the informal economy:

- What is the informal economy in Vietnam, and where is it concentrated?
- Who participates in the informal economy, and why?
- Why does informal street vending exist?
- How likely is the informal economy to stay?

I close by analyzing how the government has responded to the informal economy, through policies and campaigns addressing street vending and sidewalk usage, to understand what the current government attitudes have been toward the informal economy.

*What is the informal economy in Vietnam and where is it concentrated?*

According to the ILO, the informal sector in Vietnam is best described as “all private unincorporated enterprises that produce at least some of their goods and services for sale or barter, **are not registered (no business license)** and are engaged in non-agricultural activities.”<sup>39</sup> The informal sector is significant; in 2007, it was estimated that the informal sector was providing 11 million jobs throughout the country, 24% of total employment. Most importantly – 20% of GDP, and this estimate is likely an understatement – comes from unregistered, informal businesses.<sup>40</sup> Street vending, hawking, trading, and small sidewalk businesses are therefore included in this sector because they are typically not registered businesses with the government – in fact, they are not even required to register at all. According to Decree No. 88 on 8/29/2006 on Business Registration, “Household businesses...which are street hawkers, nosh vendors, long-distance traders, itinerant traders or service providers earning low income shall not be required to register their businesses.”<sup>41</sup>

The majority of informal businesses are still found in rural and suburban areas at 67%. Nevertheless, in HCMC alone, it is estimated that there are 750,000 informal

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<sup>39</sup> Cling, Jean-Pierre, Mireille Razafindrakoto, and Francois Roubaud. 2010. *The informal economy in Vietnam: Study for the ILO*. ILO.

<sup>40</sup> “Le Dang Doanh, one of the architects of Vietnam’s economic reforms, which were known as (Doi Moi) and launched in 1986, estimates the private sector now accounts for 40% of the country’s GDP, up from virtually zero. But Le Dang estimated as much as 20% more occurs in the “underground” economy...”

Kotkin, Joel. 2011. “Hanoi’s Underground Capitalism.” *Forbes*.

<sup>41</sup> Cling, et al., 2010, 29

household businesses employing over one million workers. Given that HCMC's population is 7.1 million, the amount of informal economic activity is very significant in urban areas and must be taken seriously.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the HCMC Institute of Development Studies estimates that small businesses, vendors and makeshift parking lots throughout the city have occupied 4 million square meters of sidewalk, with over 13 informal markets in District 1 alone.<sup>43</sup>

*Who participates in the informal economy and why?*

It is common to think that the majority of informal actors are just poor and lacking skills (a *dualist* approach); however, the connection between urban poverty and street vending seems tenuous, as the official poverty rate in Ho Chi Minh City is only 0.3%, according to the 2008 Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey. But this survey is strongly contested by a 2010 report released by the UN on "Urban Poverty Assessment in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City" because of its failure to account for migrant workers in urban areas and its usage of an income-based poverty line (instead of multi-dimensional).

Many surveys of Vietnamese street vendors suggest that they are usually young, poor, female rural-urban migrants. Sharit Bhowmik estimates that 30% of vendors in Hanoi are female, pointing to a study by Darunee Tantiwiranond who notes "women are in the forefront of Vietnam's economy." Half of the female vendors in Tantiwiranond's study were younger than 29, most of them originated from large, poor families and had insufficient levels of education to have any other types of employment options.<sup>44</sup> 2006

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<sup>42</sup> United Nations. 2010. *Urban Poverty Assessment in Ha Noi and Hochiminh City*. Ha Noi, Vietnam: UNDP.

<sup>43</sup> "Sidewalk not for walking in HCMC" *Tuoi Tre*, 2010

<sup>44</sup> Bhowmik 2005, 2260-2261

census data also notes that 90% of the vendors in Hanoi were migrants from surrounding rural provinces.<sup>45</sup>

These conclusions are generally supported by the recent UN survey and apply to HCMC. 20.6% of those surveyed in HCMC by the UN are, in fact, rural-urban migrants (meaning they do not have KT1 and KT2 registration permits). These migrants are more likely to be young, to be working than residents, but less likely to have higher education, healthcare or stable residence, and 67% are estimated to be in unskilled labor. (See Table 1) While migrants are only slightly more likely to be female in this dataset, the UN survey did not distinguish for vendors and so there is no clear data on gender distribution among vendors.

Surprisingly, though, migrants are actually on fairly equal grounds with residents regarding income poverty, not more disadvantaged. Since rural-urban migrants have fewer dependents and work more hours per week, some of them generate higher income than existing poor residents in HCMC. However, rural-urban migrants are significantly more deprived in terms of participating in social organization and community activities, and so migrants are definitely insecure in terms of social support and interaction with their surrounding communities.

We must be careful, though, in generalizing that all street vendors and sidewalk businesses are definitely income poor, migrants, etc. In William Maloney's work "Informality Revisited," he noted that informality can be a voluntary, more attractive opportunity for people – and that many informal actors are, in fact, not poor. When we look closer at the data, we see that nearly 70.3% of HCMC residents can be classified as

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<sup>45</sup> Lincoln, Martha. 2008. "Report from the field: street vendors and the informal sector in Hanoi." *Dialectical Anthropology* 32 (3): 261-265

“untrained professional level,”<sup>46</sup> increasing their likelihood of participating in low-skill labor. Moreover, migrants are only half as likely residents to work on their own-account as vendors and motorbike taxi drivers! The *structuralist* approach to the informal economy seems more appropriate in this case.<sup>47</sup>

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Migrant</b>	<b>Resident</b>
In the labor force	<b>85%</b>	59%
Children working	<b>14.7%</b>	1.1%
Between ages 15-34	<b>72%</b>	42.3%
Female	<b>53.1%</b>	52.7%
Female between ages of 20-24	<b>59%</b>	55%
Likely to have changed their dwelling in 10 months prior to survey	<b>26.7%</b>	4%
Proportion in public schools	64.6%	<b>82.4%</b>
Participating in social political organizations	32%	<b>69%</b>
Receiving social services	48%	<b>89%</b>

**Table 1:** Data from Urban Poverty Assessment 09, UN

*Why does the informal street vending exist?*

Street vending has been occurring in some manner since at least the early 1900s, with some historical evidence indicating a plethora of street foodstalls in the city center by mid-century. With the Socialist policies in the 1950s, private enterprise was barred and so street vending decreased dramatically until the advent of economic reform in the 1980s *Đổi Mới* or “Renovation” policies. Most accounts agree that allowing for private enterprise spurred enormous numbers of small businesses, both informal and formal; allowing

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<sup>46</sup> United Nations 2010

<sup>47</sup> The *structuralist* school suggests that informal economic activities could actually be a natural byproduct of the capitalist development process and so are actually quite natural and beneficial; the state might actually be underperforming in terms of its regulatory functions.



peasants to sell their agricultural surplus for personal profit, instead of giving it all to the central government, enabled rural-urban migrants to sell extra produce in the cities.<sup>48</sup> Koh notes that “The growth in sidewalk vending was also due to many people turning to trading on the sidewalk to fight hyperinflation using the quickest, if not the most effective, way.”<sup>49</sup>

**A typical street vendor story, from Hanoi**

“My family has a small area for agricultural production. Earnings from that are quite low and insufficient for the family expenditures. I started to become involved in street vending work in the spare time during cultivation and after harvest. Street vending is the means to help us make ends meet.” (M4P 2008).

Street vending is also convenient for residents. According to the M4P report, “Street mobile vending is very common in HCMC due to the consumer’s preference for fresh food...hawkers and nearby informal markets are convenient for daily purchases for working women.”<sup>50</sup> Many other cities with high numbers of vendors cite the need for convenient goods and services as a prominent motivation for keeping vendors as well.

From another perspective, Koh has argued that a lack of private space within urban homes has also forced households to conduct “personal, family and business chores on the sidewalk,”<sup>51</sup> encouraging the usage of the sidewalk by residents. Given the complexity of the informal sector as described before, it is apparent that not all members of the informal economy are poor or migrants. Therefore it is worth considering that usage of the sidewalk and selling in the streets is also a cultural phenomenon and not strictly an economic-driven trend.

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<sup>48</sup> “It’s not that these fiercely independent people want to become Americans, but that they are acting like Americans — or at least those who still favor grassroots capitalism as the best way to secure the urban future.” Kotkin 2011

<sup>49</sup> Koh 2007, 5

<sup>50</sup> Cadilhon, J. J, P. Moustier, N. D Poole, P. T.G Tam, and A. P Fearne. 2006. “Traditional vs. modern food systems? Insights from vegetable supply chains to Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam).” *Development Policy Review* 24 (1): 31–49.

<sup>51</sup> Koh 2007

### *How likely is the informal economy to stay?*

Vietnam has experienced some of the fastest economic growth over the past decade in the world and one would assume that the combination of rapid growth and decreasing poverty would lead to the decrease of the informal economy. However, it appears that the opposite will happen. Urbanization is predicted to continue, with total population growing faster in cities than in rural areas; unregistered small traders account for a significant 15% of food demand in the city;<sup>52</sup> and the ILO has simulated that “employment in the informal sector and its share in total employment will rise in the next few years,” prompting the conclusion, “the informal sector is here to stay.”<sup>53</sup>

The government cannot ignore this sector any longer. Lincoln argues that “street vending cannot be eliminated,” and the ILO agrees that there needs to be formal policies targeting the informal sector to help it be even more productive. However, in the next section, we will see that the government has resorted to clearance with mixed results.

### **Existing policies and regulatory systems toward street activity**

Since there are no formal policies targeting the informal sector, and since hawkers and traders need not apply for business licenses, it is essential to understand how the government has treated and responded to informal street vending over the years. It is important to recognize that cities in Vietnam have responded differently to their respective street vending situations, so the focus of this section is on HCMC with some references to

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<sup>52</sup> “Street food sellers worried about loss of livelihood,” *Thanh Nien Daily*, 2009

<sup>53</sup> Cling, et al. 2010, 8

Hanoi, as the two biggest cities in Vietnam, but the policies enacted here are in no way representative of the responses across the country.

Until 2008, the official stances toward street vending and informal sidewalk activity were ambiguous, at best. There were few policies regarding the specific act of street vending, but instead policies targeting health/food, sanitation, and traffic.<sup>54</sup> Koh tracks the various relevant campaigns in Hanoi, which vary from educational programs (“Tidy houses, clean streets, beautiful capital”) to monetary fines for traffic obstruction; nothing seems to have been terribly effective. In HCMC, the “Decree on Traffic Law” established in February 2003 established fines of 20,000-40,000VND for street vendors also under the aegis of traffic concerns.<sup>55</sup>

In July 2008, however, after only a few months of public opinion surveys, Hanoi definitively banned street vendors and sidewalk-based businesses from 62 streets in the city center and 48 public sites (mostly tourist destinations and government buildings),<sup>56</sup> and HCMC began officially requiring licenses for temporary sidewalk usage with Decision 74, banning vendors from 15 streets near the downtown and tourist sites in June 2009. Only sidewalks wider than three meters, moreover, could be considered for sidewalk usage. It is interesting to note that both Hanoi and HCMC, instead of dictating a specific vendor policy or licensing system, implemented policies of a spatial and transportation-oriented nature.

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<sup>54</sup> Bhowmik 2005, Koh 2007; though Hanoi may have tried to regulate vending as early as 1975

<sup>55</sup> M4P 2006

<sup>56</sup> Lincoln 2008

The official reasons for the ban were “to beautify the city” (Hanoi) “city aestheticism,” (HCMC), and also to assist with tourism, sanitation and congestion.<sup>57</sup> The HCMC government even deemed 2008 “the year of working towards a civilized urban lifestyle,” with hawking categorized as an “uncivilized act.”<sup>58</sup> However, the street vending ban was not alone. The city also banned *cyclos*, a popular form of transportation and employment source for many poor urban residents,<sup>59</sup> and all informal food production in 2009.<sup>60</sup> And most recently, the city has decided to fine pedestrians if they walk in the street instead of the sidewalk. None of these bans were accompanied by assistance programs to help with loss of employment and in Hanoi, 57% of 7500 residents surveyed disagreed with the street vending and *cyclo* bans.

The bans have been mostly ineffective. Lincoln notes that “controlling the informal sector is apparently proving difficult, as vending appears to have been interrupted very little by the new regulations,” and a local professor in HCMC has argued that without livelihood assistance, vendors will be forced to return to the sidewalk regardless of the ban. Police chiefs have also expressed frustration with repeatedly clearing vendors; Koh chronicles the experience of police with previous campaigns in Hanoi and notes that “Ward policemen were also afraid of pushing the sidewalk people too hard” due to personal connections, sympathy and lack of coordination.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> “Hawkers are a major reason for traffic problems. We believe that once the ban is enforced it will help improve urban sanitation, food hygiene and ease congestion.”

“Ban on street vendors threatens livelihoods.” 2008. *IRIN News*

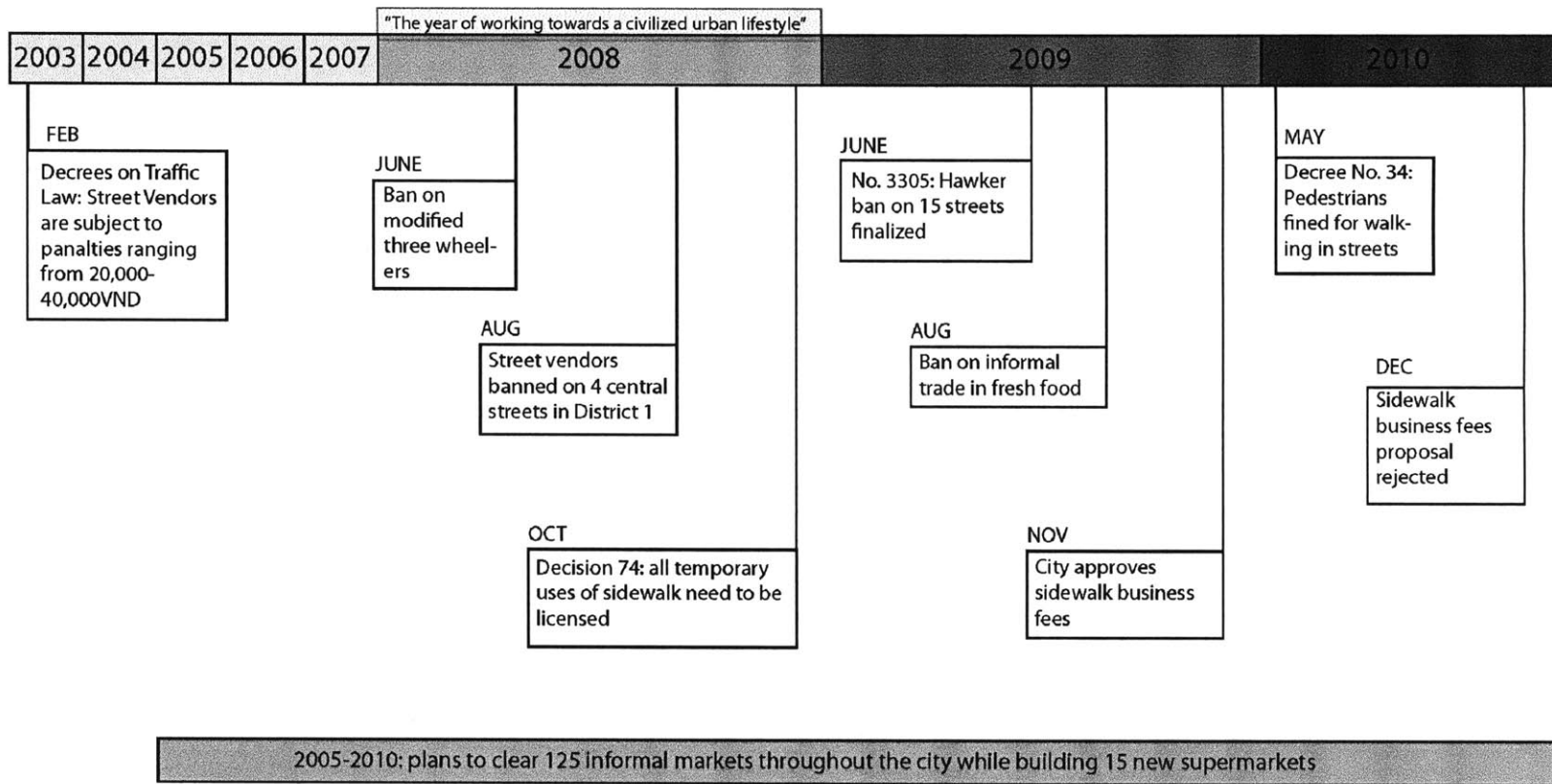
<sup>58</sup> “HCMC making efforts to usher in a ‘civilized lifestyle,’” *Thanh Nien Daily* 2008

<sup>59</sup> HCMC has over 20,000 *cyclos*, according to *Thanh Nien*

<sup>60</sup> HCMC also had a strategic plan to clear 125 informal markets throughout the city and build 15 new supermarkets from 2005-2010. M4P Report.

<sup>61</sup> Koh 2007, 6

Figure 9: Timeline of sidewalk-related policies for HCMC



A move by local officials to manage sidewalk activity through sidewalk business fees and rents in November 2009 seemed promising in terms of a new paradigm toward the sidewalk. Officials were open to charging lower fees for low-income users of the sidewalk (with higher fees for businesses and parking), and businesses were even on board with the fee structure proposed by the Departments of Finance and Transportation.<sup>62</sup> However, this proposal failed at the top level of city government in December 2010 due to the requests not being “convincing enough.”<sup>63</sup>

Michael Digregorio, formerly with the Ford Foundation, argues “there are some misunderstandings about the role of vendors in restricting movement of pedestrians on sidewalks, some competitive market issues, and a wrong-headed sense that street vendors are symbolic of poverty and backwardness.”<sup>64</sup> These misunderstandings, combined with a desire to show a “modern” image to the world, have put street vendors and sidewalk activity in dangerous limbo.

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<sup>62</sup> “Poor people who used part of sidewalks for vending should have to pay lower fees, Kim said.” “Regarding fees for sidewalk usage” 2009, Viet Nam News

<sup>63</sup> “Legislators reject city proposal on higher toll fees, sidewalk rents” *Thanh Nien Daily*, 2010

<sup>64</sup> “Out on the Street” *Thanh Nien Daily*, 2011

## **FIELDWORK: Experiences on the ground**

The fieldwork for this thesis is comprised of four weeks of mapping and interviewing vendors throughout January and December 2010. The total combined data collected from the entire MIT slab team (four students + Professor Kim) resulted in 2,793 data points in GIS and over 250 street vendor interviews (of which I personally conducted 86). We mapped certain neighborhoods in District 1 and District 5, and interviewed sidewalk users in District 1, 5 and Tan Phu.

Mapping was done with paper and pen via physical observation and photography. We noted the goods sold or use type, amount of sidewalk taken up (square meters), number of vendors and customers, how much pedestrian passageway was left on the sidewalk, whether the vendor was mobile or stationary, and other demographic information. The goods and use categories are: Food, Merchandise, Services (including barbers, manicurists, motorbike taxis, cyclo drivers, repairmen, etc), Spillover (meaning any storefront with goods outside the building), Parking, Leisure, and Beggars. All this information was encoded into GIS.

Interviews were conducted via Vietnamese translators. Selection of interviewees was entirely random and dependent on their willingness to talk. All sidewalk users were asked at most ten questions regarding their demographic information, motivations for vending/using the sidewalk, relations with property owners and other vendors, and interactions with the police and enforcing authorities (see Appendix A).

I was also able to observe three presentations with Saigon Tourist, HCMC Department of Transportation, and HCMC Department of Architecture regarding the proposed

intervention. Their responses and questions to the path are, therefore, critical pieces of knowledge informing this research.

This combination of physical observation, ethnography and interviewing has resulted in a rich picture of the complexities of street vending, sidewalk activity and stakeholder desires in and visions for Ho Chi Minh City. These findings will play an essential part in formulating the intervention.

## Initial Findings

### *Physical*

While there are many physical findings of interest, perhaps the most interesting and relevant finding is that vendors truly take up very little space on the sidewalk in comparison to sidewalk parking and store spillover. In District 1, the largest consumer of sidewalk space is parking by far (see Table 2). Moreover, parking and store spillover sidewalk usage averages at ten square meters, while vendors only use three to four.

	Parking	Spillover	Food	Merchandise	Services
Q1	<b>40.7</b>	18.9	12.1	23.3	4.9
Q5	23	19.1	5.3	<b>51.7</b>	0.9
Overall	36.7	19	10.5	29.9	3.9

**Table 2: Percent of sidewalk area used by different categories**  
 NOTE: includes “double-counted” areas, i.e. areas marked as food and merchandise

Meanwhile, we also discovered that mobile vendors accounted for less than half of street activity<sup>65</sup> (see Table 3). While the different categories reveal varying levels of migratory vs. stationary behavior, this finding, most importantly, shows that mobile vendors do not use up as much space as stationary sidewalk users.

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<sup>65</sup> Except for beggars in both districts, and services in Cho Lon, who were more likely to be stationary.



	Food		Merchandise		Service		Beggar	
	MOBILE	STAT	MOBILE	STAT	MOBILE	STAT	MOBILE	STAT
Q1	28.5	71.5	27.7	72.3	43.7	56.3	79.2	20.8
Q5	25.7	74.3	6.7	93.3	74.1	25.9	100	0
Overall	28.1	71.9	18.8	82.1	45.9	54.1	80	20

**Table 3: Percent of use/goods vendors, divided by migrant vs. stationary**

From a purely physical perspective, vending is not the major consumer of sidewalk space, and street activity is more likely to be stationary than mobile. If we are seriously concerned about sidewalk safety and pedestrians, we really should be addressing issues of store spillover, sidewalk cafes and especially motorbike parking, since these are stationary, permanent non-vending activities.

*Vendors: who are they and how do they use the space?*

Interviews provided the most insight into the day-to-day experience of vendors and sidewalk users, especially regarding who the vendors are and why they want to vend. Many of the interviewed vendors cited their poverty and lack of education as major reasons for pursuing a low-skill job such as vending. There were only a few unique cases of those who vended because they enjoyed it, needed supplementary income or felt like they could sell because they lived in the adjoining building. Nevertheless, our interview results did confirm that a majority of vendors perceived themselves to be underprivileged.

Storeowners who spilled over onto the sidewalk, on the other hand, seemed to use the sidewalk because they viewed it as a necessary method of advertisement and often had very little space inside.

The determinants for location choice fall largely into four categories: relationships, ownership, historical, and vacancy. The majority of vendors answered that the adjoining storeowner was friendly to them and allowed them to sell there; some storeowners even offered storage space and amenities (water, electricity). Others vended on the sidewalk in front of their residential buildings, citing informal agreements with property owners and their status as residents as reasons for using that particular site. A few vendors, interestingly, noted that a family member had vended in their current location before, and so they had “always been there” – from aunts and mothers to cousins, a sort of historical claim to the street. The rest of vendors tended to locate in front of vacant or closed storefronts where nobody would bother them immediately.

Sidewalk users, moreover, were overwhelmingly open to sharing spaces. Often, two symbiotic vendors would share a sidewalk (drinks and merchandise, drinks and food, etc) and it did not seem to have a spirit of competition or contestation. In Cho Lon, moreover, many storeowners seemed to have a family member with food or drinks out on the curb in front. A factor that allows this sharing to occur also is the time variety in sidewalk usage. There were definitely different periods of intensity, and vendors would utilize the space based on the time of day and their nature; this is not a case where many similar vendors are competing for a scarce resource. We see therefore that vendors do not locate accidentally and that for the most part, there are entrenched systems and networks that exist on the sidewalk and provide support and sharing for the vendors.

## **Experience with enforcement and policy**

Sidewalk activity in HCMC, however, is now prohibited without a license and only allowed to be licensed on sidewalks wider than three meters. The primary enforcers of this policy are local ward police. We were curious how different users interacted with enforcement authorities, and we found a street vending population that subscribes to Saavedra-Chanduvi's description of the social norm of noncompliance, and an inconsistent police force that is, perhaps, even slightly reluctant to implement this policy, similar to Koh's depiction of the Hanoi police force.

Quite a few vendors cited special circumstances, such as old age or a bad leg, that gave them favor with police, whereas some mentioned special friendships that allowed them to vend without harassment, or at least with less severe action. Police also appear to care less about mobile vendors, as they move around without occupying any space permanently; a lack of nighttime supervision also seemed to encourage nighttime street vending. Perhaps the situation is summed up well with the case of the migrant selling *rau câu*, a colorful Vietnamese gelatin dessert, outside of an elementary school. As I asked him whether the police bothered him at all, he grinned at me and said, "I used to sell *rau câu* to those policemen when they were little boys. They do not bother me at all!"

Only one of the vendors I interviewed mentioned having any sort of license to vend (a Health Certificate). The rest seemed resigned to paying fines, willingly taking the risk of goods confiscation, and did not mention licenses at all. A frequent comment among vendors mentioned how vendors had too many goods to pack up and run, so they would rather just pay the fine. It appears as if one of the major outcomes of this policy is increased vendor likelihood of mobility, similar to Martha Lincoln's observations from the Hanoi case.

However, this finding indicates that the original purposes of the policy - street clearance – are not exactly being met. To be truly effective, this situation demands a different policy approach that will not maintain this case-by-case, punitive, stressful practice.

Pay a fine/ticket	13
Has had goods confiscated	10
Has paid goods retrieval fee	4
Run away	10
Vend on smaller, less policed streets	2
Police don't mind because mobile	7
Police don't mind because of poor, injured, old, etc	9
Doesn't get bothered that much	12
Doesn't get bothered because legal/behind line	5
Increased police activity before festivals/campaigns	8
Knows when police are going to come, hides/sells at different times/moves goods inside	14
Police come regularly/frequently	16
Mentions corruption/bribe	3

**Table 4:** Sidewalk user interactions with police, out of 86 personally conducted interviews

It is evident, though, that efforts to remove street vending from roads and sidewalks have definitely increased since the release of Decision 74 in 2008, as most vendors noted more frequent police clearance, fining and confiscation of goods. Some vendors, moreover, acquiesce that their activities are considered to be illegal. Many vendors have taken to tracking police activity, knowing when and where to run away, devising innovative ways of carrying their goods that can let them pack up and run in a minute's notice. Some of the vendors interviewed would only sit facing the street, with eyes constantly shifting back and forth as they scanned for police activity, saying that after vending was banished from the streets, they were unsure of what they would be able to do for a living.

This sense of anxiety is heightened in the downtown areas and near tourist sites, as compared to more residential areas. The majority of sidewalk users in Tan Phu district,

which is primarily residential/suburban, did not express nearly the same sense of hostility from police or ward authorities. As one vendor answered, “different areas receive different treatments by police.” This difference in sidewalk management does beg the question: for whom is this policy intended, and what should it be achieving?

## **Grassroots Innovations**

### *Sidewalk Line*

Local authorities have taken steps to organize the streets and sidewalks more effectively, providing an interesting insight into sidewalk usage and management. The first is simply a painted line (sometimes made out of paving material) demarcating 1.5 meters from the edge of the sidewalk. It designates where store spillover, parking, restaurant tables and informal vending should be contained in on the sidewalk and attempts to leave space for pedestrians on the other half. This innovation seems to have started in a District 5 ward, and has spread throughout the city in different districts.

The line can be found in multiple manifestations. The standard was to have a straight line down the sidewalk in a white or light gray color, either painted or with paving stones. This form was the standard in District 1. In District 5, moreover, we saw a wide roll of yellow tape being used for a special occasion as well as the normal white line. There was also one (particularly wide) sidewalk with two types of lines: one blue, dotted spray paint line marking the limit which stores could use, and then another white line beyond that for parking.



**Figure 10: Variations on the line in HCMC.**

**TOP LEFT: Cho Lon line, TOP RIGHT: District 1 line**

**MIDDLE: Yellow line in Cho Lon**

**BOTTOM: Blue dotted line for merchandise and white line for spillover, Cho Lon**

The effectiveness of this line is ambiguous. On the one hand, the visual nature of the line means that sidewalk users can consciously see when they are across the line or following it much more easily. Often stores would spillover right to the line and cafes would barely touch it. On streets where the line was followed, there was significantly more space for pedestrians. However, a lack of clear enforcement and penalty seems to be preventing the line from reaching its full potential; as one vendor noted, “it’s just a line.”

### *The Honda-om Team*

An interesting bottom-up method of organization, moreover, is the case of the Honda-om drivers (motorcycle taxis), who self-organized into a quasi-union or “team” of sorts. This “union” has allowed them to negotiate legal sidewalk parking rights, mainly on corners, improving their chances of getting customers. In return, the union members wear uniforms and come up with their own shift schedule that regulates the number of drivers on the street. The Honda-om drivers developed this ad hoc union outside of a city hospital, where they had previously been competing intensely for customers. Honda-om drivers in this union gain a definite space, do not need to compete with other drivers for their location, and so have reached a level of formality unlike any other vendors. Some of the interviewed drivers in other parts of city also mentioned assisting police in monitoring crime and street activity, and as Honda-om drivers are on the street at most hours of the day, they have the capacity to do so. This case is actually quite fascinating and deserves its own research, given that the Vietnamese government has typically been quite hostile to non-government associations. It provides a strong argument for vendor organizations and self-regulation, and demonstrates a desire for institutional formality.



Figure 11: Honda-om union members in uniform, on their designated corner (District 1)

### Government presentations

Lastly, I sat in on three presentations with SaigonTourist (state-led tourism agency), HCMC Department of Transportation and HCMC Department of Architecture, describing the proposal and receiving feedback. Representatives from the People’s Committees of Districts 1, 3 and 6 were also there at the Transportation meeting. All three agencies had overwhelmingly positive reactions and appeared strongly in favor of such an idea.

All three agencies supported the idea because of its simplicity, low physical investment and lack of infrastructure development. Members of SaigonTourist particularly enjoyed the idea of creating an additional (revenue-generating) tourist experience within the city, mentioning that tourists tend to take transport from site to site instead of walking and experiencing their “friendly” city. All three agencies also suggested that this idea would link well with current proposals to create pedestrian only streets (Nguyen Hue proposal) and were highly supportive of a pedestrian-oriented focus. SaigonTourist also agreed with



the idea of highlighting Cho Lon, but the People's Committee representative from District 6 commented that it would be harder to implement this line in Cho Lon because there is less space overall and narrower sidewalks.

Many were still wary of keeping sidewalk activity, however, citing that it was "bad for pedestrians," could develop uncontrollably with tourists, and traffic standards were still not high enough for tourists unused to the traffic in HCMC. Several ideas to divert traffic were offered as well. In terms of implementing the path, most agency members called for pilot projects and temporary versions of the path to test the results. They also noted that the Department of Sports, Culture and Tourism needs to be involved in this process.

## **FINDINGS: Stakeholder Concerns**

The goal of this section is to break down the stakeholders involved and observe what the various groups are feeling about these issues of vending, sidewalk activity and tourism. Using news sources such as Thanh Nien (one of the most widely circulated newspapers in Vietnam and available in English) and Viet Nam News, I track responses especially regarding the ban on sidewalk activity in both Hanoi and HCMC to understand how politicians, experts, local residents, vendors and tourists have reacted. I also turn to tourism industry surveys, tourism forums, and tourist agencies (such as Concierge.com, SaigonTourist Travel Service and Vietnamese Travel Services) to figure out what tourists look for and what tourists respond to.<sup>66</sup> I also utilize tourism research conducted by MIT slab members on sites such as virtualtourist.com, Flickr, and blogs to create a

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<sup>66</sup> News sources: Thanh Nien, Viet Nam News, AFP, IRIN, Open Air Market Network, Forbes, Tin Quê Hố, Sydney Morning Herald

comprehensive picture of what tourists are looking for and enjoy during their experiences in Vietnam.

### *News Sources*

How have people responded to the street vending bans of 2008 and subsequent regulations? What seemed to be the general sentiment of different stakeholders involved in sidewalk life? Surveying 43 news articles from eight different sources, I formulate an understanding of which parties hold different opinions regarding sidewalk life and street vending. The news articles used are numbered alphabetically in Appendix B.

Supporters of the 2008 ban are comprised of four major groups. The first are the high-level politicians, often quoted in news articles as directly supporting the ban, discouraging sidewalk activity, and being unsupportive of vendors. These politicians are usually found in the People's Committee and in the Department of Industry and Trade.<sup>67</sup> Some legal vendors, moreover, expressed pleasure at removing illegal vendors, who sold similar items at lower prices and created more competition for them.<sup>68</sup> Lastly, while locals were overwhelmingly against the ban, a few were quoted as saying that removing the vendors had created a more "beautiful" city, a normative belief. Only one or two tourists were quoted as saying that there was now more space after the ban and they enjoyed it more.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> News Articles #1, 9, 12

<sup>68</sup> News Article #33

<sup>69</sup> News Article #10

## Who supports the ban?

### Politicians:

Mayor of Hanoi: "...we do not have to conserve what is essentially a characteristic of underdevelopment." (*News Article 1*)

Chief of Hanoi People's Committee: "It's like a campaign to change a bad habit." (*News Article 9*)

Deputy director of the city Department of Industry and trade: "I am sure city authorities will completely ban street vending in the future." (*News Article 9*)

### Locals:

"The city had never been so beautiful...such beauty would bring more tourists to the city." (*News Article 10*)

Perhaps it was the nature of the news source, but the majority of reports expressed negative sentiment toward the ban and the way it was carried out. Academics and experts all agreed that the ban was done poorly as it did not consider the livelihood of sidewalk users, and so it did not help manage street activity. Enforcers expressed frustration at having to chase away vendors day after day, both because they sympathized with vendors and also because they felt like they were being ineffective.<sup>70</sup> Locals bemoaned a loss of convenience, distinctive color and character, and sympathized with low-income vendors.<sup>71</sup> Foreigners were mostly nostalgic for HCMC pre-street vending ban, and noted that they did not want to see HCMC turn into a bland, non-distinctive city.<sup>72</sup> Business owners were portrayed the most neutral, with one commenting that the government has a responsibility to keep sidewalks usable, but that poor people should not just be banned.

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<sup>70</sup> News Articles #25, 2

<sup>71</sup> News Articles #1, 6, 32

<sup>72</sup> News Articles #26, 32

### **Against the ban**

"I am afraid that Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City will someday look exactly like fifty other cities in Asia, and be completely boring, having lost everything that made them unique and beautiful." – Journalist Matthew Steinglass, Hanoi Bureau Chief of the German Press DPA (*News Article 26*)

"Resident Pham Quang Hung, 56, buying a steaming corn cob from a street seller, said: "I often buy things on the streets. It's cheap and good and convenient. It's inhumane to drive those people away. How can they live?"" (*News Article 1*)

Letter to Vietnamese newspaper:

"Hanoi stands to lose its distinctive colour and charm in favour of Singapore-style regimentation." (*News Article 1*)

57% of surveyed Hanoi residents disagreed with the ban. (*News Article 32*)

Many articles also expressed frustration with the lack of government initiative to deal with a dearth of parking in the city contributing to the traffic concerns. Some articles also noted that the public was "openly questioning whether authorities would introduce alternatives to support affected citizens."<sup>73</sup>

### *Findings from tourist research*

Tourism is an increasingly important part of the Vietnamese economy, with HCMC, Hanoi and beach resorts topping the list. In 2008, over 4 million international tourists visited the country, and HCMC had an individual target of 2.8 million foreign tourists for 2010.<sup>74</sup> Given that foreign tourism is so important and one of the motivators behind the

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<sup>73</sup> News Article #32

<sup>74</sup> Walsh, J. C. 2010. "Street Vendors and the Dynamics of the Informal Economy: Evidence from Vung Tau, Vietnam." *Asian Social Science* 6 (11): p159.

street clearance policies, it is necessary that we unpack what visitors are actually looking for and what they look for upon visiting HCMC.

To assess tourists' opinions, I turned to tourism industry surveys and travel guide sources, collecting data from 34 articles across 28 sources. I then utilized MIT slab research that surveyed comments from 50 Flickr photo albums after 2000, 68 blogs, and eleven articles on tourism review sites with 150 comments. The purpose of doing such an extensive survey was to gather the full picture of what tourists enjoy and dislike about HCMC. Although using this type of data source is slightly biased because not every tourist posts or responds - those with strong opinions who are most critical or excited are overrepresented - this method still presented a fairly diverse set of results.

In terms of positive aspects of HCMC, tourists primarily noticed and documented instances of children, traffic, good food, vibrant street life, and local people and ways of living ("a mixture of old-world charm with modern amenities." 27.5% of our surveys mentioned street life and vibrancy of the urban experience, and 19.5% referenced street food positively. Tourists also commented on cheap shopping and friendly people. In contrast, tourists disliked being seen as sources of money for vendors, getting ripped off, witnessing evidence of poverty and feeling unsafe (especially regarding traffic safety). 10% of the surveys mentioned a dislike for overaggressive street vendors.

The research reveals that tourists definitely do enjoy the unique street life found in HCMC, confirming Lincoln's comment that "Curiously, the recent ban on street trading is at cross purposes with the desires of many tourists themselves, who worry that the picturesque quality of Hanoi's streets will be lost if vendors are excluded."<sup>75</sup> It is ironic that

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<sup>75</sup> Lincoln 2008

the HCMC government has spoken so strongly in favor of street vending bans in order to attract tourists, when in fact they may desire it more than other facets of the city. Yet tourists want a nostalgic, “picturesque” version of this, disliking the uglier side of the story, and so we need to be careful in completely catering to tourists’ desires.

## **V. Analysis**

### **Summary of Findings**

From the research and fieldwork, there is significant information regarding the existing systems of vending and sidewalk usage in HCMC and differing opinions towards these practices. The research has uncovered that people sell on the sidewalk because many of them are poor and lack other livelihood options, but there are also those who see it as their place to sell, regardless of economic need. Moreover, vendors take up significantly less space than parking and vendors, and bans on vending are, in fact, exacerbating the problem by creating insecurity for vendors and frustration for enforcing authorities.

The data also shows that the painted lines, while not totally effective, still present a visual guide that people generally follow when consistent enforcement is present. The Honda-om team, moreover, makes a convincing case for street vendor organization and legitimization of vending activity. And most importantly, we see that while high-level officials may be concerned with an imprecise understanding of tourists' needs, local officials are more sensitive to vending need as well as more open to tourists' enjoyment of Vietnam. So what will actually happen if this intervention passes the various levels of government and becomes reality in District 1 and District 5?

Given these findings and the key points from the literature, it is possible that the implementation of this line without significant thought and planning could definitely lead to the development of a homogenized city experience, where the poor and more unpleasant instances are displaced. However, with concerted decision making, this painted line does

have opportunities to address multiple stakeholder concerns, depending on different goals and consensus building processes, and could be a nexus for tourism and street vending.

*No planning – the worst case scenario*

If the line were to be painted tomorrow as is, I believe there are certain things that would happen that could lead to a “worst case scenario” of sorts. One possible picture is where the businesses completely take over the sidewalk and kick out the vendors in an effort to claim more business from tourists. These businesses would turn away from their original goods to tourist commodities and lose the original livelihoods of the area. Or, in another turn of events, vendors overcrowd the line, trying to compete for the tourists’ attention and inevitably creating a traffic nightmare. Worst of all, land values increase, given the increased tourist traffic, and residents are forced to move out. At the end of the day, poor people are forced out of the downtown, and long-term residents leave; tourists then end up finding an area devoid of original character and authenticity, replaced by a non-distinctive district performing for tourists.

*The dependent factor*

The outcome of this intervention ultimately depends on the goal and vision we want to achieve. The goal of catering to tourists, possibly trying to capture street life in a static manner, will determine a very different experience from the goal of catering to the urban poor and existing cultural practices – and the goal of catering to the government’s current perception of modernization would result in a different scene altogether. The analysis of the research findings, therefore, hinges on this key variable of the intervention’s goal. Given



all this information, there appear to be three possible goals of this intervention that different stakeholders in HCMC might have, and I hypothesize various outcomes from those perspectives, and suggest a combination of policies, strategies and intervention-specific steps to accomplish and support each goal. The three goals are as follows:

- 1) The goal is to satisfy the government's desires and to mitigate the effects for the affected parties.
- 2) The goal is to cater to tourists' desires over locals.
- 3) The goal is to create a system that can adapt to the adjusting desires and needs of tourists, vendors and residents.

### **Goal 1: Government's Current Priorities**

The government wishes to portray a modern, well-managed city to the rest of the world. By painting this line, they want to show the best of Vietnam and HCMC to all visitors, both domestic and foreign. To them, moreover, encroaching messily on the sidewalk is an indicator of uncivilized activity. So what are the ways the painted line could be used to achieve their desires and to provide an experience they are probably envisioning, without affecting vendors for the worst? This goal, actually, requires the most administration if the government truly want to achieve what they have proclaimed, because the painted line will draw attention to the effectiveness of the government on these particular streets.

Given that parking and store spillover actually take up the most sidewalk space, their goal would be most effectively met by controlling businesses' spaces and providing other areas for motorbike parking. The line could be used to standardize the area of the sidewalk that should be left for pedestrians and tourists. Since the line would be

frequented by tourists and under higher scrutiny, we might actually see stricter enforcement and safer pedestrian experiences along the line.

Tourists would also be looking for food, drinks and souvenirs along the line. Organizing the vendors into legal clusters at certain crucial areas, similar to the Boston Freedom Trail, could demonstrate the government's urban management even better than clearing them, and could provide vital services for tourists. They could standardize vending materials (such as carts, etc) to show the benefits of formalization, and control issues of sanitation and so on. The big concern with this approach, however, is the process of selecting the vendors. If there were not too many vendors to begin with, the fairest approach might be just to utilize the existing vendors in that area, or to charge a higher fee; otherwise there might be resentment toward the chosen vendors, or possibly corruption.

If removing vending is truly a priority of the government though, there needs to be a two-pronged approach in order to control the informal vendors in a more successful way than the current means. The first part would be a clear eviction policy standardizing the fine and seizure of goods for vendors, accompanied by consistent enforcement of the law.<sup>76</sup> But as many experts have noted, pure clearance by itself is ineffective because it fails to provide options for the vendors. The second part of the strategy, therefore, could be the provision of alternate selling locations for vendors, like hawker centers, or other forms of credit support. Otherwise, the vendors will still need to sell and the clearance will continue being ineffective.

A benefit of focusing on this goal would be increased scrutiny and pressure by tourists on these particular streets and so likely enhanced enforcement of traffic issues. If

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<sup>76</sup> Such as in the Indian case.

vendors were given legal status either in clusters or in hawker centers, food standards could also be addressed more easily and a regular source of revenue from vending fees could be collected. Furthermore, vendors would not be completely banned but given a chance elsewhere. However, there are some major cons to focusing on the government's proclaimed priorities. Relocating vendors from their current locations removes street activity (which tourists enjoy), disrupts existing social networks, and often can disadvantage vendors even further by removing them from supply chains and regular customers. Removing what tourists like, moreover, could result in a bland urban experience. Ironically, achieving the government's ideal of management for foreign tourists will require even more coordination and work than the current methods – so painting the line may be a good thing in this case in terms of forcing the government to face policies in a more effective manner.

## **Goal 2: Tourist-based**

The second goal, to cater to tourists, sounds innocuous, but might result in an end result not too different from the first goal, if not worse. Given that tourists enjoy street food and vibrant street life, but do not want to be pestered by vendors, see poverty or feel unsafe, the implementation of the painted line in this case could create an idealized tourism experience harmful to the lowest income members.

If the purpose of the line is to appeal to tourists, I can envision the outcome where the line creates a retail corridor of tourist items and services. For example, many of the vendors around Ben Thanh market and on Le Loi near hotels ended up vending services such as souvenir photography and English t-shirts – it might become beneficial for businesses bordering the line to convert to this form of retail. In an effort to boost business,

though, stores might begin to push vendors away from the street, or competition between vendors might increase; poorer vendors would be less able to participate in attracting tourists in this way.

The line could be used in this case again to demarcate a clear path for pedestrians, with store spillover controlled more regularly on the streets near the line. With the line, there might also be a viable economic opportunity to develop a thriving food vending culture by featuring different kinds of Vietnamese cuisine at different points on the path. A focus on food vending would require significant organization, however, and it is unclear who would champion that.

Local businesses would initially benefit from increased revenues and economic development, but with this specific vision in mind, the local residents and existing character are more likely to be displaced or pushed out. By focusing on tourists without any attention to the residents, implementing the line would probably push out existing locals while portraying a static view of Vietnamese culture.

### **Goal 3: Multiple stakeholders**

The third goal, which is in some ways the most ambitious because it tries to accommodate multiple stakeholders, is where we can get the most creative with the painted line as a tourist intervention and street vendor management tool. The challenge is to implement the intervention as appropriate for existing systems now, but flexible enough to adapt to possible changes in culture and needs. For this approach, I believe that spatial forms of regulation offer the most promise in terms of addressing multiple desires, but there will need to be some creativity and concerted planning controls.

The “areas” or “districts” tangential to the painted line could, for example, become different vending zones. There are multiple ways of determining which vendors could belong where – we could take India’s example and register all existing vendors to begin with, and support the original vendors.<sup>77</sup> Given the time-dependent nature of vending that we observed, where street activity really only occurs around certain peak hours, these zones could charge different access fees based on the time of the day. Or perhaps vendors and businesses could rotate on different days who is allowed to use the sidewalk. The wards involved could decide which level of vending activity they want, and therefore meet the needs of local residents, vendors and tourists, who could experience different levels of street life in different zones. As some wards and city departments in HCMC have already expressed interest in a differentiated fee structure to use the sidewalk, and have demonstrated sympathy toward lower-income vendors, the vending zones could be a simple way of continuing on that idea.

While Vietnam does not officially allow the operation of associations, the success story of the Honda-om team indicates the openness of the government to vending organizations and provides some important insights for structuring them. While still technically informal, given their lack of registration status, the Honda-oms are essentially formalized in terms of their interaction with the government. Their success came via self-regulation; by allowing similar vendors to collaborate, the Honda-om drivers were able to create time-sharing schedules, allocate specific parcels of land (instead of competing with each other and fearing insecurity), and cooperate with authorities. While not all vendors are probably as unified as these Honda-om drivers, organizing them by “district” could give

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<sup>77</sup> Of course, this number is hard to measure, given the presence of mobile vendors.

them an opportunity to self-determine and regulate, in exchange for implied legality. Similar to the concept of the Indian Town Vending Committee, vendor organizations appear to be a bureaucratically easier solution. Of course, organizations are not a silver bullet, with possibility of corruption, and so these need to be implemented thoughtfully.

Lastly, there are certain planning controls that can be exerted on the districts to maintain certain qualities of life. Inclusive zoning could plan for ensuring certain percentages of residential buildings and affordable housing, which could help prevent displacement of residents, and certain types of businesses (manufacturing, etc) could be given incentives to remain within a tourist district. Ultimately, each “district” should be allowed to determine what qualities they wish to maintain because it may very well be that some districts want to become totally tourist oriented while others want to prevent as much disruption as possible. Whatever avenue they choose to pursue, it is crucial that they know the tools available to them.

## **Review**

The outcome of this line will depend greatly on its intended purpose and the stakeholders whose desires are to be met by implementing this intervention. Ideally, no matter which goal, certain aspects of street activity will improve with the line – for example, better food hygiene, fewer instances of corruption, and increased local economic development. Given the current political climate and past policy realizations, I believe that the most likely goal is Goal 1, which actually has surprisingly powerful ramifications for vendors and authorities alike and uses tourism to capitalize on and maintain a city asset. However, the outcome for the line ultimately hinges on the implementing agency’s agenda and intentions, because how they interpret the line and envision its function will sway the

line along one of these goals. For example, SaigonTourist will desire a very different tourist experience than the Department of Architecture. Nevertheless, knowing the strengths and weaknesses of each approach can help prep the intervention and accompanying policies.

The line itself could be physically manifested in myriad ways. It might not be painted, or might not always bisect the sidewalk right in the middle, or it could even demarcate vending lots almost like parking spots. Regardless of the design of the line and the goal, it does appear that this simple, visual intervention has the opportunity to have positive results, such as increased government attention, potential economic development and improved management of street activity through clear regulation and organization of sidewalk space.

<b>Goal</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
Government's current priorities	Portray modern image to world, especially tourists;  Increase traffic safety	Painted line draws attention to effectiveness of government  Vendors potentially included on line through centers, refreshment	Needs significant administration, support of livelihoods  Disruption of existing livelihoods  Bland tourist experience
Tourist-based	Provide sanitized/idealized tourist experience of street life	Highlights street life culture, especially food  Increased revenue for local residents and vendors	Likelihood of displacement, especially of poorer/more vulnerable populations  Creation of tourist-retail corridor along line instead of existing livelihoods
Multiple stakeholders	Address existing concerns but be flexible enough to adjust to future concerns	Creativity with line as management tool (vending zones, organizations)  Allow communities to choose planning tools	Complicated to implement and draw consensus  Ward level decision-making may exclude vulnerable populations

**Table 5: Summary of different goals for the intervention**



## **VI. Street Life in Vietnam: Conclusions and Next Steps**

Street life, street vending and sidewalk usage in HCMC are part of an interwoven, complex web of issues. Unpacking the specific situation for this thesis, we discover many misconceptions regarding street life in the city: for example, the tenuous status of vendors in the formal economy, the ineffectiveness of clearance, the proportion of mobile vendors vs. stationary sellers, the variety of enforcement and the unique culture of sidewalk usage celebrated by tourists and locals alike. Most of the policies enacted against such activities so far fail to address the root causes of street vending or stakeholder desires.

After assessing how this intervention might interface with these concerns, I believe that the potential benefits of this visual intervention are significant. Capitalizing on an existing management trend, this simple line presents an opportunity to include street vendors and organize sidewalk life into the tourist experience. By drawing critical attention to streets with the line, moreover, this intervention could force authorities to try new and more effective vendor management policies, while preserving aspects of street life that might otherwise disappear from Vietnam.

However, there are several unanswered questions as to the long-term effects of this line and the implementation of these ideas, ranging from technical concerns to issues of politics and intra-governmental dynamics. For example, since migrants are less likely to be connected to social institutions, would wards be an appropriate level of decision making to determine their fate or would migrant vendors be excluded from that process? Moreover, the design of the “districts” near the line needs to be made carefully as the designations may cross ward boundaries and create additional sources of tension (or positively, increase diversity and ideas). Further research into the mechanisms of local government in HCMC

specifically is needed to understand their strengths and weaknesses and their interactions with various groups of people.

Implementing this line also presents transportation questions in terms of increased foot traffic, service vendors and general transportation. Will *cyclos* and Honda-om drivers want to crowd certain parts of the line (especially the beginning and end) to offer their services? Will the increased foot traffic disrupt existing flows and increase noise pollution, bothering residents? In addition to these transportation studies, more extensive, long-term research should be conducted on the dynamics of the Honda-om organization to understand the problems and successes with such an association in HCMC.

Perhaps the most ambiguous question remains in terms of dealing with areas in the city that do not receive the benefits of this line. Will other wards and communities feel envious of the economic benefits of this line (or will they be thankful for less attention)? In the Salem Heritage Walk example, storeowners not originally on the painted line began painting their own lines to attempt and direct business to their stores – would this trend also happen in HCMC, and if so, how could we prevent it, and should we?

These questions are all situated within a larger debate about development in Southeast Asia (and indeed, worldwide) that questions the attitude of preventing gentrification. Is it truly possible to stabilize a neighborhood in rapidly developing areas – and should we even try? Planners need to be careful not to preserve a static, nostalgic picture of what we see as a good part of “culture” and to recognize the changing nature of culture and cultural practice. It is easy to romanticize the past, when many residents and politicians wish to move forward in the manner they desire.

This proposal has made it to the HCMC People's Committee four months after proposing it to the Departments of Architecture and Transportation, and SaigonTourist. Government officials liked how simple it was, and the benefits of this clear visual method are strong - but as we can see, there definitely needs to be some thinking beyond just painting the line on the ground. Perhaps the best thing to do is to test or pilot the response by painting this line in an area already catering to tourists (Pham Ngu Lao or Ben Thanh market) and observing its effectiveness. With implications for economic development and urban management, drawing this line imbues a street with power and significance and could be a new model of spatial street vendor organization.

**Appendix A**  
**Interview Questions for Sidewalk Users**

1. How long have you been selling?
2. How many days do you work per week? What times?
3. Why are you at this particular location? Do you move around?
4. Where are you from currently? If not originally from Ho Chi Minh City, what province?
5. Do you pay rent for your spot? What is your interaction with the property owners, shopkeeper and neighbors?
6. What happens if other vendors try to work near you?
7. How do you store your goods?
8. How much profit do you make?
9. Have the new regulations changed your activities? When did you notice a significant change?
10. If there is less street activity, why have you stayed?

## **Appendix B**

### **News Articles for Findings**

1. AFP. "Vietnam Capital Plans To Ban Street Vendors." *AFP* 2008.
2. "A Street-smart Strategy Out Of the Crisis." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 26 Feb 2009.
3. "Ban's Bane." *Thanh Nien Daily* 17 July 2008.
4. "City Homeless Find Cheap 'hotel'." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 20 Aug 2010.
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6. "Disappearing In the Dark." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 28 Feb 2010.
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9. "Hanoi Bans Hawkers On Many Streets, Tourist Spots." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 1 July 2008. Web.
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13. "HCMC Business Students Promote Street Vendor Project." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 2008.
14. "HCMC Ignores Cholera Threat Brought By Street Stalls." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 23 Apr 2010.
15. "HCMC Making Efforts To Usher In 'civilized Lifestyle'." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 18 June 2008.
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17. "HCMC Needs To Engage Citizenry In Urban Planning: Conference." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 5 Nov 2008.
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25. "Out On the Street." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 2011.
26. "Pain Of the Nation." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 17 Oct 2009.
27. "Pedestrian-only Weekends On Nguyen Hue Planned." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 13 Aug 2009.
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29. "Reclaiming the Streets Takes Its Toll On Locals." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 2008.
30. "Shining Candy Sold To Kids after Ban." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 4 Apr 2010.
31. "Sidewalk Obstacle Course." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 18 Apr 2008.
32. "Sidewalk Shuffle." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 2008 : n. pag. Print.
33. "Street Food Sellers Worried about Loss Of Livelihood." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 12 Aug 2009.
34. "Street Vending Ban Closes Door To Hanoi's Poor People." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 29 July 2008.
35. "Street Vendors are Vital In the City." *City Diary - TuoiTreNews* 2011.
36. "Streets Paved With Bird Food, Corn and Shoe Repairers." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 18 Dec 2008.
37. "Surviving the Street Vendors In Vietnam." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 21 Dec 2008.
38. "The Chè Lady." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 27 Aug 2010.
39. "The Kindness Of Strangers." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 22 Nov 2008.
40. "Times are A-changin'." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 28 Sept 2009.
41. Tin Quê Hương. "Ban On Street Vendors Threatens Livelihoods." *Tin Quê Hương* 28 June 2008. 20 Apr 2011.
42. "Transportation Squeeze." *Thanh Nien Daily*. 2008.
43. Viet Nam News. "HCM City Mulls Licenses, Fees For Street Vendors." *VnnNews* 10 Oct 2009.

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