REMAKING IMAGE AND IDENTITY OF THE WATER CITY – REDEVELOPMENT OF HO CHI MINH CITY’S WATERFRONT TO REGAIN ITS CULTURAL IMAGE AND IDENTITY

Pham Thi Thanh Thao * & Pham Quang Dieu **

*Department of Architecture, Ho Chi Minh City University of Architecture, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, Email: k97_thao@yahoo.com
**Department of Urbanism, 2628BL, Delft University of Technology, Delft, Netherlands, Email: d.q.pham@tudelft.nl

ABSTRACT: Since Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam was established in 1698; the Saigon River and the waterway-orientated have been recognized such as the most attractive areas and important parts of urban fabric. These areas remained a rich culture of the water city and built up unique characteristics of the historical city itself. Currently, the rapidly urbanization in Ho Chi Minh City is demand on new relations between the city and its landscape. The city’s urban expansion, outdated port and slums along the river and main canals cause serious problems such as blocking the specific atmosphere, lacking waterscapes and flooding affects.

This paper concerns the transformation of the city’s structural patterns and functional spaces along the Saigon River and canals. In order to make friendly sustainable urban development criteria, these pattern and spaces are measures to redesign based on local characters, cultural and historic background. The regeneration of its waterfront is used as a strong tool to improve the local image and unique identity of Ho Chi Minh City.

We argue that regaining the waterfront’s values and maintaining its spirit and sense will return vitality for the city.

KEYWORDS: Waterfront, waterscape, water structure, redevelopment urban waterfront, cultural image, identity.

1 INTRODUCTION

Ho Chi Minh City is a water city with canal-based development and original functions of the canal system. Since it’s founding in 1698 by Nguyen Huu Canh, the city is formed by Saigon River and canal-based “retains its unique water-based social economic structures including port-boat-market activities and canal handicraft villages, processing a rich cultural and religious diversity” [32]. In recent years, the rapid urbanization and modernization in Ho Chi Minh city has result in losing its own identity and characteristic image of the a city while water is a distinctive spiritual that characterizes the urban structure of city for a long time. As a result, local inhabitants partly forgot the spirited images and distinctiveness of the water city and it loses the historic values as well as it have been almost forgotten how to build. In addition, port located in inner the city and flow of goods passes through the city addressing pressure on infrastructure as well as urban environment, resulting on cutting off the connection between city and water. Accessing to the riverbank is blocked in various locations by industrial installations, port and slums.

Therefore, the transformation of outdated port area and canal-system are urgent and necessary, not only developing an attractive waterfront of Saigon river but also recovering the city’s significant and distinguish after relocation the inner city’s port to near the sea. The approach of this paper argues a sustainable urban development criterion to improve and create connections from city centre to its waterfront, which brings the city back to the river and rediscover waterfront revitalization as a unique opportunity for cities to reconnect with its water’s edge.
The paper is built by three results, which contributes the structure of the paper and provides a mechanism for thinking about particular aspects of waterfront redevelopment in Ho Chi Minh City. History of the Ho Chi Minh City’s urban development and waterfront is firstly structured to deal with the relations between the city and port during over three hundred years. The next aspect is addressed by changing a relationship between the city and its waterfront through an analysis existing issues, the potentials, current and future demands of Ho Chi Minh City in relation with water. The third is an answer of how waterfront’s regeneration enhances urban space-making quality and spatial structure of the water’s edge?

The current identity of the city is one that has many fragmented ‘moments’; therefore, the paper researches a catalyst for transforming the city’s identity from historic preservation to new cultural and community facilities link to water to reconnect the city fabric and its waterfront. The transformation Saigon’s waterfront has the ability to shape an image for the city, to add value to city economies, and create desirability. The waterfront plays a critical role remade the image of the city. The main characteristics of the waterfront area can be considered as strengths to redevelop watersides. The environmental, cultural or historical of a specific area create the values of waterfront where have significance to the visual, social and cultural identity of local community; therefore, waterfront’s revitalization regains the city’s identity and cultural image; and improves cultural heritage values. In addition, facing today’s ecological and environmental issues, flooding protection and water management are vital factors related to future urban development in term of sustainability. Waterfront regeneration deals with water risks to contribute a better living environment, creating value for city development.

2 HISTORY OF THE HO CHI MINH CITY’S URBAN DEVELOPMENT AND WATERFRONT

2.1 History of the Ho Chi Minh City’s urban development and waterfront

Ho Chi Minh City found in 1968 on the old Khmer city of Prei Nokor with initial name ‘Saigon – Gia Dinh’. Since 1772, Saigon has become the city as the noun “thành phố” in Vietnamese language composed of two components, ‘thành’ and ‘phố’. ‘Thành’ constitutes an inhabited place surrounded by protecting walls and ‘phố’ means a fixed place of commercial interests [32]. Saigon – Gia Dinh is formed by Saigon River, Ben Nghe canal, Thi Nghe canal and natural ditches, which make the Saigon as a water-base structured city and port-boat-market activities along canals.

The first fort was built on the year 1790 with the Vauban model –“Turtle Fort” by the first king of Nguyen dynasty. It located in a strategic place to the region and the sea with natural protective water features. In 1835, the second king of Nguyen dynasty after a rebellion remade the fort with defenses as the main purpose; therefore only two small ditches connected the fort to Saigon River. However, the Saigon’s riverbanks as well as the two canals on the North and the South were still main natural water-structures of the city.

The French named Saigon as “Citadel de Saigon” and created several inner waterways for small boats and trading activities. Some of the main canals correspond to nowadays boulevards Nguyen Hue, Le Loi, Ham Nghi that forms the “Golden Triangle” in the city center. The navigable rivers and canals have served in the past as an important route into the city, often being the main approach to city. Ho Chi Minh City’s canal-based urban form is an illustration of this unchanged dependency on the city’s abounding river systems. This unique urban life, with its water-based socio-economic structures that include port-boat-market activities processes a rich cultural and religious diversity that dates back in history [32].

Gradually, all the inner land canals were filled up as the commercial activities were up-scaled. Those small ditches were not suitable for big vessels and barges. Small boat trade was moved farther to the other part of the city. As soon as the market located close to the canal was removed (due to its total damage from a fire), the last inner land canal as shown in the map (which is currently Nguyen Hue Boulevard) was filled. Its whole waterfront was dedicated to the bigger ships for international trading instead of small boats for local needs.

Throughout history, the waterfront of Saigon has been transformed several times. The place once was nothing but a fortress in the middle of marshland is nowadays the most economic developing city of the country. The water system was exploited for different uses but has never been exploited as a public amenity. Canals were dug out, low land was filled in, natural shoreline became hard edge but fundamentally, this was the use on the landside that determined the type of the contact between water and
land through different period. Uses changed, but new forms always inherit something to grow from the basis of the old infrastructures.

Figure 1: History of the Ho Chi Minh City’s urban development and waterfront

2.2 Relationship between Ho Chi Minh City and the port

Globalization has significant changed the traditional role of ports and increase competition in international trade. Particularly, the technical advancements combined with the requirements of containerization, have shifted the basing points for global water transport away from previously historic waterfronts. With this passing, the relationship between water and the generators of economic wealth has changed [23, 24]. It requires that the port be relocated to available places in order to adapt with international debate. From the 17th to the 21st, the port of Ho Chi Minh City – Saigon port is the most important hub in entire region. Through times, the layout and activities of port area is increasingly conflicting with interests concerning the natural and urban environment. The port area is not only industrial area in the city, where industries committing nuisance but also is annoying urban activities areas. Additionally, the changing technology, energy source and logistics resulted into new demands on the scale and size of port. The old port has become too small for the demands of the times, in consequence, Saigon port is moving to rural area and near the sea in Cat Lai, Hiep Phuoc and Vung Tau. It is the steps preparing for the new urban planning on the west and east side of the river. From Saigon Bridge on the north, the vacant space available for the city spreads 6.5 km length until Te Canal on the south require a plan to return a city’s vital locations to the public domain and quality of urban space.

The transformation of outdated port area and canal-side are urgent and necessary, not only developing Saigon waterfront but also recovering the city’s significance and distinguishes when relocation the inner city’s port to rural area.

Figure 2: Changing relation between the port and the city

3 CHANGE A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CITY AND ITS WATERFRONT
3.1 Urban expansion and urbanization has changed characteristics of Saigon’s waterfront
Rapid population development and urban expansion has serious pressure. In fact, the existing expanded city center is now under very high redevelopment overload. The present city center, however, is too short of urbanized structures and functions to become the core of a megalopolis of advanced commerce and service. The city and its center are needed to meet the worldly standard requirements of living environment, urban activities, investment, and redevelopment. In addition, it is estimated that Ho Chi Minh City will have a population of approximately 10 million by 2025. Under the present urban infrastructure of the city, the living conditions will be deteriorated and additional population and urban activities will paralyze traffic. Ho Chi Minh city is faced with lists of defects: traffic congestion, depressed housing, inadequacy and miss-distribution of open spaces and the jumble of houses and industry. In fact, uncontrolled developments have brought various urban problems, including insufficient urban services and degradation of landscape or amenity. Many factors varying from infrastructure to landscape will have to be comprehensively coordinated with each other by definite principles of urban planning from now on.

3.2 The challenge of waterfront because of abandonment of the old port in inner city and canals systems
Saigon Port in Ho Chi Minh City as many port cities around the world are faced with an outdated port in inner city area, which illustrates separated evident between the city and port on a global scale. The layout and activities of the outdated port is increasingly conflicting between natural and urban environment that result in cutting off the city from the water. In fact, the city is confronted with large abandoned docklands and industrial areas along Saigon River. The riverbank and canals are clearly giving way to urban sprawl, bad living environment, nondescript waterscape, no accesses and flooding. In particular, living environment of neighborhoods along Saigon River is a serious problem. Housing patterns are extremely dense with little floor area available per household. In fact, most of houses in this area are independent housing styles. They are built by owners and are no controlling architecture and planning, which often completely lacked technical infrastructure and transport connections. This has resulted in precarious living conditions for the inhabitants and in environmental problems for the city. Another is housing conditions were worse while housing demand was peaking; therefore, many people still lives densely in small space, inadequate housing and poor environmental conditions are increasing. In addition, open public spaces to the river are closed by industrial barrier. There is less green space and unattractive parks on the edge of river. Only 10% residents participate in public space and very low number of people involves open space (HCM City People’s Committee, 2010). Saigon River offers great opportunities to develop waterfront although currently not much people access to public space along Saigon River.

Moreover, port located in inner the city and flow of goods passes through the city addressing pressure on infrastructure as well as urban environment. The Ton Duc Thang highway has cut off the connection between city and water due to residents are afraid of crossing through a heavy highway to Saigon River. For accessibility, existing points to the river are often almost impossible to find. In city center, city and river is divided by heavy highway with high speed and trucks running between settlements and the river. Access to the riverbank is blocked in various locations by industrial installations or port. In architecture, at present the city offers a scattered image of buildings spanning a history of more than 250 years. There are many kinds of facade of buildings, which located along Saigon River. They mix French architecture and modern architecture. Some blocks are built to adapt with offices and shops requirement. Almost any block of the city contains a mix of new row houses with 3 to 12 floors, old shop houses and villas – the latter now most often hidden behind recent shop extensions. There are a big difference of urban density between city center and other districts. Saigon’s riverbank currently is clearly giving way to urban sprawl. Large industrial facade, office buildings, and road and nondescript housing developments characterize urban reality.

Specifically, Ho Chi Minh City suffers many serious floods. Residents along the river are affected by flooding when high tides combine with prolonged and heavy rainfall. The city has evolved with regular flooding several times each year and effecting some 917,000 people or 12% of the city population.
According to report of Ho Chi Minh city Adapting with climate change, by 2050, the number and areas of communes that are affected in part by flooding increases, especially around the central elevated parts of the city. In fact by 2050, most districts will have an increased risk of flooding in part or in whole in an extreme event (World Bank report WPS 4136, 2007).

Finally, the city is losing a connection of the city fabric and its waterfront because of forgetting historic cultural and its values. Historically, Saigon waterfront had shaped an image and distinctive identity for the water city. However, today urbanization and globalization has greatly destroyed much urban cultural heritage and cultural living is being impacted, and often threatened with destruction. Therefore, redevelopment waterfront as a chance to regains its cultural image and identity of the water city as a unique and distinguish characteristics because of “When we lose a historic place, we lose a part of who we are” (http://www.nationaltrust.org/History is in our hands, 2003).

**Figure 3:** Changing connection of the city fabric and its waterfront

### 4 REGENERATION OLD PORT AREAS AND CANALS TO STRENGTHEN URBAN WATERFRONT DEVELOPMENT

Waterfront regeneration is one of the most important urban redevelopment in last fifty years. Waterfront sites provide remarkable opportunities for redevelopment on large, highly centralized and therefore visible locations [23, 24]. In addition, urban waterfronts have the potential to create new uses in place of the abandoned property in the outdated port and industrial areas.

In fact, ports, industrial areas, highways and slums of yesterday are built along the waterfront have destroyed the valuable city assets. The former industrial waterfront areas of many cities now exist as underutilized parcels, separated from the physical, social and economic activity of the rest of the city [23, 24]. However, although the waterfront is an urban amenity, a special place in the city, it is also a relatively recent significant urban and social issue. Attitudes toward the transformation of waterfront have concerned significantly over the last fifty years. The urban waterfront tells us many things about the way we make, and think about, cities [23, 24]. Waterfront regeneration is a way to recreate the image of a city, to encourage economic investments, to attract people participates into public space and involves community.

Transformation of Saigon’s waterfront provides more social benefits for local inhabitants and employment opportunities to the city, which contracts people from surrounding areas to redevelopment zone. The benefits on social status aspects focus on:

1. Public and private partnerships can involve improving local employment as well as local community, as provide training and support services to local people would help to raise the share of local jobs going to local people.
2. Urban waterfront regeneration can deeply encourage community involvement when inhabitants can join in public spaces. Social impact depends on the interests and how people use waterside areas for residence, place of work, or recreation are associated with waterside areas for housing, industry, commerce, transport, and a variety of leisure and recreational facilities.

Waterfront regeneration transforms urban space-making quality and spatial structure of the water’s edge. From “once a physical and social barrier in the city”, water structure has become “an axis of urban development for the entire city region”. Waterfront redevelopment changes spatial structure and remaking urban environment to transform the abandonment of vast port zone, buildings deserted, and productive plants closed with the relative problems of deterioration of both a physical and social nature of relevant
portions of the urban fabric. The current situation along the banks of the Saigon River is discussed and explored for a possible plan of redevelopment spatial riverfront. The design of redevelopment Saigon waterfront located in old port area must enhance an attractiveness of riverside. Innovation planning and implementation strategy must be applied in the field of sustainable development and public interests. This research develops framework conditions for future riverbank development to enhance local people used the city’s public waterfront and places for living and working. Moreover, revitalization Saigon waterfront rediscovers the cultural living and reshapess spatial urban structure to strengthen unique view of Saigon River.

4.1 Conceptions and programs of planning Saigon’s riverbank and canals to achieve attractive and lively urban development

In order to find a solution to redevelop Saigon waterfront, the main approach of this paper is search for concepts of regenerating an outdated port area and canals into an attractive and lively urban development. The regeneration process aims to modify the urban fabric and to suit new conditions, social requirements and demands [31]. Therefore, basing on the current trends and demands of the city results in existing urban environment and problems, the regeneration will bring a new life for riverside to the city. The paper has researched the changing in the urban strategy of a port city tends to offer a contribution towards envisioning a new pattern of redevelopment for the city. The approaches are engaged in the search for new opportunities to involve the transformations of old port area to attract business and investment. More specifically, the paper discusses the way to improve the current situation along the river where has a great impact on the urban environment, identity and the image of the city itself.

The final product is a riverside redevelopment, which is promoted and supported by strategic plan and spatial functional qualities of the water city to adapt new requirement of the port city to strengthen a livable urban area in the city centre. The regeneration to achieve a sustainable urban environment as an attractive place for high quality of living, working and open space related with water. This research also rediscovers the waterfront’s role into the city’s spatial and regains its distinctive characters and identity. The conceptions of planning Saigon’s riverbank and canals in Ho Chi Minh City includes below strategies:

(I) Improve connections between city and its waterfront

A. Infrastructure linkages

It is clearly an unsustainable traffic system in terms of congestion and pollution because of increasing private transportation uses by globalization. Private and motorbikes uses are accounted for 73% of total traffic on street in Ho Chi Minh City. Therefore, the increased use of public transport is encouraged by all design measures as a strategy for sustainable mobility. This strategy encourage a better public transport uses as water taxi system to achieve a clean environment and high quality public transport. Water taxi is
generated for long-term public transportation in the city as regards urban quality related with water. Besides, redesigning streets provide more spaces of cycling and walking is needed for a sustainable mobility, which separates pedestrian space from vehicle traffic. This plan establishes pedestrian and cycling network in order to link new growth areas to central city. The walkways along the river and canals is intervention to encourage a maximum of inhabitants of the city to access to water. The new Saigon River waterfront offers a friendly active pedestrian space with countless attractive points and entertainment opportunities in order to create distinctive avenues with cultural heritage value.

Figure 6: Recreate the relation between canals and pedestrian paths

B. Urban spatial connections

Redeveloping the waterfront’s edge includes both preservation of historic waterfront and new waterfront development. “The historic waterfront comprised not only buildings, but also structures, dock walls, historic artifacts and signs of different materials and periods” (Barry, 2001). This strategy improves the links of historic fabric and old structures of the city to the river to rediscover the value of heritage and local identity by remaking connections between historic city centres to waterfront. In particular, redesigning the canals in Nguyen Hue Boulevard provide a cultural image of the city to inhabitants, which rediscoveries the spirited images of distinctiveness of the city. This proposal also wants to develop historic commercial axis in the city centre, which develop main axis in order to link the heritage buildings and to connect the city centre towards the river.

(II) Develop an attractive waterfront as a live-able place for living, working and leisure

Existing neighborhood in Ho Chi Minh City now is actually dense built-up. The strategy approach wants to redevelop for the long-term benefits of its local citizens. The transformation redefines relationship between residential area towards the river and canals. The redevelopment of existing neighborhood improves urban spatial quality with the image, identity of life in Ho Chi Minh City. Integrating green and water as main elements of the neighborhood provides high-quality open spaces between existing housing blocks and enhances the characters of houses. It reduces challenging problems of extremely dense houses in the neighborhood. Water and open space is connected with green corridor along the river. Specifically, neighborhood also provides access to the water and spaces for recreation and pedestrians.

(III) Improve the access points and orientation towards the river

To solve the problem of existing points of access to the Saigon river are often almost impossible to find and lacking attractiveness, this strategy improve the speaking orientation towards the river by create important points of access and riverside locations. Breaking the barrier of highway running between settlements and riverbank is considered as a vital approach. Creating a better connection between the new waterfront residential areas and old city fabric is the approach of the project with green public space
corridor. The form of this connection is the crossing the highway and toward the river by covering greenery on Ton Duc Thang highway. This suggestion creates the meet of access points and windows toward waterfront, encouraging a friendlier environment and public participation.

![Figure 7: Breaking down barriers and opening up access by nodes to cross the existing highway](image)

**(IV) Avoid flood**

Facing today’s ecological and environmental issues, flooding protection and water management are vital factors related to future urban development in term of sustainability. Waterfront regeneration deals with water risks to contribute a better living environment, creating value for city development. Water has always been a threatening factor; therefore, waterfront redevelopment deals with controlled and managed water, which offers certain urban development value for settlements.

![Figure 7: Creating new canals and transformation existing canals](image)

Finding the ways to reduce flood risk and improve the spatial quality of the urban environment is needed. Developing the plan with expanding rainwater storage capacity, rapid removal of excess rain is necessary. Water storage in urban parkland where the ecology can flourish and recreation is possible. It can expand the water storage capacity in historic city centre and create more surface water in existing canals. The space along the canals can replace by greenery. The transformation creates new attractive functions along canals by pedestrian lines and effective public spaces near water. For future sustainability, water can be
storage underground or buildings or streets to reuse rainwater. In addition, it is needed to create new canals and transformation existing canals in order to provide “more room for water” in inner city. Avoiding flood in city centre must keep low density urban in the East bank and maintain Thu Thiem as an “open” system, which allows for tidal fluctuations and high water events through the design of natural and man-made canals, lakes and mangrove areas.

4.2 Remaking the image and unique identity of Ho Chi Minh City to create the distinguished water city

Waterfront regeneration enhances urban space-making quality and spatial structure of the city. The transformation waterfront has inevitably influenced the spatial structure of port cities. In addition, waterfront is applied a new urban renewal as a new “urban quality” that can offer higher living standards and revitalization of public community. Historically, the former structures of port cities are defined basing on characteristics of physical, continental trade and port activities. In fact, the city has always had a strong relationship with its port, which had important roles in shaping spatial structure of urban development. From “once a physical and social barrier in the city”, water structure has become “an axis of urban development for the entire city region”. Waterfront redevelopment changes spatial structure and remaking urban environment to transform the abandonment of vast port zone, buildings deserted, and productive plants closed with the relative problems of deterioration of both a physical and social nature of relevant portions of the urban fabric.

Main waterfront of Ho Chi Minh City redevelop mainly in city centre. City centre rediscovers the historical axes towards waterfront in order to grow interests in culture heritage and attractiveness of historic city centre. In order to renewal interests in the city center, pedestrian flows and open spaces is integrated by encouraging new mixed-use and walk-able in city center. These main axes form the heart of public communities by lively mixes shops, restaurants, music, street fairs and other attractions designed to attract people of different ages, races and cultural background. These axes encourage public and economic benefits of investments and provide more water in the historic city centre. They improve and create connections from city to its waterfront to enhance urban space-making quality. The urban waterfront has the ability to shape an image for a city, to add value to city economies, and create desirability [27]. Live-able waterfront brings the city back to the river by urban spatial connections (nodes, paths, edge and landmarks) and waterscapes. The redevelopment waterfront regains the historical value of the city and enhances local cultural identity and images through passages to river.

When Ho Chi Minh City as a port city shifts from industrial to service economies, a major aspect of its success will be in the quality of their urban environments. The waterfront plays a critical role remade the image of the city. Bilbao and Shanghai are two remarkable experiences of how the waterfront has become the stage for a new expression of city aspirations and how a waterfront can provide opportunities for the creation of a new identity. The waterfront of Ho Chi Minh City has been considered as the most attractive place in the city. It is the time when the city has a chance to regain the waterfront’s values that brings back its memory.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Ho Chi Minh City now faces issues of old port area in inner cities, overload population and urban expansion, caused conflicts in urban condition. Therefore, the current situation along the banks of the Saigon River and canals are discussed and explored for a possible plan of redevelopment spatial waterfront. The design of redevelopment Saigon waterfront enhances an attractiveness, innovation planning and implementation strategy for sustainable development and public interests. This research develops framework conditions for future riverbank development to enhance local people used the city’s public waterfront and places for living and working. Moreover, revitalization Saigon’s waterfront rediscovers the cultural living and reshapes spatial urban structure to strengthen unique view of Ho Chi Minh City. This research also enhances urban quality in the “construction” of the image of the modern city [4] and strengthens local characteristic landscape along waterways. Saigon’s waterfront will be regains the own senses of self and its feelings.
REFERENCES