Observation & Negotiation at the Cultural Shoreline

Vietnam, Rasquachismo & an Architectural Practice

A project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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April 2015
OBSERVATION & NEGOTIATION at the CULTURAL SHORELINE
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Declaration:
I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the document is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Archie Pizzini
February 2015

I wish to acknowledge the generous input of my supervisors, Professor Sand Helsel and Dr. Graham Crist and the many visiting critics who reviewed my work in progress, especially Dean Richard Blythe and Dr. Gretchen Wilkins who contributed much constructive input over numerous occasions. I owe much thanks to several friends who have made a special effort to introduce me to situations that gave me a deeper understanding of Vietnam. These people include Hong Nhieu Quyen, Le Ngoc Dang and my incomparable assistant Luu Phoi. Thanks to my colleagues Lisa Rosenthal, Rich Streitmatter-Tran, Laurent Gutierrez, Zoe Butt, and Matt Lucero for insights and understanding. Thanks to Hoang Thi and her family for their endless hospitality. Thanks to Josh Breidenbach and Chi-An De Leo of Rice Creatives for their stellar layouts and graphic input. Thanks to Sue Hajdu for selected editing and sage advice. Thanks to my eternal friend Sylvia Wang for her insights into related research sources.

All HTA+pizzini projects covered in this document were co-authored with my partner Hoanh Tran, as was the PhD exhibition. This document would not have been possible without his constant and generous communication.

All photographs in this document and its appendix, whether captioned or not, were taken by Archie Pizzini except where noted otherwise. All photos by Archie Pizzini are copyrighted by Archie Pizzini.

Muchisimas gracias to Chavela Macias Mugica who made this endeavour possible a very, very long time ago.

For Archie Jr., Isabel, Freja and Eva
## OBSERVATIONS | Context & Background

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Abstract

This research results from my practices of photography and architecture in the rapidly changing cultural environment of Vietnam, a place where a local culture of localised systems of individual enterprise is being quickly displaced by a system of large multinational entities operating at global scale. I research in two ways: as a photographer observing and reflecting on the social and urban environment and as an architect negotiating responses to our design tasks and practice environment.

The practices producing this research have highlighted three central issues: a culture supporting local systems of individual enterprises, an opportunistic approach to seeing and making, my expanded role as a design professional.

I reflect on the above three issues through several recurring themes: fertility, negotiation, and transience. I trace a progression through three groups of projects punctuated by inflection points where events precipitated a moment of reflection and a change in my understanding of how best to practice architecture in the rapidly changing environment of Vietnam.

This increasingly transient built environment has produced a shift in my definition of architectural product, to foreground ideas and adaptability to better fit an era of flux, which is often displacing or even erasing the embedded social structures. It also produced a design approach based on an understanding of how Vietnamese society operated and built in the relative absence of globalised systems.

This design approach is closely connected to rasquachismo. Rasquachismo, a Hispanic term for a cultural phenomenon not limited to Mexico, but common around the world, refers to the ability to make whatever one needs from whatever is at hand. It tends to exist in the poorer segments of a population and is a strategy of necessity that substitutes ingenuity for money and specialised products. This strategy includes repair and adaptation as well as making.

Rasquachismo’s main component is a way of seeing that emphasises qualities over defined usages. It thrives in dense, loosely controlled environments providing opportunities for improvisation. It has a correlating mindset that regards not only objects, but also situations as opportunities to be evaluated for unscripted exploitation. Rasquachismo is inherently sustainable, promoting repurposing, local sourcing of materials, and the forestalling of obsolescence.

Because it is part of the worldwide confrontation between globalised and unglobalised cultures, this approach, though traced in Vietnam in this document, has utility to the greater discipline of architecture especially in the areas of sustainability and resilience, both of which I will outline briefly here.

Sustainability

William McDonough, in *The Hannover Principles* (1992) offers a definition of sustainability as follows:

“The concept of sustainability has been introduced to combine concern for the well-being of the planet with continued growth and human development. Though there is much debate as to what the word actually suggests, we can put forth the definition offered by the World Commission on Environment and Development: ‘Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.’

In its original context, this definition was stated solely from the human point of view. In order to embrace the idea of a global ecology with intrinsic value, the meaning must be expanded to allow all parts of nature to meet their own needs now and in the future.”

This is a useful definition of sustainability, aimed at minimising the damage being done
to the ecosystem with its far-reaching effects on humanity and the global ecology that sustains it.

In this document, sustainability includes efforts to: reduce the amount of construction required to achieve design objectives, reduce transport distances for building materials, reduce the amount of technology and infrastructure required to build, repurpose materials already available locally, repair and adapt instead of manufacturing anew, reinforce systems that embrace repair rather than resist it, and resist increased energy use, especially for climate control.

In the years since the term sustainability was introduced to the discussion, the global climate situation has intensified to the point where resilience has surfaced in discussion about responses to the acceleration of ecological damage resulting from human action and its consequences.

Resilience
Resilience describes an ability to adapt to change—to mitigate adverse developments and to exploit opportunity. Resilience is now a relevant subject since adverse effects of ecological damage are now appearing worldwide. Regardless, the addition of resilience to the discussion should not be seized upon as justification for doing unlimited ecological damage, since resilience’s ability to mitigate damage is, of course, limited.

Two Bodies of Research

Vietnam in 2005 was a culture quite different from any I had been immersed in before. This compelled me to photograph its density, its richness and its many instances of improvisation and making. Reflection on these photos gave me a fuller understanding of how Vietnamese culture contrasted with the American culture I had come from. I started to understand that Vietnam’s embedded systems and the corresponding urban forms were intertwined. This emphasised to me that understanding the context is the key to understanding what to build. I concluded that ideas taken from different aspects of Vietnamese culture could advance the practice of design. I further developed ideas about the relationship between control and the possibilities for creativity inherent in a situation. These photos, the reflections and the resulting conclusions constitute the first body of research.

My architectural practice forced me to deal with the Vietnamese cultural situation. As my understanding of Vietnam developed, I began to see how aspects of the culture could be used to produce better design. My conception of my role as an architect also changed. The projects presented from this architectural practice and the conclusions I drew from them make up the second body of research.

Vietnam contains a microcosm of a global cultural situation. Both cultures are on view, the disappearing deeply human local culture and the quickly enveloping global one. This offers an opportunity to study the cultural shoreline between the two worlds, a shoreline that doesn’t exist where only one culture dominates. The qualities of both cultures can be evaluated and compared, and the useful aspects of both cultures can be combined in the practice of architectural design.

Consequently, these two bodies of research are relevant beyond the context of Vietnam.
The Structure of this Document

This document focuses on my study of the cultural situation in Vietnam; and also on the architectural practice HTA + pizzini, a partnership between Hoanh Tran and I, two U.S.-trained architects, in Vietnam. I am a Hispanic American educated as a fine artist and an architect. Hoanh, originally from Vietnam, grew up in America where he was educated as a chemist, a preservation artist and an architect.

In this document, I have distilled the data from my first body of research, my photo-documentation in Vietnam, and related it to my second body of research, my practice as an architect in Vietnam. I have tracked how the context of Vietnam and the mindset of rasquachismo affected and were incorporated into my practice of architecture, expanding my role as an architect.

Part 1, OBSERVATIONS—This section reflects on and organises my documentation of Vietnam, bringing into focus the systems that make up the context in which I live and work while developing their utility towards urban and architectural design.

Chapter 1, Vietnam, pulls out aspects of the social and built environment relevant to the practice of architecture and urban design. It categorises these aspects, showing how they connect together in a complex network of informal systems and addresses the intertwinement of the urban context and with these systems.

Chapter 2, Rasquachismo, focuses in on the local culture of repair and adaptation that uses ingenuity to overcome a lack of resources. It explores rasquachismo’s role in the societys in which it exists and its potential for use in contemporary architecture. It focuses on how rasquachismo is enabled by a particular way of seeing. It reflects on the nature of worth. It also begins to widen the scope of rasquachismo to a mindset—an opportunistic approach to systems and situations as well as to individual design tasks.

Chapter 3, Framework, includes key aspects of my design background and a discussion of my collaboration with Hoanh. It also positions me within the design community in Vietnam.

Part 2, NEGOTIATIONS—This section traces my investigation through architectural practice into how to design in the special situation of Vietnam. It reflects on several architectural projects through the lenses of three related themes: fertility, negotiation and transience. It also traces the development of the role that making occupies in my designs and the shift in my conception of my role as an architect.

Fertility covers the subjects of making, repair, repurposing and improvisation; the factors that promote their presence in a situation; and their role in my work. In the projects I focus on, I trace a change in the role of making, in particular, the type of making intrinsic to the Vietnamese cultural situation, in the work of HTA + pizzini.

Transience traces the role of rapid change in urban contexts, its implications for the context I work in, and its shifting role in my work as change went from a non-issue, to a perpetually destabilising element, to an integral part of the context. Vietnam’s economic development has resulted in an increasingly rapid and widespread turnover in the built environment, which has forced me to confront the impermanence of our projects and of the greater cultural situation.

Negotiation is the process of understanding and mediation through which I deal with transience and other aspects of the context. I negotiate solutions in the form of designs between these polarities by evaluating the situation and balancing the competing pressures on the design.

Hoanh and I also use this term to describe a broad method of approaching situations that range from room-scaled space planning to community-scaled cultural impasses. We favour solutions crafted from the physical and cultural fabric of the situation itself. We resist the wholesale eradication of the context and the implementation of a new, completely alien, context. Ours is an ethical position favouring sustainability and resilience.

Finally, negotiation has emerged in this context as the balancing of the needs of different groups of people through the use of an agenda separate from the client’s.

I present six architectural projects in Part 2 in three phases, each phase comprising one chapter and containing two projects, each phase bookended by inflection points—moments when a key event sparked a change in thinking and design approach.

Chapter 4, Arrival, exhibits an excitement at the possibilities in the fertility of the situation; first attempts to negotiate the situation and the momentum of escalating events.

Chapter 5, Immersion, discusses my intoxication with exploring the fertility of Vietnam through making; a more defined understanding of the role of designer as negotiator/mediator and ends with a moment when accelerating events reached a crisis point.

Chapter 6, Embedment, highlights my understanding of a new role of making as an...
enabler for a greater agenda, a broadening of the role of the designer as negotiator/mediator to that of an advocate for different groups of people who will be affected by the design and a new understanding of the primary product of architecture brought on by the temporality of the contemporary built environment.

Through the phases of my practice of architecture in Vietnam, my conception of my role has changed. It started as a negotiator of pressures in the service of a client’s agenda to produce a built project with a long lifespan. It then progressed through a phase that forced me to accept the transience of the situation. Finally, I arrived at a role in which I am the keeper of an agenda separate from the client’s. This was arrived at through an in-depth understanding of the context and the people and needs to be negotiated within it.

Conclusions—This section distils the results of both bodies of research, observations and negotiations into three parts:

1. A mindset taken from the context of Vietnam—a thrift-conscious bias favouring adaptation and collaboration fuelled by ingenuity.

2. An approach to design developed through my practice of architecture in Vietnam—a strategy of close observation, reflection and understanding focusing on ideas as well as built space, with an incorporation of flux and lifespan.

3. An expanded role as architect rooted in the ethics of contemporary practice—a mediator with an obligation to all parties affected by the project and an agenda including sustainability and resilience. This includes the preservation of the environment of face-to-face relationships that favours individual endeavours.

Appendix—This volume follows the main volume and contains two parts, each a photo essay. They present more fully my first body of research as a photographer.

Part 1, Vietnam, which augments the images in Chapter 1, is a collection of photos of the environment in Vietnam. It represents a much larger body of thousands of images taken since I arrived in Vietnam in 2005. This body of images suggests the messy and constantly evolving web of systems that form the built and social environment.

Part 2, Rasquachismo, which augments Chapter 2, documents the handmade solutions to everyday needs, many crafted from cast-off materials and elements. In reality a subset of Part 1, it covers in more detail a category very closely related to design.
OBSERVATIONS | Context & Background

Right:
A sidewalk scene on Dien Bien Phu Street framed through the base of an electric tower, which has been colonised by a street mechanic who, ironically, rides a bicycle. Visible are his pail of water for checking punctures and his repurposed cookie tin containing tools and odd nuts and bolts. He has hung tyres wrapped in coloured foil on the tower to serve as a signpost for his business. There is a small table he has fashioned from light angled steel bolted together. In the foreground, someone has hung clothes for sale, possibly part of the shop in the background.
District 3, HCMC, 2011
© Archie Pizzini
Vietnam Already Works

Vietnam already works...in its own way.

All of us woke up this morning and made it here successfully.

When we are hungry, we find a rich selection of things to eat.

When we want to go, we choose a method of transport and go.

When we are tired, we find a place to sleep.

This city and this country are a functioning complex of smaller systems that make it possible for each of us to layer a life over the framework of what is available to us here.

Yes, there has been incredible growth and a lot of new problems have arisen as a result of it. Yes there are many situations that have room for improvement, but we should not forget how efficiently, how thriftily and how vibrantly the Vietnam we have already works and how much it can show us about designing for the future.

--Archie Pizzini and Hoanh Tran

From the HTA+pizzini address to the Architecture Forum
Ho Chi Minh City Architecture University
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam 2008
People as Context

In 2005 during my first months in Ho Chi Minh City, a friend and I went to Cholon, the old market district and a nexus of the heavy Asian urban chaos that permeated the city.

We were near the Binh Tay market, across from a main bus yard. There was a complete traffic lockup with buses, jinneys, cyclos, taxis, three wheelers, delivery bikes, vendor carts, and whole families on their motorcycles all mashed together in a smoky beeping honking yammering mass. In the middle of the street, in the mess of buses and bikes, a fistfight erupted. The wife of one of the combatants stood on the sidewalk watching, seemingly hysterical with fright. Her expression resembled a strange combination of near laughter and near screaming. People cooking pig meat over smoking fires on the sidewalk ignored the whole scene. Someone was pulling my arm trying to sell me lotto tickets. We hailed a cab. It felt like jumping into an airlift.

It was the most human place I had ever been.

At the time I found Vietnam both unbelievably stimulating and incredibly exhausting. Looking back at it, I see those feelings originating in the contrast between where I had just come from, Texas, and where I had just arrived.

In Houston, operating within the city entailed a series of encounters with objects and organisations in somewhat depersonalised situations. One moved through the city in an enclosed room on wheels, distracted by one’s audio stimulus of choice, driving through the bank, the pharmacy, the coffee shop, the fast food restaurant. Traffic jams were still frustrating, but in an abstracted fashion. Hazards such as diesel fumes and hot tailpipes remained physically removed. People, when one encountered them, were often disembodied voices on the other end of a speaker. Walking through the deserted streets brought few encounters with other humans. In most parts of the city, being on foot was so uncommon it made one suspect.

Vietnam by contrast was, in the most literal sense of the word, in your face. The context was not objects and abstractions, the context was people.
The City

In 1975, greater Saigon became Ho Chi Minh City. It encompassed a city that had begun as the separate settlements of Saigon (now roughly District 1), developed by the Viet, and Cholon (now parts of Districts 5 and 6), developed by ethnic Chinese. Expanded and then combined during the French colonial era, they had both been remade with grand boulevards and round points, but they had retained very separate souls, with Saigon becoming the seat of colonial power and culture, while Cholon lived up to its name, which translates literally as ‘big market’. In the twenty years of hardship following 1975, few large projects were built, though the city fabric grew on through the processes of repair and adaptation.

Ho Chi Minh City’s urban fabric by the time I arrived was a mesh of individual adaptations draped over a skeleton of decaying colonial buildings and boulevards. It was a huge living collaboration already in progress for decades, which changed my attitude toward design, making me more comfortable with the idea of collaboration. The French city from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had been encrusted with layers of adaptations by subsequent generations of inhabitants spanning at least four major cultures. Mid-century modern buildings from the American War era had also become part of the skeleton to which later skins and subsidiary spaces had been adhered. Roof terrace trellises had been tarped, later roofed, and still later turned into enclosed apartments, which in some cases had eventually grown their own new roof terraces. Balconies had become toilets, bedrooms or living areas, some walled in with bricks, tarp or sheet metal, some windowed or louvred. Courtyards had been filled in or roofed. Ladders and staircases spanned eras, connecting buildings and floors from different centuries. In some cases, even the oddly shaped stairwell voids had been appropriated and inhabited. All this produced spaces so improbable that I imagined no designer capable of conceiving them.

Along the streets, garden fences had become walls, which had then grown outbuildings and later, windowed shop fronts. Changes were cheap, quick and rarely authorised, leaving visible seemingly endless layers of wear and reworking. An abstract painter confronted with this living texture, of a scale and complexity impossible for any one person to ever completely know, might see no point in making a painting ever again. The very idea would have seemed ridiculous.

Rough Order

The chaos of that time seemed all-enveloping and impossible to comprehend, but it revealed its nature whenever I flew out of the city. As the plane gained altitude, the details of the houses blurred away with distance. The districts revealed themselves as remarkably homogeneous, with houses of surprisingly similar sizes and heights painted many colours, but without an overall dominant hue. Boulevards ran through the city branching into roads that later veined off into alleys in a skein of circulation not dissimilar from veining on a leaf or in animal tissue.

It became clear that what I had been experiencing was not chaos. There was order in Ho Chi Minh City.

Similarly, I began to detect an order in the social systems as well. There was a rough but massive network of intricate systems operating through a very different method of coordination than I had encountered before. Furthermore, it seemed to be powered not by corporate spending power and technology, but by individual initiative enabled by loose controls on several key aspects of the urban environment.

VIETNAM
Left: A mid-morning street scene at the mouth of an alley feeding into a narrow but heavily trafficked artery. In the foreground a street vendor pushes her food cart into the traffic. To the left, a xe om motorcycle taxi driver relaxes while balanced on his motorbike. On the power pole, demolition companies post their phone numbers. Just below is a hand-painted sign demarcating a noodle shop. It’s painted with more care than is necessary to convey the message, which evidences it as the work of someone who enjoys making things.

Phu Nhuan District, HCMC, 2011
© Archie Pizzini
Amassing the Big Picture

I came to understand Vietnam and its culture through reflection on thousands of photos taken between my arrival in 2005 and the present. By 2007 I had amassed a few thousand photos of Vietnam, but it was not clear to me why I was taking them. The best seemed to share certain qualities but it was not until I had accumulated more images and experiences that I really began to understand what I had been recording about Vietnam. While my initial motivation had been simply to record interesting situations, reflection on the details of these situations gave me indications of underlying systems. Soon Vietnam had become a large part of my design consciousness. I identified with the ultra-practical attitude that regarded everything as raw material. I was delighted by the ingenuities that subverted adversity. I saw fertility in the untidiness that created opportunities in the shuffling people, materials and situations. Using photography as a way of in-depth observation, I found that my understanding of the very large and complex environment of Vietnam could be deepened through reflection on the thousands of moments and situations I had collected over several years. Now Vietnam is undergoing intense change and many of the things shown and described in this document have disappeared completely or exist only in diminished form.

Vietnam is in transition from a poor country to a more prosperous one. It is also on the cusp of trading a culture that favours large extended families living together for the western model of small nuclear families living in relative isolation. It is also in the process of changing into a consumer culture, turning from a mindset that favours improvisation, repair and reuse to one that disdains anything that is not made in a factory and bought new. Generally, the built fabric and the factors that control it are changing from those conducive to individual efforts, such as micro-businesses, to those favouring large-scale business entities and their endeavours. Vietnam’s city centres are becoming indistinguishable from any city centre in the developed world. The architecture and interior design profession is a
The photos in this section describe a collection of non-monetary and low-tech resources that exist now and relate to design issues in Vietnam today. These resources do not exist separately, but are intertwined with systems forming a network that is the working part of Vietnamese culture. The culture, from the architecture to the social customs, has evolved into a mechanism for empowering individuals to support themselves through micro-enterprise.

Because so many of these resources are products of individuals’ micro-businesses and craft development; they are renewable resources that are strengthened, not depleted, by use, but they depend upon a loosely controlled environment. As an environment is homogenised, these types of resources are eliminated. These resources have been used to empower people who have less money to cope with and improve their living situations. Similarly they might be used to empower designers to design more sustainably.
**A Catalogue of Resources**

**Proven Architectural Models**

**Indigenous Structures**

Indigenous structures in Vietnam evolved to require a minimum of construction effort and energy consumption. They incorporate locally available materials and are geared to construction without heavy machinery or specially engineered items. These buildings, designed to function sustainably within the local climate and physical surroundings with no technological support, foster close ties to the surroundings through the use of locally available materials.

**French and American Colonial Architecture**

Closely aligned with indigenous structures, the buildings erected during the French colonial and the American War eras are carefully tailored to the local climate and physical surroundings. They utilise verandas, buffer corridors and elongated layouts a single space thick with large operable windows, shuttering systems and sunscreens.

There has been a special accommodation of the extremely deep and narrow lots (a product of French colonial tax laws, which taxed only the frontage) that are usually about 4 metres wide by 20 metres deep. The houses on these lots, called ‘tube houses’, evolved a layout featuring mid-plot stairwells doubling as air chimneys, pulling air into the lower floors as they exhausted hot air through the top. This also affected social function, transforming the stairwell, which might have been only a conduit between floors, into a social nexus with the expanded functions of communication, light conduction, and even goods transport with baskets and ropes.

Craftsmanship superior to today’s ensured a long life for these buildings with proper maintenance. Built to be handed down instead of torn down, their construction was resilient, accommodating modification well, and their design highly sustainable.

Near Right Top: The Hua Binh French colonial market building is built in L’estile Indochine, a style synthesised by French architects. It was meant to incorporate the local culture while accommodating the local climate. Shown is one of the four corner towers with its screened walls, part of a chimney effect strategy for exhausting air through the high points while taking air in through the lower floors. The upper floors are also screened for ventilation, and each attic features a full-length ridge vent. District 5, near the East-West Highway.

HCMC, 2010 © Archie Pizzini

Far Right Top: An old French colonial villa glimpsed through a hole in the gate on a road in outer Go Vap District. This villa, small though somewhat elaborate, is not near the centre of the city. Perhaps it was in an isolated village when it was built. The city has now grown around it, but the winding nature of the road it fronts still gives hints of the countryside it once resided in.

Go Vap District, HCMC, 2012 © Archie Pizzini

Right Bottom: The old French colonial paediatric hospital in District 1 shows its cast iron brise soleil framing the rooms beyond. The wide walkway becomes an extension of the hospital rooms and is used for laundry and auxiliary sitting space, as it is customary for at least one friend or family member to stay with a patient at all times, including nights. This historic building and its supporting structures, some of them also historic, occupy a huge and wonderfully treed tract adjoining Hai Ba Trung Street in the heart of the city.

District 1, HCMC, 2014 © Archie Pizzini
Design and Construction Options

Affordable Craftsmen
In the West, custom making of furniture and architectural elements is too expensive for most projects while in Vietnam it is well within budgetary limits.

Custom loose furniture is affordable as well. Much of the high-end imported furniture now being marketed here is particle board with a plastic veneer and costs double or more the price of commissioned furniture made locally from more durable materials. While Vietnamese-made furniture can also be badly made from inferior materials, we have found many craftsmen who will construct furniture to a higher specification if the client agrees to pay the increased charge. This, in our experience, is still substantially lower than the cost of an imported branded piece of furniture.

The key to finding the advantage in this situation is personal contact. In Vietnam, there are still a large number of tiny shops that do work in almost any field making it possible to have a personal relationship with the craftsman providing the service one needs. Deals can be made, details can be modified, personal preferences can be accommodated, materials can be upgraded.

Commissioning custom furniture benefits the local economy and avoids the environmental costs of shipping furniture in from abroad.

Recycling
Each morning hundreds of people on bicycles fan out through Ho Chi Minh City like a huge human filter combing itself through the urban chaos, sifting each bag of garbage it encounters. These are self-employed sorters, collecting and distributing recyclables—metal, wire, paper, plastic, Styrofoam, glass; for a small cash margin.

The environmental cost of the collecting effort seems modest compared to the carbon costs that go into the mass recycling
collection in the West. But an added twist is that the hand sorting phase and the sorters’ knowledge of the system allows some items to be resold locally in local markets.

A local market on Yersin Street in District 1 specialises in old tools and industrial parts—springs, drills, cogs, pulleys, bushings, hooks and the like. These are things that normally would have been chipped up for scrap and shipped abroad for industrial recycling. Old wood furniture goes to a small enclave on the canal in District B. It was recently displaced by development from the recently demolished French colonial warehouses in District 4. Old sewing machines are repaired and resold in District 5. This function was displaced from an old three storey block across from the Ben Thanh Market. A market in District 10 near 3/2 Street specialises in computer parts and electronics. Another market in District 10 near Hung Vuong Street specialises in new and used motorcycle parts and adjoins a row of metals resellers offering old nuts, bolts, fittings and the like. Reclaimed items are accessible and affordable in quantities and variations far exceeding those I have seen in America. As of 2015 however, all of these markets were shrinking, due to displacement pressures from development and perhaps also due to declining interest in repair and thrift as Vietnam becomes more prosperous.

Newspapers
Newspapers arrive one day late. Airport workers who clean the planes collect used newspapers and magazines from the overnight flights, reselling them to suppliers who bring them into the city for sale to newspaper sellers. The newspapers come into the city mostly intact with perhaps a crossword puzzle half done or a coffee stain embellishing a page. Some of them arrive stamped with the name of an airline or transit lounge.

There are French, German, English, Korean, Japanese, American, Chinese and Singaporean papers of varying sizes and tints. If one befriends a seller, he will keep an eye open for favourite obscure
La Fenetre Soleil

There was a café, La Fenetre Soleil, in an old French building from the nineteenth century. It was accessed by a strange stairway half in the original building and half in an addition from the 1930s. The original stair had been combined with a newer stair, you could see it in the morphed steps half tiled and half treads in concrete. Ascending, one entered from the twenty-first century into the early twentieth, passed a landing, a flight and a landing in the nineteenth century and emerged at the top of the stairs into the 1930s. A quick right down a long corridor landed one in a large room probably from the late 1800s lit by huge arched windows. The many dislocations, temporal and spatial, in the 40-second ascent put a mental distance of miles and years between the noisy sidewalk and the still timelessness of the sunny room upstairs.

The battered steps described a roughly trapezoidal space within the ascending flights. This void had somehow been enclosed and a couple lived there cocooned outside of normal time and space, neither on the ground floor nor on the floor above, not fully in the epoch of the French, American or Vietnamese Saigon. Their only door entered mid-flight into a space with two windows – one through the exterior wall and another into the staircase high above the lowest steps. From the stair, this evidence of the home within the void was undeniable, yet contemplating how it existed constructed seemingly right through another space had a way of confounding the mind. Entering the flat seemed to entail crossing a dimensional threshold that implied a danger of never being able to exit back to the world of normal physics. The buildings were destroyed in 2010, the strange staircase and the great café room upstairs demolished for an as yet unrealised venture, but who can say the tiny apartment does not still survive, safe in its own dimension, invisible to this world and the endless appetites that drive it?

magazines that occasionally appear, sometimes with a foreign price tag or a foreign mailing stamp, and that may not be available again for months. Relatively current magazines and papers can even be returned to the newspaper seller for re-resale if one finishes with them quickly enough.

The books, magazines, computer components, motorcycle parts, tools, wood furnishings, and bits of machinery mentioned are all examples of localised repurposing. They avoid the large-scale aggregation and long-distance shipping that increase the ecological cost of industrial recycling. It is true that once the magazines and newspapers have fallen too far out of date, they will be industrially recycled for paper pulp, probably in another country; just as the other items mentioned—the nuts and bolts, tools and furnishings—will eventually be recycled in one form or another as well. In the interim, however, the alertness and social connectedness of the population made it possible to sandwich in another round of usefulness for the items. This supports many lives and increases the viability of repair and reuse while adding little in ecological costs to the entire life cycle.
Enhanced Space Usage

Density
The heavy density of Vietnam urban life pressures people to do more with less. People use flexibility, mobility and blurred boundaries to offset the pressure of having less space than in the West. This opens up a different way of implementing shops, living spaces and services.

Shops housed in dwellings often occupy spaces that become living and dining areas after closing. When the occupants retire to their sleeping loft, the shop area houses their motorcycles.

Space usage rotates even in dwellings that do not house shops. The main space accommodates living, working, entertaining and eating at different times during the day and is motorcycle parking at night while the occupants sleep in a small raised sleeping loft that doubles as clothes storage, dressing and study. Floors can be bed platforms, seating areas, dining tables and workspaces. The custom of removing shoes when one enters a home keeps street filth off the floor, which may also be the bed/table/chair/desk of the home.

This pattern of usage rotation reduces the need to build large permanent structures with accompanying infrastructure. People find ways to do more with less, producing a more sustainable system.

Appropriation of Public Space
In Vietnam, understanding of public space as being literally public is taken much further than it is generally taken in the West. The personal economies of the average Vietnamese depend on this.

65.4 per cent of employed Vietnamese were self-employed in 2011 according to statistics from The World Bank.²

Thousands of tiny businesses operate on public property. Shops, restaurants and repair stations crowd the alleys, sidewalks and

Near Right Top: The shop houses of what is called the Ancient Town in Hanoi have a pattern of deep narrow passage-ways leading to an open service alley connecting the backs of the buildings. Motorbikes can come shooting out of these passage-ways unexpectedly, evidencing the dwellings that open into the alleys buried within the blocks. Old City, Hoan Kiem District, Hanoi, 2010 © Archie Pizzini

Far Right Top: Near the canal between District 1 and District 4, exists a four-level neighbourhood of density extraordinary even by Vietnamese standards. The neighbourhood is closely grided with small alleys making the spaces of the buildings quite pleasant in contrast to the deep and dark spaces created by the tube house lots (the 4 metre by 20 metre lots the city was divided into during the early French colonial era when dwellings were taxed by frontage rather than area). This house is being seen through the doorway to the alley on the opposite side of the house. The sleeping loft is upstairs and looks original to the construction, which by the fenestration suggests it is from the mid-twentieth century. District 1, HCMC, 2013 © Archie Pizzini

Right Bottom: A motorbike repair business housed in the Art Deco Nguyen V. Hao building at Calmette and Tran Hung Dao Streets. The older man is repairing a wheel rim, straightening it and preparing to re-spoke it. District 1, HCMC, 2006 © Archie Pizzini
Urban Carpets

For much of the colonial period, residences and shops were floored with thick cement tiles sturdily coated in colourful patterns. Called gach bong, for decades this was the floor of Vietnam’s buildings, as well as the sidewalk in many cases.

Before Ho Chi Minh City began its sidewalk standardisation program, now generally complete, many shops had tiled their own stretch of sidewalk with whatever pattern of gach bong was available at the time. There were also sidewalks of terrazzo with inset logos and even carved wood insets.

The carpet of different patterns on the sidewalk added civility to the city, connecting public space to private by way of a civic gift. It felt luxurious to be greeted by a shop floor extended through the sidewalk to the street like a welcoming carpet. This was also the logical architectural manifestation of the melding of the spaces inside the shops with the adjoining public sidewalk spaces they often used during opening hours.

Walking down the street brought a series of small delights as the patterns changed in front of each shop, each speaking of a different era of design. The oldest displayed patterns with finials and flourishes in a tight pattern of static circles coming from the late nineteenth century. Just younger than that were the art nouveau patterns, similar but more organic and exuberant. As Art Deco arrived on the scene, the patterns became more adventurous including pill-shaped forms linked by wave type line work or sinuous stylised roses on endless vines. Somewhere in there were trompe l’oeil stepping patterns in varying shades of greys or earth tones. The ‘40s and ‘50s brought houndstooth variations in blues, yellows and reds and boxy hand-mottled compositions in greys with primary accents. The tiles seemed to die out in the late ‘60s, perhaps as they became associated with old things and thus poverty. They are now replaced whenever possible by cheap and flimsy porcelain tiles deemed superior solely by virtue of being new.

One can still find these nearly indestructible tiles for sale down by the river for the equivalent of about 12 cents apiece. Scraped up from the floors of shops and houses now being demolished, they will generally be smashed and used to fill potholes or foundations even as they enjoy new found popularity and tiles are once again being made in factories in France and Vietnam.
streets, the mobile ones sometimes moving through the city at different times of the day and night. Altars to enhance business sometimes perch on planters or hang from power poles and walls. Nails for hanging wares and supplies stud the fences.

A family’s home may be a restaurant in the daytime hours expanding through the alley and leaving motorcycles and pedestrians threading their way through folding tables jammed with patrons slurping noodles.

Sometimes the physical accoutrements of businesses simply stay on the sidewalk permanently. Barber chairs and mirrors, as well as café tables and stools, can be chained to pillars at night and left to await the opening of business the next day.

Block ice, and roadside cutting stations complete with table saws, still supply much of the demand for ice in HCMC, even though pre-formed ice cubes are displacing them. These stations simply stay on the sidewalk all night, covered up until the morning when the ice cutters arrive to cut the ice for the day and load the dripping, metre long blocks onto the backs of motorbikes for the day’s delivery.

Almost no basic need is more than a block or two away be it a noodle seller or magazine seller, barber or motorcycle mechanic. In many ways, Vietnam is one of the most thoroughly convenienced places I’ve ever lived.

Family celebrations and commemorations can become semi-public events as well, and while driving through an alley one may be forced to drive one’s motorcycle literally through a canopied space in the alley erected to house a wake, a wedding or a birthday party. One glides through the fabric room joining for a millisecond the mourners stoically listening to the monks chanting or the wedding guests drunkenly serenading the wedding couple. This is human life at its most insistent. Non-participation is not an option.
A street procession through an alley at the Tet Moon Festival, a festival celebrated largely for children with brightly coloured lanterns in various shapes lit by candles. Night-time street processions even in the main streets were common until traffic became heavier. Now the processions, when they occur, keep largely to the alleys. Binh Tan District, HCMC, 2012 © Archie Pizzini

Left Lower:
Sidewalk noodle shop in the late afternoon.
District 1, HCMC, 2013 © Archie Pizzini

Right Top:
The recently demolished Art Deco apartment block at 213 Dong Khoi began life as a premier address in old Saigon. An enclave of working-class Vietnamese by the time of its demolition, the balconies and top floors had been augmented with informal additions.
District 1, HCMC, 2005 © Archie Pizzini

Right Lower:
The top floors of the Catinat Building, at the corner of Dong Khoi and Ly Tu Trong. The rooms at the top of this building, though obviously original, have been augmented by the occupiers. The play areas and sitting areas suggest a Vietnamese home, set far above street level at the top of the old French colonial masterpiece. This building, having been designated as a ‘gold site’ is also slated to be destroyed soon, despite its popularity as a venue for boutiques, studios, cafes and restaurants.
District 1, HCMC, 2011 © Archie Pizzini
Vietnam’s control of land usage and occupation has in the recent past been looser than in richer parts of the world. Perhaps lack of funds to enforce restrictions produced a laissez-faire attitude towards businesses that operate on public sidewalks and streets. Sometimes there are small expenses associated with maintaining access, but generally it gives people who can’t afford a shop a low-cost location to make a living. In a country like Vietnam, which has fewer resources to help its population, it might be seen as a type of symbiosis.

Accretion and Collaboration

Cities normally grow in tandem with their people and culture in a process of accumulation and adaptation. This is in contrast to the way cities grow in a developer-driven boom.

Working within a situation of accretion nearly mandates collaboration. An auteur’s approach in such a situation will probably be counterproductive. Perhaps a key is in understanding how to embrace the messiness of human interactions.

This type of accretion also produces what William Lim calls spaces of indeterminacy3 where eras and structures are overlaid imperfectly on each other, creating a richer experience. These situations often produce spaces so unexpected that they defy a designer to conceive them.

Accretion can occur at the tops of old apartment buildings as informal constructions are added to the robustly constructed French colonial buildings. Sometimes starting from the original servants’ quarters, they can reach such density that they begin to form hems in the sky complete with cooking areas, small street cafes and playing areas. This parallels the Instant City or Para-city that WEAK! Architecture highlighted in their exhibition Illegal Architecture.4
Flexibility, Temporality, Mobility

Many micro-businesses of motorbike repairmen, barbers, magazine sellers, café proprietors, sandwich sellers, locksmiths, laminators, music sellers are mounted on carts, bicycles or motorcycles and take to the streets daily.

The physical form of a business is based on fitting all of its necessary components (except one---space) into one transportable package. People carry entire restaurants in don ganh---the ancient two-basket and carrying pole system. A new business model has arisen with motorcycles with cafe ‘pods’ mounted on the back. The pod contains coffee, water, other ingredients, disposable cups. They show up at public gatherings like the weekend morning concerts on the steps of the opera house. Many also work regular corners, shifting during the day.

Activators and Zones of Influence

Businesses are reduced to a compact component---an ‘activator’, which can be transported around the city and can quickly be made ready to do business when the situation arises. In this way, zones of influence are defined by the presence of an activator. An activator can be a chair and a mirror for a barber; a tall stack of books strapped together for a bookseller; a signboard with sunglasses; a tray full of sundries like gum, lighters, playing cards; or a pot of soup with small blocks scattered nearby for customers to squat/sit on. Zones may overlap invisibly, adding energy to public space in proportion to their number. The spaces become multi-purpose venues, like the ones created artificially in Tokyo or Brooklyn, to compete with the homogeneous branded shops, but with the unscripted vibrancy from the different vendors that can never be designed in.

Flexibility is important even to the non-travelling shops that occupy spaces in the buildings. Street facing shops use wheeled carts to extend the shop into the sidewalk during the day, retracting them into the interior at night.
Colonised Walls
Many walls have been pressed into service for the businesses that occupy the adjacent sidewalk during the day. Though the practice has been curtailed more and more, especially in the central city, you can still see walls that support signs, hanging alters, bags of utensils, small mirrors, lights and even, in the old days, tool boxes and street barber chairs. In the old days, many of the big items stayed on the sidewalk all night, such as the street barber chairs. Some very large sidewalk shops simply spread their wares out and never left, with people stringing hammocks from the wall at night and stringing tarps up during the rainy season.

Tarp Shops
Many sidewalk vendors define their shop spaces by laying a heavy plastic tarp on the ground and spreading their wares on it for sale. This provides a nice bright background for the items to be sold, protects their wares from the dirt on the sidewalk and defines a shop space by the simple act of placing a square of colour on the pavement. Items for sale vary from clothing, to motorbike helmets, to old tools, to sundry used items, to stuffed animals, to real animals. A critical function of the design becomes apparent when the police arrive unannounced and the vendors grab the four corners of their tarps, making them into instant bundles, and scatter.

Social Networks
Business in Vietnam generally still happens face to face with the proprietor. Personal relationships are deeply entangled with business and even official relationships. This can have its downsides, especially in the exact definition of deliverables and fees, but it offers different possibilities as well. One's patronage benefits specific people in the local economy.

There is a strong sense of connection within the community from the daily interactions that go on in close quarters. There are rivalries, simmering disputes as well, but generally the situation encourages
people make things work by giving them no option. Perhaps the systems of daily life reinforce to people the fact that their lives are tied to all the others in their community.

Vietnamese families traditionally live with several generations of extended family living together. There is a complex structure with members taking different roles as they mature through life. Children are taught they owe a debt of money, care and respect to the older generation. Some may take the responsibility more seriously than others as ‘pullers’ and ‘riders’ emerge. Money given to the elders is often redistributed through them to other family members.

Duties can be spread across the family, freeing up stronger members to spend more time earning money. There are usually some family members available to care for small children and the elderly while family members that have jobs are working, enabling the family to avoid the high costs associated with day cares and nursing homes. A bonus is that the caretakers are close relatives, which is often a plus, and the loneliness and isolation that hastens decline in nursing homes can be dispelled by familiar faces.

For better or worse, however, in the big family tradition, the actions and fortunes of every member affect everyone in the family. If one member becomes wealthy the family as a whole often prospers, however if, for instance, one member goes to prison or becomes addicted to drugs the associated costs can affect the lives of everyone in the family.

Many Vietnamese are the opposite of people from heavily suburbanised western cities who can’t endure too much time with other people. Some are unnerved by the idea of spending a night alone and don’t sleep well without someone else in the room. Many are saddened or even frightened at the prospect of living alone. They bear loud environments and close quarters more easily. Living with a large extended family has yielded, in general, an enhanced...
This market scene illustrates the density of life often seen in Vietnam. This market is put up in the morning and taken down at night, on weekends. The vendors sit on table-like platforms that delineate a room without walls and provide a separation from the dirt of the street and sidewalks. District 5, HCMC, 2012 © Archie Pizzini

ability to cope with a life lived among humanity. Not only have they evolved the flexibility to deal with the constant presence of several different humans with different temperaments, habits and motivations, many prefer aspects of this situation, more closely suiting themselves to urban situations and the dense family environment that makes so much of their lives possible without the hiring of outside service organisations.

Big families and heavy interaction with the general public can help children develop people skills and foster cooperation and sharing. There is a flip side to this condition in that family members who are a negative influence cannot be avoided and there are practical disadvantages to close quarter living with large numbers of people, especially where infectious diseases are concerned.

This situation is changing as the younger generation internalises the dream of the suburban single family home as marketed through new developments like those in districts 7, 9 and 2 of Ho Chi Minh City. Sustainability is subtracted as extended families that once occupied a single building or apartment scatter to occupy several separate houses perhaps located far from each other. Construction and transportation costs to the environment, as well as the loss of farmland and wetlands to development are increasing.

Corporations are appearing to supply services for needs that were taken care of by the family in the traditional model. Day care for children and care for seniors now sometimes drain family resources where they were not needed before.

Invisible Architecture
The density also leads to a very different way of dealing with other people and humanity in general. It fosters corresponding social responses, as physical conditions create psychological solutions. Sometimes this takes the form of invisible architecture, especially in situations from which there is no place to escape. For instance, Vietnam can seem like an overwhelmingly loud environment to a
visitor, children are less restrained than in many places in the West, people play their music loudly and sing perhaps even louder, and the masonry walls with tiled floors seem to reflect the sound endlessly. Typically, most Vietnamese don’t react much to this continuous cacophony. They aren’t deaf. They are employing a selective deafness. Their minds seem to provide sound separations where the architecture lacks it.

People doze in the midst of cacophony, often balanced along the back of a motorcycle. Children sleep on moving motorbikes weaving through traffic surrounded by roaring dump trucks and blaring air horns. Perhaps they are in a mental room with no physical walls, emotionally cocooned within the presence of their parents.

In dense neighbourhoods with living or working spaces adjoining a sidewalk, alley, or market, it is not uncommon to see people standing less than a metre away from an intense domestic squabble, but who seem completely removed from the emotions being vented literally within arm’s reach. They are employing a psychological barrier, forming an invisible wall where none exists.

While these strategies are products of very particular social situations, they raise basic questions regarding typical architectural design in the West. My observations in Vietnam suggest that buildings in the West may be overly subdivided. What I’ve seen in Vietnam suggests a thriftier way to use space with different functions using the same space for different purposes at different times of day. This produces sustainable results by having the same room fulfill multiple functions in different configurations at different times during the day. There is also a reduced tendency to build and maintain rooms that are not often used, such as the rarely used formal living and dining rooms that occupied a full 25 per cent of my family home when I was growing up.
Sustainability and Resilience

Needs-Based vs. Speculative Construction

Construction is a major cause of climate change, contributing to rising CO2 levels in the atmosphere in multiple ways including mining, logging, smelting, milling, transporting, assembling, finishing. Even recycled materials are not waste-free, though they reduce the amount of waste. Reducing the amount of built space is one way to advance sustainability.

The scale of a Vietnamese micro-business dictates its business strategies. A scissors maker or sidewalk shoe maker, for instance, will tend to seek out localised and small-scale solutions to problems that arise. Ecologically costly strategies such as shipping large quantities of things to different countries for assembly don’t enter into the picture. Construction for Vietnamese micro-businesses tends to be small-scale as well, closely tied to the needs of business owners, practically and economically. People cut up bikes, old tarps and cabinetry to support their ventures, doing what is necessary and no more. The need for construction tends to be real, not speculative, and scale is limited to what is necessary. Vietnamese micro-businesses are largely built on filling people’s existing needs like food, drink, clothing, grooming, cleaning and repair. They can differ from businesses in consumer cultures that often create needs that don’t previously exist.

Acclimation

The hot/humid climate is difficult to address through passive architectural means. Over the centuries, the Vietnamese deployed all the architectural strategies of increasing airflow and shade to mitigate the heat, but more effectively they added acclimation—they just got used to it. A large portion of the population is still uncomfortable with air-conditioning (temperature controlled to meet Ashrae 55, a standard developed to accommodate the comfort of a Western man in a full business suit). This is changing however, due to the introduction of more air-conditioned shopping malls and offices.
Early Mornings
In working-class Vietnamese neighbourhoods, movement begins at 4:30 AM. In Hanoi’s Old City, the public park and promenade surrounding Hoan Kiem Lake are well populated before sunrise with people doing tai chi. In Da Nang, the Han River promenade hosts a similar scene of groups of people exercising silently in the darkness. In Ho Chi Minh City, a popular gathering place is Le Van Tam Park in District 1. In the denser parts of Ho Chi Minh City, sometimes a wide, but less trafficked dead-end alley will become a gathering place. These hours are valuable in the sweltering climate because they have the most pleasant temperatures of the day. The streets are silent and clear even in places that will later be dense with traffic.

Midday Siestas
Vietnam has a strong siesta culture. Not only labourers, but also office workers break for a nap following lunch. People sleep in hammocks strung across market stalls or in open bus luggage compartments. They spread out across pushed together desk chairs or balance precariously across the seat and handlebars of motorcycles. This custom, driven by climate and the acclimation of most Vietnamese to the hot weather, is implied to be highly sustainable by the rise in air-conditioning seen in Mexico since a siesta ban was introduced there in 1991. Lancaster University sociologist Elizabeth Shove notes that the siesta’s shifting of the working hours from the sweltering midday to the cooler evenings created a kind of de-facto air-conditioning.

Ingenuity
One of the central resources visible in Vietnam today is the ingenuity evident in improvised solutions to everyday needs. There is a strong culture of making, repair, repurposing and adaptation that is covered in more depth in the following chapter. The environment of micro-businesses that make things one by one, whether improvised or not, supports the existence of the critical mass of craftsmen and small shops necessary to promote an environment of rasquachismo.
Conclusion: A Network of Systems

My early understanding of my photos of Vietnam was as a catalogue of aspects that could be used to improve the making of everything from furnishings to cities. This evolved into an understanding of these aspects as part of a complex network of intertwined systems. These systems illustrated a wholly different way of constructing a society than that I had been aware of before—a social network embedded in the built fabric of Vietnam. I mention a few below.

There are systems for care of very old and very young family members that have evolved in tandem with the large family system.

There is a layered network of micro-entrepreneurs make a living reselling reused magazines and newspapers. This includes cleaners who collect the papers, suppliers who aggregate them and redistribute them in the city, and sellers who hawk them on the streets. Quick response via cell phone has strengthened many systems. Magazine sellers call their supplier when they run out of specific items, keeping their stock small and mobile in case of unexpected problems such as heavy storms or unfriendly police.

There are collection networks for other types of waste as well. Bikes with barrels collect uneaten food from restaurants and even homes for use as livestock feed. Networks of trash sorters sift and redistribute cast-off items they find in the streets to the resellers’ markets mentioned earlier—electronics and audio to 3/2 Street, used tools to Yersin, building materials to District 5 by the canal. A dense network of street mechanics covers most urban areas in Vietnam. Running out of gas or having a punctured tyre is not a big problem if it occurs on a city street since a mechanic is usually within sight of wherever one might be.
Some people combine several enterprises to make a living. Ms. Mai in District 1, for instance, supports herself, her daughter and her disabled husband selling cold drinks on a street corner to passers-by, but she also does laundry for individual clients and for nearby hotels. The mainstay of her corner for years, she arrives about noon and stays until nine or ten in the evening. Near sunset, when the breezes blow, she takes a brisk walk around the block, sometimes adding a few callisthenic movements, like the walkers in the parks do. The community of her corner includes a magazine seller and his brother, two xe om, and a motorcycle parker for the restaurant on the corner. Everyone on the corner supports the community. They cover for each other during absences and refer people to each other.

Xe Om

The xe om are part of another organ in the complex entity of Vietnamese culture. Xe om translates roughly as ‘motorbike hug’. Also known as Honda om, these are the men (and a few women) who sit atop their bikes on any reasonably busy street corner in Ho Chi Minh City. They provide a motorbike taxi service to anywhere in town, usually faster than an automobile taxi, but the transformative quality of the system becomes apparent when one digs deeper.

If one has a package that needs to go across town and be delivered to a particular person’s desk within the hour, or if one is too busy to go out for lunch but wants a sandwich from one’s favourite banh mi shop, having a long-standing relationship with a nearby xe om makes things possible that wouldn’t be in a ‘developed’ country. With the phone number of a trusted xe om, business and life becomes easier. One can send him out for office supplies or to pick up or deliver a printing job. People send their kids to school via xe om. They also send xe om to pick up medicine, groceries, whatever they need.

All of these errands are done immediately and the results delivered directly and personally. Such an efficient system, with delivery drivers one knows personally stationed on every street corner is beyond the capabilities of even the largest corporations, especially...
Mr. Hieu

Mr. Hieu was one of three xe om, motorcycle taxi drivers, that stationed themselves in front of our office building on Le Loi street. Hieu inspired confidence as he rode straight backed in his crisp blue shirt driving his old, but well maintained Honda 90 with just the right amount of aggressiveness. He never wasted time and effort on weaving or erratic moves, and he knew the entire city with all its landmarks, alleys, hagglers, locally 'famous' noodle shops and banh mi stands. He was the consummate pro and utterly reliable.

Our office manager, our receptionist and our team leaders all had Mr. Hieu’s number on their phones. He delivered desk to desk, coming up to our office for heavy drawing rolls and specification books and delivering them to far-flung districts within the hour, laying them on the table of the recipient, and returning with the transmittal. He would go to Hoanh’s favourite sandwich shop for a banh mi made to order and delivered to Hoanh’s desk at lunchtimes when he was too busy to go out.

Hieu’s sister, Ms. Thao, lived in the old colonial house on the back alley where she had a cafe. She would bring a morning ca phe sua nong made to order delivered to my desk and served in her own china cups with a small metal spoon. Disposable cups and plastic tops were not even considered. We ordered by cell phone, but if she didn’t answer, you could call out of the window at the back of the building.

There was a community of the alley, as there are of so many corners and alleys in Ho Chi Minh City. This one included Hieu, Thao, and two other xe om—one a wiry old man whose wife ran a small cigarette cart and the other a gregarious, often drunk xe om who was a bit dicey to ride with but who also was a passable motorbike mechanic.

In slack times, Hieu played chess with friends on the sidewalk under a tree by the alley. Usually there was a crowd of at least four watchers, often more. He played with the same verve he drove with—energetic, engaged, cheerfully confident.

Hoanh and I would debate his quality of life versus ours (and whether he should seek globalisation or flee it) when we passed him happily playing chess with his friends while we were on our way to a hurried lunch on another stressed-out day.
if one doesn’t enjoy having data collected on one’s errands. Yet Vietnam already has this system in place, affording anyone a ride to the next district for about a dollar. This enables the rest of the systems in the overall entity to function faster and more affordably than they could in another environment.

The systems in place provide a very even network of services over the entire urban area. There are few places where the garbage does not get combed through or where you cannot find a xe om or motorcycle mechanic. Yet the providers are not part of an organisation and the individuals are not linked. The systems, once in place, attract providers and behaviour that support the systems.

For instance, our office secretary took it upon herself to separate out the recyclable paper (already reused on the backs for sketches) from the office garbage. She knew that the cleaning lady separated the paper out for a small cash reward from the people who combed through the bags at the kerb, so she took the trouble to separate the recyclables for a portion of that reward. In this case, the system was reinforced, the secretary’s and cleaning lady’s sustainable behaviour was encouraged, and the garbage sorter got extra paper to raise her income that day. This quite thorough system for sorting recyclables uses an informal network of individuals but requires no ‘buy in’ to the concept of climate change (something that limits recycling in many places). This shows an opportunity to re-think the mechanisms through which goals like sustainability are pursued.

These systems reflect the small–scale environment, but the environment is also a reflection of them. The hems, especially reflect it, with their informal modifications from overhanging vegetation and canopies, to informal house and shop additions that take care to include the alley itself as usable space. Studying how the social systems have shaped the spaces can give architects information on how to build spaces that engender a healthier, more beneficial social network. Vietnam not only works, it can teach.
Notes—VIETNAM


4. WEAK! architecture, Illegal Architecture (exhibition), Urban Core Gallery, Taipei, (April 2011)


Left: Kites for sale at a kite flying gathering on a breezy Sunday afternoon in District 7. The kites, a few of which are visible in the sky, are popular instruments of recreation in the city. The kite flying congregation zones vary and change, depending on the availability of open area. No one coordinates the spaces or the gatherings. In earlier more stable times, the open fields around District 7 were the default destination for an afternoon of kite flying. This particular gathering was on a construction site where building had halted due to the downturn. It has now long been displaced by apartment towers and shopping malls, but new kite flying destinations have arisen in areas like Thu Thiem which has recently been cleared and is awaiting a huge crop of towers. District 7, HCMC, 2009 © Archie Pizzini
The elegant use of garbage is the hallmark of rasquachismo.

*Rasquachismo* is a Hispanic term for a global phenomenon. It means roughly “the ability to make whatever one needs from whatever is at hand”. It has counterparts in immigrant communities across the U.S. as well as in other places around the world including India (where it is called *jugaad*), Brazil (*gambiarra*), and Africa, to mention only a few. Wherever this ability exists, including Vietnam, it is prevalent in the poorer classes and is disdained by many in the more prosperous classes. Even in the poorer classes, though, some see *rasquachismo* as a mark of honour while others see it as a target for derision. Though it’s a common cultural aspect in developing nations, it is lost, sometimes deliberately erased from societies as their systems, tastes and economies become more like those of consumer cultures.

*Rasquachismo* gathers strength in Vietnam from being part of a society where many things are still made, since the number and variety of makers and their shops multiplies the types of variations possible. It’s a strategy for making everything from tools to dwellings by utilising close attention paid to one’s context. Seen this way it appears closely related to indigenous making, but it takes a form not often associated with indigenous endeavours. Many of the materials used by *rasquachismo* are not natural materials, since the context is often not a natural context, but an urban one. The materials in the context are not grass and trees and reeds as much as they are used tyres, wires and the like.
Rasquachismo is a global phenomenon.

Top Left Row, Left to Right:
- Bamboo construction scaffolding of bamboo poles, synthetic lashings and plaited split bamboo matting. Shanghai, China, 2007 © Archie Pizzini

Top Right Row, Left to Right:


Bottom Left Row, Left to Right:
- Child’s toy from tin can tops and coloured sheet metal. Mexico, 1989. Photo 2012 © Archie Pizzini

Bottom Right Row, Left to Right:
- Two different types of hand-crafted vehicles. Kolkata, India, 2013. © Archie Pizzini


Bottom Right Row, Left to Right:
- Wonderfully direct dolly for hauling freight. Four large bearings mounted to a wood frame. Shanghai, China, 2007 © Archie Pizzini

Disturbing but effective advertisement for a barbershop. Camera tripod and hair cutting practice head. Shanghai, China, 2007 © Archie Pizzini


Altar from repurposed lunchbox. New York City, 2012 © Archie Pizzini

Miniature bicycle from coloured tin can pieces and wire. Africa, 1990s. Photo 2008 © Archie Pizzini


Bottom Left Row, Left to Right:


Disturbing but effective advertisement for a barbershop. Camera tripod and hair cutting practice head. Shanghai, China, 2007 © Archie Pizzini


Altar from repurposed lunchbox. New York City, 2012 © Archie Pizzini

Miniature bicycle from coloured tin can pieces and wire. Africa, 1990s. Photo 2008 © Archie Pizzini
A Way of Seeing

*Rasquachismo* develops a way of seeing things that emphasises the qualities of objects rather than the names and usages that have been assigned to them. A normal urban situation can be awash in raw materials to someone who sees in this way. For instance, a used bicycle, motorcycle or auto inner tube with a serious puncture is not garbage if seen through the lens of *rasquachismo*. It is a durable, waterproof, elastic membrane in the form of a closed cylinder. If it is seen this way, many usages are possible.

Empowerment

*Rasquachismo* empowers individuals to circumvent limitations in money and specialised components by using strategies of repair, repurposing and improvisation. This empowerment results in individuals being enabled to fulfil daily needs without dependence on large organisations. This is different to what is usually called economic empowerment. Economic empowerment, which focuses on increasing the income of the population, can bring improvements in living conditions, but in some aspects has results that exist only in tandem with consumer culture. *Rasquachismo* differs in that personal experience and ingenuity can’t be lost, confiscated or otherwise usurped. It is a very sustainable and resilient resource.
**Embedded Value**

Solutions produced using rasquachismo have an inherent value, coming from the ideas and experience they contain as well as the individuality expressed in each handmade creation. This contrasts sharply with the applied value of branding used widely in the developed world where the price of an object increases dramatically when a logo is added.

**Thrift**

Making, repair and construction with misused, reused or found objects are sustainable and resilient strategies. They contain the benefits of thrift and making enhanced with the surprise of unexpected solutions. Rasquachismo maintains the viability of the people it serves by operating within the limited resources of individuals. This limitation in scale also tends to limit waste. This contrasts with consumer culture, which operates at large-scale and aims for constant acquisition, constant growth and rendering of products obsolete or useless once they have been sold—a multiplication of waste that is not only unsustainable, but anti-sustainable, in that it resists sustainable practice.

**Delight**

Rasquachismo at its best creates a solution from a totally unanticipated direction, producing a clear diagram of the forces in play—economics, weather, physics, culture; in a medium one would never expect.

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The Pinwheel Man

The pinwheel seller is a shy man for a maker of children’s delights and he waits silently on a corner at the edge of Tao Dan Park for toddlers to become fascinated by the cluster of colourful whirligigs as they walk past or sit on a motorbike waiting for the long light to change.

Wielding an elegant pair of hand-forged shears—the type you can still get in Cholon—he makes new fan blades from sheets of colour, turning the squares rapidly as he cuts, a half second per cut, four cuts per sheet, two sheets per wheel, two wheels per stick. The rotating and cutting, folding and stacking assume a hypnotic rhythm like the counting of beads or the intoning of prayers and the spinning sheets in his hand mimic the whirling swastikas of the Buddhist temple at the other end of the park.

His motorbike mounted display is a system of wires, bamboo sticks and pieces of rubber hose assembled into intricate trees flourishing perhaps 80 bright toys that hum in the breezes throughout the day and long after dusk. Around 10, as the traffic fades and the park closes down, he packs his tools, boards his bike and disappears slowly down the darkened boulevard floating in a cloud of whirling colour.

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2010

© Archie Pizzini
Far Left Top:  
Musician’s Rasquachismo  
This blind duo works along De Tham Street in District 1, both in the back packer area and further towards the canal. The guitarist wears a shortened strap, so the guitar-mounted microphone ends up close to his mouth. The cash bag hangs from the end of his guitar. The backpack contains the power source. The speaker/amp hangs from another strap. His sidekick, behind him, plays tambourine, sings and sells lotto tickets.  
District 1, HCMC, 2009

Far Left Bottom:  
Market Rasquachismo  
A plastic rain tarp in the Binh Tay Market with a sewn-in drain sleeve. Rolled up in dry weather, it is located directly above a floor drain.  
Cholon, HCMC, 2009

Left Top:  
Construction Site Rasquachismo  
A handmade wheel for a construction cart. The rubber is a strip repurposed from an old truck tyre.  
Phu Nhuan District, HCMC, 2006

Left Bottom:  
Cooking Rasquachismo  
Cooking pit from a split steel drum.  
District 10, HCMC, 2010

Right Top:  
Electrical Rasquachismo  
Outdoor light protectors from plastic bottles.  
My Tho, Vietnam, 2014

Right Bottom:  
Agricultural Rasquachismo  
A pig feeder fashioned from an old split tyre with a heavy wire frame segmented to feed 12 pigs and incorporating a handle, welded and bolted to it. The sheet metal cone distributes food dropped in the centre of the tyre when the pigs’ heads block the tyre trough. From a Mekong Delta village market in 2011. Photo taken in HCMC, 2014

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Far Left Top:
Truck tyre cut open and repurposed as a mudguard for a ba ba nhat.
District 5, HCMC, 2007
© Archie Pizzini

Far Left Bottom:
Truck wheel repurposed as base for umbrella stand.
District 1, HCMC, 2008
© Archie Pizzini

Near Left:
Bicycle saddlebags made from repurposed feed bags.
District 10, HCMC, 2011
© Archie Pizzini

Right:
Floor of random donated tiles at a Buddhist orphanage and monastery.
Long Thanh, Vietnam, 2012
© Archie Pizzini
Vietnam’s version of the free-range chicken is the so-called ‘walking chicken’. Chickens live on many sidewalks in Ho Chi Minh City. They hatch, nest, raise chicks and are slaughtered at the place they will be eaten. Mass meat factories as well as supermarkets and fast food chains have recently been introduced to Vietnam, standardising poultry production and presumably adding all the hormones and antibiotics served to Americans and others in the developed world. Beside many roads in Vietnam though, for the moment, some chickens still walk.

Right:
Sidewalk chicken coop on Ho Tung Mau Street, half a block from Ho Chi Minh City’s tallest building. The chickens run free during the day, and are shut in with pieces of plywood at night.
District 1, HCMC, 2013
© Archie Pizzini

Left This Page:
A dragon made of ceramic soup spoons, teacups, teapots, plates, bowls, platters and serving spoons. Part of a display at a local amusement park.
District 11, HCMC, 2006
© Archie Pizzini
Left Top Two Photos: Lighting fixture from filigreed aluminum cans with lamps and wire frames, found at a shop on Hai Ba Trung Street. There were several lamp types, some free-standing like flowers and others hanging like lanterns. All came with handcrafted boxes, carefully wrapped in festive paper with a custom-fitted top from heavy clear plastic sheeting (not pictured). Some had holes cut in the back of the box so the lamps could be lit while displayed in the box. Purchased Dist. 1, HCMC, 2007. Photos 2011, 2015. © Archie Pizzini.


Near Left Bottom: Rugs made from repurposed old clothes collected by a Buddhist monastery east of HCMC. Sewn by the nuns in the temple, some are used there and some sold to raise money. Long Thanh, Vietnam, 2009. © Archie Pizzini.

Rasquachismo in Vietnam

The culture of making, repairing, repurposing and improvising is still evident in Vietnam. Decades-old treadle-powered sewing machines or ancient scooters are still repaired, wired together, adapted to new uses or, when all else fails, plundered for parts. People still know how to make things.

Ad hoc vehicles are individually adapted to a specific usage with whatever is around. Motorcycles are cut in half and welded to carts or fitted with carrying racks made from scrap steel. Old truck tyres become fenders. Aluminium cans are turned into toys, caps, bags or cigarette box holders. Old garments are repurposed as handmade clothing and doormats. Salvaged plastic banners become roofs (complete with sewn in drain sleeves) or walls or café umbrellas, or even bags and backpacks.

Street mechanics keep water in old rusting war helmets to test punctured motorcycle inner tubes. Tubes that can be saved are patched and patched again, the ones that can’t are cut into strips and become bungee cords and rubber bands. Old men make radios from hoarded wires, knobs and earpieces, charging old batteries by setting them in the sun.
Contraptions

These vehicles, having evolved specifically for their physical and cultural context, contain clues to designing for the physical and social fabric of urban Vietnam. They are handmade and hand-modified vehicles specifically adapted to the organic, small-scale textures of the French colonial cities of Vietnam where alleys wind their way through almost every block providing access to thousands of tiny dwellings and shops. The alleys are like capillaries sustaining the inner organs of a giant beast. Passage is often restricted by the small size and odd configurations of the alleys, in some places there is just enough room for a motorcycle to thread through the openings. It’s no accident that Asian motorbikes have short handlebars.

This type of city with its tiny alleys necessitates a smaller scale of transport for things such as construction sites. A builder might need a cubic metre of sand to make concrete for a tiny job in a small alley. A standard dump truck won’t fit in the alleys and is too expensive anyway. Vietnam has evolved a specialised set of tiny transports to nourish the city fabric through this constricted infrastructure. The making and modification of these is aided by the abundance of tiny welding shops throughout the city.

Upon close observation it becomes evident that the city structure, the size of the micro-businesses, the types of transport that have evolved to serve the situation and the types of fabrication used to create the transports are all intimately connected.

For construction needs, there are ba banh (literally ‘three wheels’) --pedalled tricycles and motorcycle/tricycle hybrids that haul sand, rocks and freight. When a ba banh reaches a construction site with a load of sand, the back wheel can be lifted by the workers, and the entire vehicle simply dumped like a wheelbarrow, leaving the back wheel and engine hanging high in the air. When the cargo is removed from the bed, the back of the vehicle comes crashing back down. It’s an ultra-simple, albeit somewhat dangerous response to a functional
Right Top and Bottom: This soup cart is intricately hand-crafted from wood and glass with high quality glossy red paint. It has a sheet metal roof, to which are tied plastic stools and tables. Various hooks and straps hold different accoutrements such as tongs and caps, making this a very self-sufficient soup kitchen on wheels. A close-up of the interior shows a working space with bowls, a soup pot and an ice tea container as well as a rack for condiments and a prominently displayed photo collection of girls in swimsuits. An upper shelf contains more condiments and business gods as well as a container for eating utensils. There is a can for cooking utensils and a nail for a spatula on the upright support. In the front are a brass pagoda, a mirrored entry god usually found at the door of a house, and a tiny holder for incense sticks.

District 3, HCMC, 2012 © Archie Pizzini

Left Top: A motorbike with a steel rack from welded steel heavy-gauge wire. The plastic bags contain colourful fish. The gold fish are popular because they are thought to attract more ‘gold’.

District 3, HCMC, 2012 © Archie Pizzini

Left Bottom: An ice cream cart, neatly kept and decorated, that plies the stretch of Ly Tu Trong near Truong Dinh Street.

District 1, HCMC, 2013 © Archie Pizzini

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need that would be met with technology and expense in another part of the world.

The xe lam is a surprisingly common holdover from the late 1950s—a tiny, three-wheeled truck made by Lambretta with an engine that sounds like an amplified popcorn popper. Hundreds survive and are in use today, adapted as jitney buses, garbage carriers and open-backed haulers.

More specialised vehicles include pedalled tricycles outfitted with a wooden tray of compact discs set on top of two large boxed forward facing speakers. Under the back of the tray is a stereo control box. The seller pedals through the neighbourhoods serenading the public with songs that might bring a sale. A motorcycle or car battery in a rack under the display tray powers the speakers and a fluorescent lamp.

There are motorbikes adapted specifically for sellers of dried squid. With an upright rack with wires on which the whole dried squids are stretched and displayed, each has a fluorescent light and a small work surface with a bin for condiments and a charcoal cooker that sometimes is still burning and throwing sparks as the bike weaves through traffic on the way to the next stop.

The food sellers know their neighbourhoods, the businesses and their customers. They time their arrival to coincide with meal breaks then may zoom off to take advantage of a late night beer joint crowd or an after-dark necking scene at a park.

These are actually somewhat uniform vehicles, but there are also truly unique oddities—one might see an aged monk pedalled through the city in a machine consisting of a half bicycle welded to the back of a wheelchair with an umbrella tied to the top.
Constructions
Improvised and handmade constructions are still numerous today as well.

The trussed structures of highway billboards in rice fields are sometimes colonised by farmers into storage and sleeping huts. Floating communities of hybrid constructions house water-dwelling populations in the bays and rivers. Some float on rafts of old 50-gallon steel drums, others on different materials. Some floating communities such as the ones on Ha Long Bay on the northern coast of the country have schools, shops, cafes and even post offices.

At the beginning of the millennium, even state-built infrastructure had an obvious element of handmade quality to it such as the old steel bridges roughly hand-welded from steel members and floored with steel grating. There were many in Ho Chi Minh City in 2005, including one connecting motorcycle traffic between districts 8 and 5/6 and another nearby one only for pedestrian traffic. There are a few still existing in less prominent places including the further reaches of District 8, Ho Chi Minh City.

Rural indigenous housing has, in places, incorporated found items from the developed world. Glass bottles have found their way into wood houses in Sapa in the northern highlands. These houses often also have tiny generators that can be set into one of the many small streams coming down off the mountains to generate enough power for a light bulb or two and a DVD player.

Other urban informal dwellings share some aspects of indigenous architecture in that they adapt themselves to what is at hand both in materials, infrastructure and construction manpower. Agglomeration of materials happens but often with an obvious set of aesthetic preferences. Constructions that show an affinity for a particular colour or pattern and aesthetic flourishes that have no relation to function are not uncommon. This implies that there is often more
Far Left: Wall of a building clad with steel panels fashioned from cut and unrolled steel drums.
District 5, HCMC, 2007 © Archie Pizzini

Near Left: Front wall of a home fashioned from various panels attached in a manner which enables various types of openings.
District 10, HCMC, 2011 © Archie Pizzini

Right: Front wall of a shop clad in left-over pieces of steel siding from another building.
Tan Binh District, HCMC, 2012 © Archie Pizzini
Top Row:
Home constructed from salvaged materials. The colour choices show a definite design sensibility at work. This house was part of the community in Thu Thiem that was erased to implement the Sasaki designed development now under way.
District 2, HCMC, 2007 © Archie Pizzini

Bottom Row:
Wood house constructed by indigenous people in the northern highlands. Salvaged glass bottles have been repurposed as a light filter at the bottom of the wall. Star-shaped cutouts allow ventilation and light, as do the cracks between the rough sawn boards. The house is part of a community of Red Dao people.
Sapa region, Vietnam, 2007 © Archie Pizzini
than a simple desire to fulfil a function involved in the making of the informal products of rasquachismo.

Another important aspect is not only how opportunistically these constructions use materials, but how opportunistically they use their context. Many are constructed to make use of adjoining public space or to enhance the connections between spaces, people or businesses.

Toys

Improvised toys are common in Vietnam. Tin and aluminium cans, nylon cords, wires, straw and bamboo are materials commonly used to produce toys, some gracefully delicate, some surprisingly robust. They combine the playfulness of form with the added delight of the unexpected methods and materials of their construction. But this type of delight is not confined only to the toys of rasquachismo. It is present in many other products of rasquachismo where the construction methods are exposed on the surface of the object.

Right:

A flotilla of various ships crafted from Styrofoam, painted and outfitted with flags and accessories. This fleet graces a small pond complete with a small wooden pier by the side of the highway leading from My Tho to Ho Chi Minh City. The maker runs a small service stand by the side of the road where a smaller road branches off heading into the countryside. Near My Tho, Vietnam, 2014 © Archie Pizzini

Left Top:

A triplane made from aluminium cans. Purchased in 2007 in District 1, this toy shows signs of standardisation, though it still has wheels cut from rubber instead of the plastic wheels found on similar toys today. In 2000, these toys were very popular and easy to find. Designs varied greatly, evidencing lack of standardisation. Now they are available only in limited designs from a few vendors. Photo 2015 © Archie Pizzini

Left Middle:

A man makes and sells animals and ornaments from leaves in the days approaching Tet. District 1, HCMC, 2014 © Archie Pizzini

Left Bottom:

Miniature furniture set made from folded paper. This is a type of toy making popular in the Dalat area, but was purchased in the street in District 1, Tet 2008. Photo 2015 © Archie Pizzini
Situational Improvisations

Vietnam also features examples of rasquachismo that are not primarily built objects. In the recent downturn, there were many vacant lots that stayed vacant for years when the projects slated for them stalled. In many cases, these vacant lots became open-air, temporary restaurants. Though there was a minimum of construction in the form of a wood deck and some tables and chairs, the crucial part of the restaurants was the ability to imagine a deliberately temporary incarnation of a restaurant on a piece of land in transition.

Informal banks called choi hui still exist in Cholon communities, where residents contribute a small amount of money each month to a community fund, receiving a bonus when they contribute and don’t use it, and paying interest if they borrow from it.

Stuart Rutherford, an architect who has studied DIY micro-finance in communities in Asia and South America, states that such community financial institutions can be found in poor communities around the world. This is the same part of the population where rasquachismo is most prevalent.

These imply that rasquachismo is more than simply a cultural aspect useful in making—it is an opportunistic attitude that analyses situations in terms of their qualities and opportunities rather than the limitations set by their names. With that attitude, abandoned construction sites can be restaurants and banks can exist within a circle of neighbours.
Ca Phe May Bay

In the last days of the American war, a jet airliner was flown to Hong Kong from Saigon and abandoned there when the pilot and crew fled to the West. The plane languished there in limbo for months after the war ended until someone who knew how to fly an American airliner was located to bring it back. It immediately became the flagship of the Vietnam Airlines fleet and flew commercial routes again briefly, but its operating costs were beyond the reach of the national airline in that era. Soon afterwards, it was parked indefinitely near the airline offices, though its working life didn’t end there.

In the lean times that followed, the airliner became a giant backdrop for tourist photos. Newlyweds and visitors from the countryside would pay a few dong to have their picture taken in front of a real American jetliner. As the years passed it almost inevitably became an outdoor café, the big 707 providing a natural shelter from sun and monsoon. The airline office workers and off-duty flight crews would take morning coffee or a cooling afternoon cà phê sua da in folding chairs set out under the broad wings. Eventually, the engines were removed. Later, the decaying wings were propped up. Later still, the fuselage was embedded in enveloping structures. Through the decades, the sleek chunk of metal built to cross oceans at an altitude of several miles worked on, every day becoming a bit less an apparatus of technology and the heavens, and a bit more an element of improvisation and the earth.
Conclusion: A Mindset and a Method of Interaction

This section is not an attempt to document every possible variation (although that would be a worthy, if unachievable task due to the unlimited variations produced by new combinations of humans and raw materials), it is a documentation of a mindset—a different way of evaluating what one is seeing.

*Rasquachismo,* “the ability to make whatever one needs from whatever is at hand”, is by definition both a local and thrifty strategy useful not only for designing in Vietnam, but in the wider context as well.

It affirms the value of ingenuity, one of its key components, and fosters an opportunistic way of seeing not only materials and objects, but also situations.

Containing the act of negotiating a situation, rather than erasing it, *rasquachismo* tends towards sustainability and away from waste.

It’s a methodology tied directly to the context within which it operates, containing a component of close observation. In this sense, it is an interaction with its context, not an action against it. It does not seek to ignore, redefine or erase its context, as western strategies often do. Instead, it begins with the assumption that the solution to any given problem is contained within the context.

This is not to say that *rasquachismo* resists change. Instead, it interacts with the entire context including what has been added recently. This aspect is a key to *rasquachismo*’s resilience, but that resilience thrives only if the context is not erased.

Left: In a boat on the canal between District 5 and District 8, a man intently grooms a tiger made of fruit. Meant for the celebration of the Year of the Tiger, it was one of many he had brought in on his boat, probably from the Mekong Delta. Until recently, many boats docked at the canal separating District 5 and 6 from District 8 each Tet. They sell traditional fruits, trees and flowers for the Tet celebration. Recently their number appears smaller. There is a similar aggregation of boats along the canal separating Districts 4 and 7.

District 5, HCMC, 2010 © Archie Pizzini

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http://www.jointokyo.org/mfdl/readings/PoorMoney.pdf (last accessed April 2015)
shifting Contexts

Ho Chi Minh City, like most urban centres in Vietnam, is undergoing rapid change. The speed at which this is playing out is unprecedented compared to the U.S., but some patterns repeat those seen before in America. Having lived in both Houston and New York City, perhaps near the far ends of the density spectrum in U.S. cities, I have tracked development in HCMC through the lenses of my earlier experiences in the U.S. Even as cities like HCMC develop towards a model of city prevalent in the U.S. in the 1970s, the leading edge of urban design in America and Europe is trending away from the very city that HCMC is making itself into.

Houston and Ho Chi Minh City

1960s Houston still had a living urban core with hotels, movie houses, the flagship stores of local merchants, restaurants, diners and other support businesses. Street life included shoeshine men, organ grinders with miniature monkeys, shouting street preachers and paperboys. The suburbs however, were growing to a new car-dependent pattern of single-family homes with few necessities within walking distance and a population suspicious of pedestrians. As Duany, Plater-Zyberk and Speck point out in their book *Suburban Nation*, these neighbourhoods are inherently anti-sustainable.\(^1\)

Developments with similar aspects have been built in Ho Chi Minh
City, most notably in District 7’s Phu My Hung, master planned by Skidmore Owings and Merrill’s Chicago office in the 1990s.

Downtown development in Houston in the 1970s, ‘80s and ‘90s was largely skyline-focused towers that did not provide any retail spaces at the sidewalk. These include Pennzoil Place (Johnson, 1975), Republic Bank (Johnson, 1983), Texas Commerce Tower (Pei, 1981), Allied Bank (SOM, 1983) and One Shell Plaza (SOM, 1971).

Central in location but suburban in mentality, they deliberately subtracted from street life forcing support businesses such as lunch venues underground into a labyrinthine tunnel system lacking in public amenities and hostile to unsanctioned activities. Security guards patrolled the towers’ plazas to prohibit unscripted public use. Housing in the central city was bought up by developers and cleared, becoming parking lots that remained for three decades. Without a resident population, businesses such as cleaners and theatres disappeared. Evenings and weekends found the central city deserted and by the late 1980s street life downtown had vanished except for a homeless population fed by the dumping of destitute mental patients. There were also packs of wild dogs.

This pattern of development, with its inwardly-focused buildings, its appetite for land formerly used for housing and farming and its restrictions on use of public space parallels some of the newest development in Ho Chi Minh City, not only in District 7, but in the central city as well.
Destroying a city’s built fabric seems to generate greater immediate profits for developers but has repercussions for the city in the long run. Singapore has a reputation as a once-beautiful colonial city that then turned itself into an endless indoor shopping mall. New developments by starchitects and tourism-boosting campaigns aim to raise Singapore’s reputation, but the urban texture which supported a more intimate contact with the city, its inhabitants and its cultures has been erased save for small pockets.

Urbanist William S. W. Lim says of Singapore, “Having disregarded most of the old and existing, the city is left with no visual identity to speak of.”

“The devastating effects of modernist planning, major rehousing and redevelopment have left Singapore with little more than a manufactured, over-regulated, glossy and tidy image of a city. In the process, it was stripped bare of vitality, complexity and chaos, qualities which make neighbouring Asian cities like Bangkok, Tokyo and Shanghai appear much more vibrant and exciting”.

Montrose, Loose Controls and Fertility

Houston’s Montrose district, located near downtown, a university and several museums, is a relevant case study of the relationship between property values, control and fertility. In the 1970s, craftsman-style bungalows and mansions from the 1920s still populated streets lined with giant oaks. The shady streets and numerous small shops supported modest pedestrian and bicycle traffic.

As American cities sprawled to distant suburbs, Montrose’s decline in property value spawned a cultural blossoming, echoing New York’s Lower East Side, central Los Angeles, and central Chicago of the 1970s and 1980s. A source of cheap flats, it became a nexus of outsider culture, the local music scene, students and artists. Low property values bred fertility.

In the 1990s, Montrose’ rising ‘cool’ factor, its proximity to the central city, its cultural institutions, and its walkability were rediscovered by the mainstream public and property values rose, sparking gentrification and a radical reshaping. Mass house builders erased streetscapes of craftsman–style porched bungalows, replacing them with street walls of double garage doors that maximised buildable area and car parking potential, destroying the huge old oaks in the process. The streets were transformed from shaded public spaces that strengthened the community (making it safer and more resilient in times of adversity) to treeless thoroughfares maximising vehicle access. Development maximised benefit to developers while ignoring the needs of the community.

Similarly, Ho Chi Minh City’s main population, with its intense use of public space, its reliance on the hems (alleys) as an extension of semi-private space and its dense connection of personal relationships, practices a very specialised form of city life that is largely ignored in the globalised plans for the city’s growth. There are no hems in the urban designs for District 7 (by Skidmore Owings and Merrill), District 1 (by Nikken Sekkei) or District 2 (by Sasaki), meaning these new developments will be unsuited for the lifestyles of the average Vietnamese. In fact, there is no sign of the intimate knowledge of Vietnamese urban life that would allow design of an urban landscape for average Vietnamese, unless there existed an intention to exclude that part of the population.

FRAMEWORK

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Ho Chi Minh City’s current development echoes Singapore’s course in many ways.

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Dinosaurs and Rats

In the 1980s, neighbourhoods in Houston’s central city were considered worthless and were not heavily regulated. Street parking was free and music venues sprouted in vacant buildings. Colonnaded overpasses became unofficial art galleries.

As the scene grew, street skaters began to be harassed by police for using the deserted public spaces at night. In 1992, the downtown homeless population was abruptly removed for the Republican National Convention where protests were removed to fenced off ‘free speech zones’ distant from the entry and media, in a practice that has now become standard in America. About that time, public parks began to be frequently fenced off for corporate sponsored events charging admission for entry to public space. Informal block parties and free festivals were marginalised and in some cases prohibited.

The annual Houston Art Car Parade started in 1986 with a parade of about 20 cars. Later, the cars became more ambitious, with a rough anarchic edge that peaked in the early 1990s when the parade snaked through downtown Houston and included a black Volkswagen Beetle modified to resemble a rat pursued by a huge carnivorous looking vehicle sporting massive steel jaws that slammed shut when the driver hit the brakes. There was also a school bus with a cannon that pulverised oranges against the skyscrapers, bringing the faces of shocked office workers to the windows. The mists of vaporised citrus literally gave a wonderful air to the parade that year.

The parade was featured in the New York Times 1997, and by 1999 had its first corporate sponsor. The profile of the parade increased, but limitations began to be evident in the cars.

Right Top: The relative lack of restrictions in central Houston in the 1980s due to lower property values fostered a culture of appropriation and improvisation in Montrose, a central Houston neighbourhood. Shown above is urban furniture in the form of a stegosaurus sculpture made from re-used sofa cushions and pillows wired together over a steel frame fashioned from re-bar. Stegosaurus was constructed by Paul Kittelson in 1986 under a Montrose freeway overpass often appropriated by artists for both sanctioned and unsanctioned artwork (this piece was reportedly financed by a small grant from Diverse Works, a local arts organisation). It was quite effective at placemaking and, not surprisingly, a quite comfortable place to relax and enjoy a beer at night. Barely visible behind it is the Houston Philatelic Society, an old postal rail car repurposed as both a venue/office and a home for the couple who ran the society. Houston, 1986 © Archie Pizzini

Right Bottom: Art car fashioned from repurposed stainless steel flatware. This is one of many vehicles crafted by Mark Bradford, a sculptor who worked out of an old 1930s Montrose apartment building with a courtyard in the 1980s. His studio after that was in a craftsman-style bungalow that was razed when the entire area was developed into strip centres and big box stores. His workshop currently (2014) adjoins one of the last working rail lines through the city, and he parks his old creations along the street next to the rail line. Houston, 2013 © Archie Pizzini
The New York I inhabited in the late 1980s still held traces of the city as it had evolved and functioned at its manufacturing and shipping peak. Moving through the city gave the impression of exploring the skeleton of a huge dinosaur.

There were still vestiges of the piers that had lined the riverfronts of Manhattan, bristling like spines or teeth around the long tongue of the island. To me they resembled villi, the tiny finger-like projections, themselves covered with even tinier micro-villi, that cover the intestines and absorb nutrients into the bloodstream for distribution throughout the body. Their elongated shape increases the surface area of the intestines to increase absorption. The piers of the city served a similar purpose, increasing the perimeter area of water contact allowing more ships to load and unload, more goods and materials to be transferred, more ‘nutrients’ to be absorbed into the great organism of manufacturing that had been New York in the mid-20th century.

I understood the lofts to be the flesh of a giant internal organ that had been the city. It ingested raw materials through the docks, channelled what it ingested through the city’s lofts where they were transformed into products that were circulated throughout the country via the rail lines. The biology of the city showed me how similarity of function can generate formal similarities that bridge the categories of scale, purpose, etc.

--Archie

interviewed by Sue Hajdu, 2010

Left Top:
Photo of lower Manhattan ringed with docks in 1931.
Photographer Unknown. US National Archives. Call Number: 30-N-42-1864. (Public Domain)

Left Bottom:
Magnified image of cross-section of the human intestine.
Author: Josef Reischig. (Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License)

New York City and Ho Chi Minh City

Urban Fabric and Vibrancy
As New York was, Ho Chi Minh City at present still is a vibrant working city. The port is adjacent to the central city in District 4 with several working dry docks adjoining District 1. There are major specialised market areas in the city including a market for flowers, for motorcycle parts, for electronic parts, for building materials and for herbal medicines, to name a few. The city’s history still shows in what remains of its colonial buildings and arrangement. Cholon’s history as a Chinese market town is still quite evident as is District 1’s history as the seat of power for colonial French Indochina. District 10 still contains hundreds of micro-manufacturing shops and District 4, newly shorn of its French colonial warehouses, is still heavily influenced by the port and the surrounding canals. Different classes of populations have been spread somewhat evenly through the densest districts of the city, though many districts are now trending away from this. Ho Chi Minh City is changing in that regard, with development quickly erasing large swaths of the fabric not only in the central city, but in most of the central districts.

Living in Manhattan and Brooklyn, with so many overlays of histories and populations offered insights into how richness is woven into a city’s fabric. Living in Houston taught me what happens when that fabric is erased.

Economics and Exclusion
In 1989, ad hoc shelters built by homeless people were all over New York City, some quite ingenious and elaborate, such as a full-size Indian teepee, with the traditional hides replaced by plastic sheeting. A recent financial crash had expanded the homeless population of the city. There was, however, a tacit agreement by the liberal city administration to allow the homeless to build homes and even communities in the vacant and abandoned areas of the city.
Uncontrolled Juxtapositions and Vibrancy

The old loft buildings of the city had been built with no specific functions in mind, so each door opened still held the possibility of surprise. One floor of a building might hold a sewing machine repair shop, while another might house a taxidermy supply house specializing in glass eyes for animals ranging from pythons to elephants.

The Soho loft building where I worked had a cigar factory on the ground floor through which I had to pass daily. The murky space was filled with water-filled vats of tobacco leaves above which were strung clotheslines full of drying leaves like strings of wrinkled, mud-coloured flags. There were dusty bales of cigar boxes clogging the walkways and, in the back of the space under a dingy skylight, a row of middle-aged Puerto Rican women sat and chain-smoked their way through the days while rolling cigars at a tobacco-stained plywood counter. Meanwhile, downstairs in the basement, I was silk-screening marble panels and hand painting and gilding architectural embellishments.

Walking out to lunch, sometimes I would see garments being loaded into trucks from the sweatshops on the upper floors of lofts. A rope would be strung from the upstairs windows and tied off in the back of a truck parked across the street. White shirts on wire hangers were slid down the lines into the arms of the loaders in the trucks. When glimpsed unexpectedly, they looked like startled ghosts fluttering off into the streets of the city.

--Archie, interviewed by Sue Hajdu, 2010

These dwellings were a form of urban indigenous architecture, a product of the materials, equipment and manpower available. Many of these dwellings also included a level of aesthetic design far above what was needed to fulfill the function of shelter. The ingenuity and industry with which the inhabitants did this was documented by Margaret Morton in her photos and books including Transitory Gardens - Uprooted Lives and Fragile Dwelling. She also recounts the destruction of these hand-built communities as a result of the city administration becoming more conservative, politically.

Today, self-built dwellings have largely disappeared from Manhattan, but the problem of homelessness has not been solved. In fact, available statistics indicate the number of homeless in New York City has increased since Margaret Morton's books. Manhattan has simply become unavailable to them as a place to live. Space for their communities, built of ingenuity and self-actuation, has been usurped by a different city, one that does not include people like them.

These people were living outside of most of the systems that permeate global culture. They had no bank accounts, no phone system accounts, no credit card accounts, no mortgages, no employment contracts. In other words, they were very similar to a large portion of the Vietnamese population. They were people making a life with their own hands through observing and implementing the opportunities they found. They operated at the basic level of humanity, before all of the commercial systems were hooked up to influence and monetize their actions and desires. It's interesting to note that as globalisation claimed Manhattan, they were displaced, implying that people below a certain income level—or perhaps spending level—have no place in globalised cities.

In terms of affordability, 2014 Manhattan is closed as a residence not only to the homeless, but also to a growing proportion of the population and Brooklyn is quickly following suit. Parallel events are occurring in cities throughout Europe and Asia.
Making Do

“Making do, at its best, reveals utility, and amplifies the intrinsic value of materials. Although often a source of its inspiration, making do is not an act of desperation. It is the ability to make something happen that was never intended, and to find value in those things where use was intended, yet never realised. The architect who makes do is making a living, dynamic architecture that is never fixed and is always adjusting, coping, architecting.”

“Like making do, rasquachismo or rasquache, a term used in Chicano art, finds value in everyday objects of utility. Rasquachismo and making do are both a political and aesthetic terms that are acts of will and resistance.”


WPa—Williams Pizzini architects was a minority-owned architectural partnership in Houston consisting of William Williams, an African-American educated as an architect and myself; a Hispanic-American educated as an artist and architect. We worked under a repurposed name, specialising in small architectural projects and art installations with non-profit organisations in minority communities with a strategy of improvising to build projects for historically marginalised communities. The partnership participated in several exhibitions that exploited our varying but related backgrounds.

Experiments in Fertility

Making

Memory Room—2000, Project Row Houses, Houston

I spent several weeks plaiting strips of split cane into an art piece called Memory Room, a collaboration with William Williams done in a century-old shotgun shack repurposed as an art space.

It was a time-consuming process necessitating a strong element of care, as well as the accommodation of practical issues revealing themselves throughout the process. It required a constant mindset of improvisation, as the materials and methods were new to me and I was learning their strengths and weaknesses through the process of doing. This was familiar to me in my daily life, as I then made many items for my own use from furniture to bicycles and skates to jewellery – as well as the artwork I had been trained to do.

Enjoying the hypnotic satisfaction of making by hand, I produced a large organic element in which I displayed the hand tools of my grandfather, an immigrant from Mexico who, with others, had instilled making and improvisation into my design sensibilities. The old wood-framed building, integral to the city my grandfather arrived in and added to with his own self-trained construction skills, accepted the intervention effortlessly. I now see in Memory Room’s culturally-rooted, handmade, intervention into historic city fabric, a precursor to my recent architectural work.

Control and Fertility

The Collaborative Project—Fotofest 2002, Houston

This installation generating photo-based environments transformed images by subverting control. It was designed by Scot Brooks and myself, and produced with 36 associates. Each element of the installation—the rotating screens, the projectors, the images—had...
a built-in element of messiness. Control was always mediated by an element obscuring prediction of what the outcome would be. For someone like myself, educated both in art and architecture in the lone auteur tradition, the project explored new area in the deepening of design through the introduction of elements beyond my control, some physical and some in the form of other voices. Balanced with control, disorder became an enriching element.

Introducing input from collaborators was perhaps the greatest reduction of control in the project. It showed the fertility added when collaboration occurs. Other people produced images I would never have produced in places I had no access to with motivations that are absent in me. I can recognise now that there may have been a desire to approximate some aspects of a dense community not unlike the one I would later inhabit in Vietnam.

Generating Serendipity

Sketchbooks (1977–present)
My sketchbooks, which are ongoing conversations with myself with ideas for further development, are subject to periodic reconfiguration. I remove redundant and unpromising pages and shuffle the remaining sketches, adding new pages randomly throughout. The resulting unfamiliarity slows down the process of finding a particular page and forces encounters with other ideas. It also creates random adjacencies between previously unrelated ideas, allowing unsuspected relationships to come to light. When the sketchbooks are edited, unproductive elements are subtracted, control is subverted, fertility increases.

I suspect that promoting fertility for design ideas parallels, in some ways, promoting fertility for organisms. Disorder promotes mutation. Mutation is key to adaptation and creation.

Disorder can be fertile.
Shifting Attitudes

Liminal—2002

I spent a year exploring and photographing a large abandoned train yard and surrounding abandoned warehouses in central Houston. There were several huge concrete-framed train sheds left intact from the day they had closed, with furniture, manuals, tools, equipment still in place. I visited the structures constantly, but I never really inhabited them, leaving everything exactly as I found it. Perhaps I was in awe of the shadowy timelessness within the huge silent structures or too aware that many of my older relatives had worked there years before, including my father’s father, the yard’s foreman, who had let me blow the noon-time whistle when I was too young to remember.

The giant train sheds would have made amazing market places, lofts, museums, conference centres, art galleries. Instead, the huge parcel of land was completely cleared then filled with rows of identical developer town houses.

A friend and I mounted a photo exhibition entitled Liminal, the work later appearing in CITE magazine. ‘Liminal’ refers to the period between one state and another, a state of existence when something is neither what it was nor what it will be afterwards. The photos were not meant to be nostalgic, they were intended to mine the rich layers of textures and history that permeated the site as we found it. Still, I have mixed feelings about the fact that I never physically intervened during that year when the yards were available for whatever we might have wanted to do.

Change and Opportunity

In 2005, I saw Inversion by Dean Ruck and Dan Havel in Houston. It was the transformation of two craftsman-era bungalows slated for demolition into a temporary but arresting art piece. Their attitude offered an alternative to the frustration I felt seeing my city destroyed by thoughtless development over the years. The artists had embraced the interim before destruction as an opportunity to create...
something, even if only for a few months. It reminded me of Gordon Matta-Clark’s work transforming abandoned or condemned buildings into artwork such as Conical Intersect (Paris, 1975) and Days End, Pier 52 (New York City, 1975). Conical Intersect was made possible and then destroyed by the urban redevelopment centering around Piano and Rogers’ Centre Georges Pompidou art museum (1971–1977). In Days End, Pier 52, Matta–Clark cut large voids into a disused Hudson River pier, disregarding the building’s continued viability as a secure weatherproof shelter as he sought simply to exploit the unique qualities he found in the space. Left un-addressed was the issue of what was being lost versus what would replace it over the long term, but there was a recognition of the opportunity to create something in the interim, which, because of its temporary nature, enjoyed freedom to become something a permanent structure could not. I showed Inversion and Matta–Clark’s work to Hoanh in Vietnam in 2005. Like me, he was intrigued, but neither of us understood at the time how to place those attitudes within our work.

Exquisite Corpse
On reflection, I recognised that in the photo piece, Liminal, I had been intrigued by the accumulations of different interventions we found in the site. It had been like photographing an exquisite corpse; what is left after the surrealist game of additions has finished and been unfolded. Reviewing my attitude, I felt that, while I had documented the resulting ‘cadaver’, artists like Ruck, Havel and Matta–Clark were playing the game.

When I arrived in Ho Chi Minh City, I found it the hugest accumulation of individual additions and insertions I had ever encountered. Street scenes rich with unpredictable juxtapositions made it the most complex and all-encompassing game of exquisite corpse I had yet encountered. But what I found most compelling about the city I found when I arrived in 2005, was that nobody ever ‘finished’ the job, the game never ended.

The city was alive.
Design and Collaboration

The Impulsive Chemist

Hoanh spent his childhood in Vietnam, grew up in the U.S. and returned nearly two decades ago to live in Vietnam. His large extended family and his two lives in two different Vietnams give him deep roots in Vietnamese culture.

Educated first as a chemist, later as a preservation architect, and still later as an architectural designer, he works strongly from intuition and gut feelings. He has an affinity for roughness and visible age, and a preference for elements with a visceral emotional impact.

Before I arrived in Vietnam, HTA under Hoanh did several projects establishing a design tone for the practice that I found largely aligned with the design motivations I brought with me when I arrived. He approached these projects as situations ‘out of alignment’—what was needed no longer aligned with what was there—but he did not view the situation as inherently flawed. It seemed to me to be a type of negotiation.

Bun Ta—2004

The decision not to demolish, but to refurbish a century old villa for this Vietnamese cuisine venue was radical for 2004 Vietnam, where old buildings were considered undesirable in every possible way. Hoanh’s design process balanced preservation and design, allowing domination by neither camp, but retaining the option to do whatever the project required.

Hoanh revealed the old villa in all its innate beauty by undoing much damage that had been done to the building through the years. He also connected it directly to the wide sidewalk and the street by lowering the garden wall in a move that not only highlighted the restored villa, but also reconnected the site to the lush park across the street and city in general, also providing an identity for the restaurant to the public. Perhaps most importantly, he disproved a popular misconception that all old buildings were worthless and undesirable, a view so unusual at the time that Hoanh and the project were featured on Vietnamese television. The conversion of colonial-era buildings into venues while preserving their identity as such has since become common in Vietnam, but this was one of the first. It was a popular restaurant, but it closed in 2010 and immediately disappeared behind a construction hoarding.

Galerie Quynh 1

In this small art gallery, dismantled in 2010, Hoanh decided to forego building much needed wall-hanging space in favour of keeping the existing shop windows to connect the gallery and its art to the street and everyone on it. It was a counter-intuitive move that ended up satisfying a commercial need for exposure as well as a practical requirement for space at events, as it essentially made the adjoining sidewalk part of the gallery by turning it into viewing space. More importantly it bridged a sociological gap by exposing the general population of Vietnam to contemporary art and inviting them to participate.

Bad Chemistry

In 2005, Hoanh called me to Vietnam to upset his practice. While he did have more work than he could handle alone, he told me later that the underlying reason that he invited me to join his practice was that he was uneasy with the direction it was taking. Hoanh felt that his increasing workload with its strong commercial pressures might overwhelm his own resources for time needed to investigate creative ideas. Many people would have sought a non-design oriented implementer to speed the process of documentation and construction, but Hoanh wanted an offsetting voice to maintain
focus on non-commercial aspects. He was looking for someone to impede the production of what could have been purely competent commercial projects.

Our collaboration since then has often seemed to be about seeking the longer distance between two points.

Because clients often demand a concept within days of beginning the project, we often learn about the advantages and pitfalls of each project’s circumstances through the process of design. In complex situations, the best solution might present itself only after several attempts. Each failed attempt yields more knowledge about the design problem, though this conflicts with clients’ tendencies to fixate on the first things they are shown.

Our collaboration frustrates the drive to preconceive a design and build the initial idea. It forces the process off the default design path, requiring exploration of avenues that would not have otherwise been considered. It also slows the design process providing time to gestate what was learned in the preceding attempts. We each contribute approaches the other would never do or even think of and we push each other to test the limits of what the client might accept.

Our design partnership is a negotiation between two different people with distinctly different drivers and preferences that lead to similar outcomes. Reflecting on our work, I see jointly designed solutions we both feel strongly about that are collaborative products of differing sets of motivations.

Attitude
We try to see each project and its situation as a system, like an organism, a functioning product of all of its factors and elements. We feel that everything in the overall situation is playing a role. We observe and evaluate, then mediate elements, systems and concerns within the project, eliminating things only as a last resort.

Hoanh’s preservation background holds a core implication that what exists has inherent merit, while my background in rasquachismo and DIY tells me that many things normally discarded can be useful and that using ingenuity to adapt them to a new situation or to adapt the situation itself might produce a better outcome. Seeing cities erased in large swaths and feeling the effects of each element lost has convinced me that the obliterative approach of contemporary development produces many missed opportunities.

We try to negotiate a situation and feel that wholesale erasure of the context and imposition of an entirely new one is not negotiation at all. This aligns us more closely with someone like Jane Jacobs rather than someone like Robert Moses. [9]

Our approach aims for both resilience and sustainability by repairing systems and reinforcing what is already working about the situation, and later accommodating changes in needs with a minimum of waste and complications.

Negotiating misaligned situations in buildings, interiors and cities often leads us to probe deeper to discover sociological disconnects. Our solutions can involve communicating information to try to fill a gap in knowledge, remedy a misconception or introduce an alternative.
I feel that starting with the details and working upwards can generate intrinsically interesting design that also performs the tasks it is given well. Details can be used as much as concept to generate design.

Objects can fulfill a function with a minimum of expenditure in money or materials and that also show that function on the surface, producing beauty in the process. Old automobile engines or the constructions in Bernd and Hilla Becher’s books, particularly Blast Furnaces (1986, German language edition), are objects whose beauty is a product of functionality. The forces and responses, the needs and solutions, the entire process of providing heat, exhaust or power with all its sub-processes is clearly diagrammed by the object itself.

My early work experiences included stints as a house framer, woodshop worker and artist’s studio assistant. Making was a daily work experience which continued in my daily life with bicycles, beds, skates, lamps and tables made for my own use. I found making gave things inherent value that surpassed the value of things bought new. My raw materials often came from thrift stores, yard sales and items left on the street for garbage collection. Objects that I had made were objects that I knew intimately and could repair, adapt and maintain with little effort since I had been educated in their workings through the process of making.

The design communities I feel most aligned with are the ‘makers’ and ‘social observers’. My own direction is at the confluence of these two interests—I use social observation to design made objects and I make things that give rise to social observation.
Makers

Makers that I align with tend to value ingenuity and show it in their work. They also tend to observe their environment and materials in the rasquachismo— influenced manner, evaluating things and situations in terms of qualities and opportunities. Although they work in tandem with their context, they nevertheless retain the freedom to change things to achieve their aims. This type of change is not at the scale of erasure, but at the scale of adaptation, resulting in a product that enhances the existing environment by taking advantage of qualities present within it. Makers whose work I use to position my own work include artists, architects (both exterior and interior), product designers and local proprietors who operate with attention to possibilities inherent in the context as they find it.

International Art

Alexander Calder’s early work included simple cooking tools fashioned from wire, such as a straightforward, but ingenious, rack that toasted the name of his daughters into pieces of bread. Elements of his *Circus*, (1926-1931), done in the same period, were even designed for portability, fitting into old suitcases modified into carrying cases. His fulfilling of functional needs with the added expressed pleasure of making gave the user more than simple utility.

More recently, contemporary artist Xu Bing was commissioned to make a sculpture called *Phoenix* (2008-2010) for the World Financial Centre in Beijing. Following a visit to the construction site where he met the workers in their working environment, he redesigned his piece to be made from cast-off construction materials and equipment as a tribute to the ingenuity and perseverance of the people who constructed the buildings of China’s financial boom.

International Adaptive Reuse

Fisher and Prendergast’s wonderfully alert repurposing of a disused New York City public school into the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Centre...
Archie Pizzini | OBSERVATION & NEGOTIATION at the CULTURAL SHORELINE | Vietnam, Rasquachismo & an Architectural Practice

**FRAMEWORK**

**Right Near Top:**
The entrance to Himiko Cafe on an alley off of Dien Bien Phu Street. Foil leaf on exterior wall at alley. District 3, HCMC, 2010 © Archie Pizzini

**Right Far Top:**
Detail of bar in Himiko Cafe. The detailing suggests a bridge to the blocky, darkly woody 1960’s modernist interiors of old Saigon, but with variations hand-done in a very personal manner. Above the bar is a beautiful variation on the hanging cuts for the martini glasses. District 3, HCMC, 2010 © Archie Pizzini

**Right Near Bottom:**
Small makeup mirror fashioned from buttons sewn together and a motorbike mirror removed from its casing. This is typical of the designs of Lisa Rosenthal, whose company develops and locally produces them. © Archie Pizzini

**Right Far Bottom:**
The focal point and namesake of La Fenetre Soleil cafe was a wonderful old room with creaky wooden floors, high ceilings, and great arched windows with doors of wood and bevelled glass. The owner, an early foreign arrival to Vietnam, did relatively little to the space and should be credited for recognising a great existing space when he saw it. The entire block was erased in 2010 for a development scheme that has yet to materialise. District 1, HCMC, 2010 © Archie Pizzini

(1997) demonstrates through its details that its designers evaluated each situation for opportunity. To me, this project also shows an appropriate amount of irreverence in the willingness to destroy and remove. Perhaps dictated by the budget, this approach parallels the dynamic of an individual using rasquachismo to repair a house, shop, motorbike or even a lamp where economics mandates that attention be paid. When economic constraints are lifted, however, detailed evaluation of the existing situations often disappear.

**International Architecture**

**Rural Studio, Sam Mockbee’s non-profit, university-based, design/build entity uses improvisation and reused or repurposed materials to enable housing of local residents and construction of small community facilities in an underprivileged community in the American South. It has inspired a series of similar design/build studios across the country, but improvisation can be labour and time intensive and until recently had not often made its way into commercial practice where there is no access to the labour of students. For-profit situations also include clients who may have distinct biases against making and adaptation. The New York design practice LOT-EK uses repurposed objects in a commercially successful design practice documented in their book Urban Scan (2002). They see objects of all sizes and original purposes in terms of their qualities and possibilities. Their situation and ours differ in aspects ranging from the skills of craftsmen available to the resources and tastes of the clients involved.

**Local Product Design**

The symbiosis we now have with local craftsmen parallels relationships some non-architectural design ventures have with the community of makers. Lisa Rosenthal, the owner of Blue Dragon Craft, a venue for small goods crafted by local people from reused or repurposed materials, reinforces the culture of making by hand by infusing it with new designs to make it more viable for producing products with appeal as ‘higher end’ products. She strengthens...
the position of Vietnamese hand craftsmen under pressure from mass manufacturers. This is similar to the dynamic in many of our projects. The community of craftsmen make possible our designs because of their availability and relative affordability. We make them more relevant by utilising them in contemporary architecture and expanding the capabilities of what they can offer.

Local Adaptive Reuse
In Vietnam, projects designed inside historic fabric can tend towards evoking a French Indochine fantasy, as Noor did in their wonderful restaurant, Temple Club (1999) in Ho Chi Minh City or, alternately, neo-Brooklyn industrial casual, as shop owners are doing in venues occupying old buildings throughout the city centre. These casual cafes, boutiques and bars share a general appreciation of the old buildings, but differ in their methods of working within that context.

The early adaptor Himiko Nguyen, when moving her Himiko Cafe to Dien Bien Phu Street (2008), took the situation as it was. With no preconceived ideas of a ‘style’ she was seeking to transform it into, she simply occupied the space and layered her stuff on top of it. She is not an architect, which may have helped in loosening self-constraints of what could or should be done. The details were refreshing in their spontaneity, sometimes failing, but more often delightful. Another early adaptor, Takayuki Sawamura, with his first La Fenetre Soleil cafe on Le Thanh Ton (2001), simply recognised superb qualities of light and form that he mostly left intact when he occupied the space with a few accent pieces and some old mismatched furniture.

Some designers, in infusing a fantasy of old Indochine into old HCMC spaces, emphasise existing and sometimes even construct new architectural features that might support this. District Eight Design did this well in an understated way with their L’Usine cafe (2010), simply exposing what existed, such as original cast iron columns, old windows and shutters; and adding a few new elements such as a wall mural and an entry partition in a period language. Other local venues
trying to follow in that vein have taken a less controlled approach, adding things like Corinthian columns or a giant window clock with results that might startle an architect or historian.

Tran Binh, a Vietnamese architect, began in 2007 with the resourceful idea of opening his studio to diners by appointment in the evenings, and now owns several restaurants under the name Cuc Gach Quan. These share with our work inspiration from the Vietnamese culture of adaptation. Some spaces he occupies are historic Saigon Modernist buildings, but he doesn't constrain his designs, taking the liberty he needs to produce the spaces he envisions.

Some intervene minimally, either because of economics or design intent. Thuy Minh's Things Cafe (2010), one of the first to occupy an old chung cu apartment block, took a very matter-of-fact approach by brightening the space with old furniture and painted accents, but remained more of an occupation than a renovation. Perhaps this is due to the death sentence hanging over many of the buildings they occupy. Saigon Chic (2014), a cafe in 151 Dong Khoi designed and operated by an architect couple including a former student of ours, Huynh Cong Khanh, is a recent addition to the collection of dressed-down cafes in the city. It demonstrates a balance of observation, evaluation and creation, evidenced through carefully adapted existing windows and old partition walls thoughtfully modified to retain vestiges implying separations. The furnishings show similar resourcefulness using old security screens as semi-permeable dividers or decorative elements. This contrasts with many other venues whose designers arrive at their spaces with a preconceived design idea that is simply enacted with no attention to the richness already existing on the site.

My approach within these old buildings is to develop opportunities in the context and materials while maintaining flexibility to intervene as much as is necessary to achieve the aims of the project; an approach that parallels the mindset of rasquachismo.
Social Observers

The context, so much more dense and complex than where I had come from, invited my close observation when I arrived simply through its unfamiliarity. As I observed the context more, I began to understand that it was a context of people and their relationships to a degree not seen in a place like Texas. Observing the social fabric of Vietnam became an outgrowth of my desire to understand the context of my work. The social observers that have influenced me include not only architects, but also historians, political scientists and anthropologists, artists and curators, to list a few. They began to shed more light on the deeper drivers of social networks, aspects that became more crucial to understand as I began to see the close connection between how people’s lives are intimately connected with the form of the city. The social observers that I most align with are those who begin by focusing on individuals and individual interventions. This parallels my affinity for rasquachismo, which is a very individual-based phenomenon.

International

Erik Harms, a Yale University cultural anthropologist, has researched cultural phenomena and the personal stories they contain, piecing together a larger understanding of the cultural situation in Vietnam. He uncovers underlying systems through the accumulation of individual stories in his book Saigon’s Edge: On the Margins of Ho Chi Minh City (2011). This approach has similarities with my own method of social observation that involves the recording of hundreds of single moments coupled with reflection on the entire body of information.

International Architects

Roan Ching-Yueh, a Taipei-based architect and educator who is part of the architectural collective WEAK!, focuses on informal constructions that Taipei’s residents have made to their dwellings, in Illegal Architecture (2011). This parallels my interest in the self-built dwellings of Vietnam (and, earlier, New York) that I discussed in the Rasquachismo section above. MAP-office, the Hong Kong based duo of Laurent Gutierrez and Valerie Portefaix, has documented typologies of informal interventions in Hong Kong as well as the effects that increased control of public space has had on the urban landscape and those whose livelihoods are connected with it. A cultural shoreline in Hong Kong similar to the Vietnamese shoreline I describe, is described in their work such as Underneath (2005).

Local Fine Arts Professionals

Dinh Q. Le, who left Vietnam in the 1970s as a young boy and returned as a young man, is an artist of international reputation who sometimes focuses on the ingenuity and resilience built into Vietnamese culture. His work has ranged from photographic documentation of typologies to the appropriation of actual artefacts including a flag vendor’s bicycle in Signs and Signals from the Periphery (2011) and a handmade helicopter in Projects 93: Dinh Q. Le (2010). These provide direct contact with the resourcefulness of Vietnamese people.

Zoe Butt, curator for the fine arts organisation San Art based in Ho Chi Minh City, has an intense interest in piecing together a larger picture of the trends that span the Global South, an area spanning South and Southeast Asia as well as Africa. She ties together input from multidisciplinary sources from many regions of this area in the series Conscious Realities (2013–2015). Her drive to broaden and deepen the understanding of the phenomena evident in Vietnam runs parallel to my inquiry into how Vietnam’s situation fits into the global picture.

These practitioners, though their practices may vary, share with me an interest in urban Asian cultural phenomena. Many are focused, as I am, on Vietnam’s culture specifically and its position in the greater global picture.
The Cultural Shoreline

We practice on the cultural shoreline between the older Vietnamese culture of individuals and improvisations, and the global culture of organisations and systems. The shoreline is constantly moving, so it is difficult to describe the exact meeting point in detail, but it can be better understood by identifying what it lies between.

Vietnam is a large-scale landscape of micro-scale actions. Global consumer society is a macro-scale landscape of large-scale actions. What follows is a comparison of some of the main aspects of the two cultures.

Empowerment of Individuals
Vietnam has been a country conducive to self-employed individuals and micro-businesses. Until very recently, the use of streets and sidewalks was loosely controlled and traffic was moderate and slow moving. This supported drive-up street stands and enabled cross-street commerce.

Making a living outside of a large business entity is key to the lives of many Vietnamese. Their network remains affordable and adaptable, strengthening the micro-business friendly environment, since people in a self-employed person’s support network are also self-employed at roughly the same economic level. People such as soup sellers, barbers, newspaper sellers, repairmen, cyclo drivers and others can support themselves and their families without the certifications or specialised skills required for corporate employment. They run tiny businesses, sometimes several layered on top of each other, to support themselves and their families. They find slots in society to occupy and exploit. According to World Bank statistics, 65.4 per cent of employed Vietnamese were self-employed in 2011.

American-style societies, by contrast, are characterised by tighter controls such as business licencing, curtailed use of public space,
patent and copyright issues, traffic control and tax collection. These can reduce opportunities for individuals to support themselves through micro-businesses. In 2010, 6.8 percent of employed Americans were self-employed according to the World Bank.  

The Form of the City
Vietnam’s large proportion of self-employed people, supported by the loose control of public space that allows all manner of micro-business to happen on the sidewalk, highlights a symbiosis between urban form and social structure. The form of the city, with its numerous hems, places where traffic was until recently lighter and non-vehicular usages took precedence, supports the lifestyle and livelihoods of much of the population by giving them a place to do business.

This highlights a major problem with importing western-style urban forms to Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh City’s new developments -- such as Phu My Hung and the Sasaki plan for Thu Thiem -- are designed for populations that do not use public space for their livelihood. These development projects were designed by people based in foreign countries. Their designs have no hems and assume all activity will occur according to a globalised model of shopping malls, office towers and tightly controlled sidewalks and streets. If Ho Chi Minh City as it exists is erased and replaced with a city devoid of alleys and consisting of tightly controlled public spaces such as exist in America, it will become a city hostile to the lifestyles and livelihoods of much of the Vietnamese population.

Local Networks
Vietnamese networks of individual enterprises consist of small-scale components; the products and effects stay small and local. In repair shops, hard-to-find parts are not ordered from another continent, they are fabricated by another individual in the network, as parts for my old 1974 motorcycle were when it needed major repairs. In that instance of repair, waste was reduced, obsolescence was postponed, and the overhead and associated waste of a large entity was avoided.
In addition, repairs were done quickly and the repairman and parts fabricator each netted a large proportion of the price of his services. This type of repair is made possible by the existence of this network. Multiplication by dozens of types of services and thousands of encounters multiplies the system's overall sustainability. A large portion of Vietnam's population depends on this system to support itself.

In America, such types of repair are prohibitively expensive if available at all. Repairs of obsolete items are niche markets priced at a level that largely eliminates repair from serious consideration. The environment has largely been cleaned of the individuals necessary to provide what is available in Vietnam. The U.S. system promotes obsolescence, discarding and replacement.

Control and Organisation

Vietnam is full of undefined situations. Street numbers don’t progress in sequence, regulations are vague, prices are negotiable, property edges are flexible in practice, traffic rules were non-existent until recently and are often still treated more as suggestions. The flexible nature of this type of environment demands a different approach than is generally found in globalised culture. Everything, from buying food to driving in traffic to having laundry done, revolves around a personal negotiation with another individual.

For example, a globalised city supports a way-finding reflex based on detailed maps, but the situation at the moment is different for Ho Chi Minh City. In 2005, a detailed and definitive map of the city was impossible to find. It was possible to get a general map showing main boulevards, major landmarks and district boundaries; but maps showing the alleys and making sense of the numbering were simply not available.

Moreover, the city is structured in a way that is unsuited for western way-finding techniques. Ho Chi Minh City had a very ordered
structure at one time, but has grown in a quite organic way in the decades since the early French colonial era when Saigon was laid out and a strong order was imposed on the urban fabric. While new American cities also have an element of organic growth to them, they grow in an ordered way, like a very formal garden or an industrial farm. Ho Chi Minh City reminds me of Ta Prohm, the ancient overgrown temple complex in Cambodia, an entity with a clearly planned underlying skeleton subsequently permeated by organic layers. The city’s form resists definitive understanding.

Consequently, the Vietnamese response to a way-finding problem is to ask people on the street, perhaps repeatedly as one closes in on the desired destination. The number of people spending large amounts of time on the streets supports this approach, enabling quick way-finding in a city where street numbers are often non-sequential, detailed maps hard to find and the blocks are veined with tiny twisting alleyways that can change unexpectedly through informal construction.

Sustainability

Thrift and Reduction of Waste

Recently, global style speculation has taken built form in Vietnam. The recent bubble saw people reselling many new apartments before construction even began and companies doing the same with entire apartment building projects. It might be inferred from this that many of the apartments filled little urgent need for housing and came into existence, at enormous ecological cost to humanity, solely as a method of generating large profits.

Micro-businesses have no access to the money needed to fund speculation on this scale. Moreover, they have little immunity from the consequences of bad investments. Proprietors depend on their businesses for their livelihood and can little afford to take risks with it. They depend on their neighbours as well and might suffer if they openly abused them for profit. They are not necessarily more virtuous, the situation is simply more evenly scaled, more interconnected and, as a result, reckless behaviour is discouraged.

Anti-sustainable practices such as planned obsolescence are much harder for sole proprietors to perpetrate as well. A very large corporation, however, can control enough of the market to force repeat purchases, sometimes at very frequent intervals. Mass-manufactured electronics can be designed to resist reuse and thrift. Devices with rechargeable batteries can be designed to be non-interchangeable and in some cases non-removable even though they are essentially the same. For instance, I have seen five different batteries for five different models of the same brand of DSLR cameras and no two are the same. The effect of this design strategy is multiplied by the corresponding condition that each different type of battery requires a different type of charger.

In contrast, if Mr. Tien, the man with the tiny cart on Yersin Street who repairs my eyeglasses, suddenly decided to start building wasteful defects into my glasses, I would simply find another repairman.

Global Scale

Sustainability in many ways is tied to scale. The mechanisms used to do things at a large-scale may encourage waste and unsustainability. For instance, in many cases it becomes cheaper and easier to ship things long-distances or inflict large-scale changes on the landscape rather than to intervene thoughtfully and do as little damage as possible. This can have a reverberating effect as they have in the U.S., as small-scale ventures are priced out of the market and large-scale entities begin to influence legislation, remaking the landscape in a way that disempowers both consumers and micro-businesses.
As of 2012, 95 per cent of vehicles registered in Vietnam were motorcycles. For most people, the experience of going through the city happens on a motorcycle. In 2005, detailed traffic rules were almost wholly unacknowledged in Vietnam, and even now hierarchical concepts such as right-of-way, often seem not to exist as drivers rarely yield right of way, give little precedence to pedestrians in crosswalks and treat all intersections the same.

When I arrived in Vietnam, for the most part traffic seemed to follow one simple rule—“don’t crash into whatever is in front of you”. This all-purpose, non-hierarchical and un-systematic mandate remains central to driving in Vietnam today.

Reading about how birds flew in flocks finally enabled me to navigate Vietnamese traffic as a motorcyclist. Any bird’s movements are influenced by the actions of the three birds to the immediate right, left and front. Self-placement in traffic movements are influenced by the actions of the three birds to the immediate right, left and front. Self-placement in traffic is a live negotiation—it is not wholly determined by lane markings and traffic laws as it is in the U.S.

At the time of my arrival, as a pedestrian, I was acutely aware that, in the eyes of most drivers, my movements were protected by exactly zero traffic rules, and that, having crossed dozens of streets through traffic by day’s end, my personal existence had been extended through the conscious decisions of several hundred drivers in completely unregulated actions. (500 people spared my life today!) The immediate right, left and front. Self-placement in traffic is a live negotiation—it is not wholly determined by lane markings and traffic laws as it is in the U.S.

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Even now, people ride the wrong way up the street driving one-handed while balancing trays of noodle bowls with the other. Disabled people selling lotto tickets howl in the traffic lanes. People await the announcement of winning lottery numbers in the roundabouts, sitting on their motorbikes in the traffic lanes as they wait. The streets are still understood to be for activities far more various than the simple transport of vehicles. The Yale anthropologist Erik Harms, in his research of Hoc Mon district at the edge of HCMC, studies the highway and its usage as a social space in Vietnam and observes, “Disruption in flow due to cross-flow traffic is the surest sign that one has reached a social space of any relevance in Vietnam.”

He identifies the drive towards globalised traffic control in Vietnam as reflecting an agenda to increase speed of traffic to encourage industrial expansion. He also notes that the increased speed of traffic reduces the possibility for cross-road traffic, killing a road’s viability as a social space and damaging or eliminating the micro-businesses that depend on business from the travellers. In this trend, streets are removed as entities enabling individual actions, such as micro-businesses or social encounters, in order to become entities more fully enabling the endeavours of large businesses such as mass manufacturers and large scale transporters.

This conception of streets as public space and not exclusively transportation corridors is not a peculiarly Asian concept. Relatively recently, it existed in most parts of the world. University of Virginia historian Peter Norton has researched the transformation of American traffic laws in the two decades from 1940 to 1960 as it changed from a template favouring pedestrians to a template favouring motorists. He notes that U.S. traffic rulings before the changes usually put responsibility for an accident on the larger of the vehicles—a stance resembling current Vietnamese traffic laws. He also documents how the American auto industry financed a campaign to change the public’s conception of what a street is primarily for as well as to change the laws associated with street usage. In Asia, similar trends are occurring, with Beijing police reportedly beginning to crack down on pedestrians who cross streets outside of the crosswalks.
Scale and Sustainability

When I first arrived in Vietnam, bamboo was becoming popular in the U.S. as a ‘green material’. Hoanh and I assumed that, since we were in Asia, the source for bamboo, we would be using a lot of bamboo building materials in the coming years. In one of our first projects, a medium-sized one, we tried to specify a bamboo floor instead of a wood floor. I had been wary of using flooring from big suppliers, worried about the increased environmental cost added by shipping tons of bamboo around the region for processing.

We searched for local suppliers, finally getting a line on one or two. Investigating further, though, we found that the bamboo was not collected from existing stands of bamboo around the countryside, but was grown commercially in farms clear cut from forest areas.

With some thought, it was easy to understand why. Quality and quantity would be difficult to guarantee on a large scale if the situation was not controlled tightly. Moreover, the effort of collecting stock from diverse locations would probably make the product uncompetitive in price. While a furniture maker might be able to walk out into the countryside and cull enough quality bamboo to make a single piece or even five pieces of furniture, sustaining a company that supplied mass items like flooring to builders was a completely different story—sustainability would be eliminated from the equation.

This suggested an inverse correlation between scale and sustainability. Sustainability and mass production might be mutually exclusive.

Conclusion: Interplay and Balance

There is already interplay across the cultural shoreline, evidenced by things as disparate as the trade in used magazines from transpacific jets to the way cell phones have been integrated into street businesses (as when a sidewalk drink vendor makes a call and a fresh bag of drinking straws flies out of a sixth-storey window). Pushcart vendors now sell accessories for cell phones and laptops.

Rasquachismo is negotiating the changes in culture. Coffee stations now operate out of pods clipped onto the backs of motorbikes—an example of a new business model and bike variation synthesised from the confluence of Vietnam’s bike culture, its pedestrian density and cultural shifts.

Built-In Sustainable Behaviour

A tendency towards sustainable practices is still common in Vietnam, though it is not rooted in ethics. It is a product of the nature of micro-businesses and limited household incomes. The consequences of waste are visited immediately and directly on the homeowner or business owner.

In 2005 Vietnam, people generally turned off the lights when they left the room, both at home and at work. Nearly all homes and small businesses used natural ventilation. Sandwich bags and plastic food containers were rinsed and reused. These sustainable actions were rooted in self serving intentions as people bore the direct consequences of wasteful behaviour due to the localised and tiny natures of their businesses. Moreover, the size of the businesses meant that no one business had the power to wreak ecological havoc on its own, which tended to localise the fallout from its actions. Someone making a mess ended up having to live in it.

This is not to say that Vietnam’s culture is completely sustainable, clean and waste free. But scale and direct consequences can suggest
part of the reason why non-developed nations have such small carbon footprints in comparison to developed ones. Vietnam emitted 0.3 metric tonnes of carbon dioxide per capita in 1990, increasing to 1.7 in 2010; compared with 17.6 in 2010 for the U.S.A. (World Bank statistics). Adaptability and resilience seem to be less chosen than mandated as sustainable behaviour is embedded in the situation through the structure of the society and the scale of its components.

The direct chain of cause and effect is what Western-style incorporation breaks, insulating decision makers from consequences of their actions. The relatively recent phenomenon of the ‘serial CEO’, a chief executive who’s career is spent not at one company, but in jumping from one company to another, can further uncouple decision makers’ fates from that of their corporations. At the very least, decision makers are de–incentivised to act responsibly, in the worst cases becoming focused only on short term personal gains, perhaps even to the point where even their own corporations are treated as expendable tools whose sole purpose is to provide immediate personal profit.

Negotiating Globalism

Globalisation is usually presented as a complete package, difficult to separate into disparate effects such as lower infant mortality, displacement of populations for sprawl–based development, increased obesity and diabetes, and erosion of the use of public space and its impact on individuals with micro–businesses.

Is there a way to negotiate globalism? Is there a way to take what is beneficial on terms that benefit ordinary people?

For example, in Vietnam in 2012, HIV medication and treatment cost about 100 USD/month (through a private clinic; public clinics had a lower price thanks to subsidies by foreign foundations) while in the U.S. the cost was 2000 to 5000 USD/month. The average (2013) Vietnamese income of 166 USD/month made treatment expensive but an option, though even this semi–affordability is threatened through new international agreements promoted by large corporations. For the moment though, the economic availability of life–saving medications remains an example of how a country might take benefit on its own terms from globalism.

Parity

All of this is not to suggest that Vietnam’s old culture is perfect or unimpeachably virtuous. It is certainly not to suggest that Vietnam’s population should remain poor. It is also not to suggest that globalisation is completely destructive and always without benefit. This is an observation that systems benefit a larger portion of humanity when they are in balance. It is from the micro and individual nature of Vietnamese endeavours and the close ties to their context that much of its benefit springs. Conversely, insulation from the environment and the consequences of one’s actions can promote adverse behaviour sometimes evident in globalised societies. This suggests that parity, not poverty, is at the root of many of the most beneficial aspects of Vietnamese society.

Old Vietnam is individual customers dealing with individual service providers dealing with individual suppliers dealing with individual merchants dealing with individual landlords dealing with individual tenants. The large global entities who have entered the scene will be present in Vietnam for the foreseeable future, but perhaps the key to finding benefit for individuals is to ensure that enough small entities survive to balance the equation.
After fifteen years of architectural practice in Texas I had a senior position, but always focused on implementation, not design. There seemed to be no way to change that. While working in large companies, I had always moonlighted design ventures of my own, but I couldn’t circumvent the prohibitive costs of full-time self-employment in the U.S. The costs of things like licences, equipment, health insurance and taxes hit an individual practitioner disproportionately. The business environment itself seemed skewed to favour large corporations and to obstruct individuals. I quickly accepted Hoanh’s invitation, quit my well-paid corporate job, left Texas and became a partner in his fledgling design office.

I found Vietnam in 2005 to be a place where loose regulations, a lack of corporate influence, and an abundance of affordable services and micro-businesses made a small design venture possible. In many ways, it was the opposite of Houston. Vietnam was a place shaped by the endeavours of individuals instead of control by large organisations. It was also a utopia for repurposing where nothing with even the slightest remaining bit of utility was ever finally thrown away.

In this environment I found I could pursue design aspirations I had abandoned in the U.S.

I felt that I personally had been recycled.

— from an interview with Sue Hajdu
Notes: FRAMEWORK
2. “Aid sought for mental patients dumped at bus depot”, Associated Press (December 6, 1984) and “Mental hospital to alter discharge practices”, Associated Press (December 9, 1984), “Approximately 20 patients a week have been dropped off at the Greyhound bus station in the past year, hospital officials said.”
4. Ibid. p. 135
5. For more on self-built urban shelters in the developed world, see Kyuhei Sakaguti, Zero Yen Houses, (Little More, 2004).
6. Control of public space has become tighter in New York City and the self-built shelters have disappeared from Manhattan, but this does not mean that the homeless no longer exist. Today the homeless in New York City are more numerous than ever before, but after three decades of administrations favouring moneyed interests, there is less visible evidence of them. In March 1991, about the time of Margaret Morton’s photos, the recorded monthly population in homeless shelters was 22,377; in February 2015, the recorded monthly population was 60,484. (Data source: The Coalition for the Homeless)
8. Ibid. p. 135
9. Jane Jacobs (1916-2006), though not an architect or urban designer, wrote several well regarded books on urban issues centering on her life in mid-20th century New York City. She emphasized the importance of relatively large parts of the urban texture that existed in New York City before the mid-twentieth century.
12. Ibid.
15. Ibid., Chapter 5, ‘The Road to Paradise’
18. THE WORLD BANK. World Bank Open Data. 3.8 World Development Indicators, (2014)
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Right:
Interior of the HTA + pizzini atelier on Le Lai Street in central Ho Chi Minh City. Visible through the screen of pivoting reclaimed shutters are the two partners, Hoanh Tran and myself. Dist. 1, HCMC 2009
Photo: Le Ngoc Dang © HTA + pizzini
**ARRIVAL**

**Exploration**

One day in mid-August 2005, I worked a 12-hour day finishing up my corporate job in Texas, travelled 26 hours and went directly from the airport to my new office in Ho Chi Minh City. The city was in an accelerating construction boom and speculation was fuelling huge master planning schemes. Many of our local colleagues were expanding their offices as much as ten-fold, to capture as much work as possible. The collective delusion that things would keep going upward forever was prevalent in the construction community.

Ho Chi Minh City was a smaller design and arts community than it is now, with a heavier emphasis on construction and fabrication. There were already dedicated practitioners of contemporary art as well as excellent designers, but there were fewer than now—the flip side of that situation was that the community was small and closely knit. It was possible to be on very familiar terms with most of the serious professionals in town.

Vietnamese culture and rasquachismo permeated the city, even the central districts. The uncontrolled urban texture of micro-businesses extended to almost every stretch of sidewalk and open space in the city. Barbers set up their chairs on the sidewalks and chained them to lampposts at night. Street mechanics stuffed spare supplies into open pockets in the walls adjacent to their stations. *Cyclos* permeated the traffic in all districts of the city—auto traffic had not yet become a problem thanks to high import tariffs that had limited car ownership up to that time. Geriatric Vespas and Hondas plied the streets in dilapidated states, having been repaired and kept running through a half century (or more in the case of the occasional Mobylette).

Many of the oldest buildings, especially institutional ones belonging to the state, remained relatively unaltered from their original design—there simply had not been enough money to change them.

Our office had some public housing blocks in design phase, two private apartment towers in site-clearing phase, and a medium-sized apartment tower, Avalon, under construction.

*Right: Vietnamese New Year’s Eve, 2006. A crowd formed into an impenetrable mass of people at the foot of Nguyen Hue Avenue in anticipation of the midnight fireworks. I watched from a friend’s balcony in an old chung cu-style apartment building as motorbikes passed through the streets below with more and more stopping until traffic reached a point of coagulation and all movement stopped. The crowd of people took on the aspects of a viscous fluid. Entropy was suggested by the distribution of the food carts, identifiable by the bluish-white lights scattered relatively evenly through the darker coloured crowd near the riverfront park. District 1, HCMC, 2006 © Archie Pizzini*
I arrived to find Avalon under construction, but with key parts still being designed. It was a high-end apartment building by a western developer meant to meet a high international standard of quality. The main client contact was an Australian architect trained in the modernist late-1960s. His agenda was to deliver a cleanly designed product in contemporary language, suitable for one of the premier addresses in HCMC. Despite the existence of so many Saigonese Modernist buildings from mid-century, new buildings in contemporary language were an anomaly in HCMC at that time. Hoanh’s added agenda was to bring in design strategies rooted in old Saigonese architecture. My agenda was to explore the possibilities within the very different environment in which I suddenly found myself.

The small number of apartments (52), coupled with the fact that nearly all of the consultant team and the main client contact had personally bought units, motivated everyone involved to deliver an excellent product. This contrasted with the normal developer–design team relationship, as well as the normal developer–product relationship where disconnects can exist between the agendas of the client and the end users, the designers and the end users, and the client and the design teams. In this case, the client, consultant and end user groups all overlapped, melding their agendas.

The lobby interiors, the entry garden, the rooftop pool area, as well as certain details of the exterior fenestration, became Hoanh’s and my first collaboration. The possibilities of working in Vietnam became clearer to me as I noted the hand shaped louvres already designed for the mezzanine lobby and the custom wood shutters in the apartment interiors. It was quickly becoming evident that everything needed for making anything was available right there in the city, affordable materials and craftsmen included.
**Cholon**

In 2005, you could find anything in Cholon.

One of the two cities that grew together to become contemporary Ho Chi Minh City, Cholon, (the name translates literally as ‘big market’), remains a nexus of small shops selling all manner of items needed in a country that still very much deals with physical objects. Here, people sew things, ship things, weave things, fabricate things, even dismantle things and reassemble the fragments. All this doing requires a myriad of tools, raw materials, pieces and parts. Cholon is a place where you can find everything from boat propellers to industrial scales to plastic flowers sold in bulk (with or without Christmas lights).

The lobby lights at Avalon were to be a gem-like focal point produced on a modest budget. The building was seen by the developer and the designers as an oasis of order, a refuge from the chaotic landscape of Ho Chi Minh City, 2005. I understood the lobby light as a comforting beacon, like a lamp in a window on a stormy night. The first idea was a stylised model of the building, lit from within and sheathed in a screen like the tower. This evolved into a series of glowing boxes wrapped in stainless steel fabric, but the fabric sourced from Japan cost as much per square metre as the budget for fabricating and installing the entire ensemble. An afternoon’s walk in Cholon produced an affordable stainless steel fabric normally used for conveyor belts in shrimp processing. Cholon parallels twentieth-century New York as a nexus of fertility. It’s a place where everything is available if you know how to find it.

An afternoon’s walk in Cholon produced an affordable stainless steel fabric normally used for conveyor belts in shrimp processing. Cholon parallels twentieth-century New York as a nexus of fertility. It’s a place where everything is available if you know how to find it.

**Left Top:** A shop for nuts, bolts, screws and other forms of attachment. The wooden trays allow foot traffic while displaying a large variety of wares. Cholon, HCMC, 2014 © Archie Pizzini

**Left Below:** A selection of wires, wire fabrics and perforated sheets. This shop was where we found the stainless steel fabric we misused for the lobby light fixtures at Avalon. Cholon, HCMC, 2014 © Archie Pizzini

**Right:** A selection of decorative end caps, gratings and connectors in brass, cast iron and stamped metal. Cholon, HCMC, 2014 © Archie Pizzini

**Engaging Fertility**

We designed the lobby lighting fixtures as a minimalist sculpture aligned with the clean, contemporary design of the building. Our sketches were approved, the client was delighted, but it quickly became apparent that the budget did not support an ultra high-end purchase. It was evident that the fixtures must be hand fabricated in the city with locally sourced materials.

I was eager to explore custom fabrication in Vietnam, something I had never been able to do in the U.S., though it was part of the tradition I had been educated in. In design and construction, the lights would be rooted in the markets and street fabrications of Vietnam. I wanted to explore a notion I had had for years: that the strategy of *rasquachismo* could be used to create high–quality design products in spite of budgetary constraints. Our lobby lights became the first product of this exploration. We used improvisation with the materials at hand to overcome a lack of monetary resources.

It was also my first experience with the close interplay with craftsmen that Vietnam provided. The lights developed as a series of sketches, first for approval by the client and later for detailing for the contractor. There was an evolution in the sketches resulting from the exploration of available materials and the craftsmen’s capabilities. The materials sourcing included an intense learning experience in Cholon. Finally, through the contractor’s production of a mock-up, included within the very modest fabrication bid, we fine-tuned the design.

The irony that most visitors would miss when they arrived at Avalon, one of the premier addresses in town, was that the lobby lights—the focal point of the main lobby, were created using poor people’s approaches to making—misuse and repurposing. Even in the most westernised part of Ho Chi Minh City of 2005, the cultural shoreline made an appearance.

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The evolution of the Avalon Lobby Lighting.

Inspiration. The tower lit at night. A sanctuary from the overwhelming feel of Ho Chi Minh City in 2004.

District 1, HCMC, 2007 © Archie Pizzini

Concept Sketch. The light was originally conceived of as a miniature version of the apartment tower itself, slightly abstracted into a lantern meant to convey the feeling of security lent by a light in a window on an inhospitable night.

Sketch by the author, 2005 © Archie Pizzini

Presentation Sketch. The fixture was refined into a series of glowing lit boxes suspended from the ceiling, screened by a metal mesh curtain.

Sketch by the author, 2005 © Archie Pizzini

Construction Sketch. The construction of the boxes was refined through a series of sketches informed by materials searches by ourselves and by consultations with the fabricator.

Sketch by the author, 2005 © Archie Pizzini

Prototyping. The fabricator produced a full-scale prototype of one of the lobby lights, refining the design further in its production.

Go Vap District, HCMC, 2005 © Archie Pizzini
Filters, Screens and Phantom Spaces

The building design was a series of filters—a series of systems for controlling views, light and solar heat gain, often using methods coming from the colonial buildings of Saigon. It was also a response to the need for distancing oneself from the noise and chaos of the city of that time. This paralleled my response, at that time, towards Vietnam, which I found stimulating but exhausting.

The design of the entry garden continued the idea of mediation through filtering and supported the idea of the apartments as being a sanctuary, a quiet refuge from the urban chaos that saturated even central HCMC at that time.

The garden design expanded a tiny plot of land into a transitional experience through the insertion of several planes between the building front gate and the building entry. These suggested a layered progression to another type of space quite removed from the noise and frenzy of the street. The planar elements of vegetation were conceived as dividers defining large courtyard–like voids—the voids were then compressed leaving only the planes and the residual slivers of space where the large courtyards would have been.

This echoed the apartment balconies upstairs which were also slivers of spaces that nonetheless inserted a layer of removal and filtering between the apartment interiors and the city outside.

The garden design was inspired not only by Japanese forms, but also by tiny spaces I had seen visually expanded by Howard Barnstone, a Houston architect who had designed several physically small but visually expanded townhomes and apartment complexes in the 1960s and 1970s.
Reciprocation

The Avalon lobby lights were a relatively small intervention, but they became a marker to me, proof that the kind of making I aspired to do was possible in Vietnam. Moreover, the design was inspired by high-end minimalism and was the focal point of a high-end project for relatively well-off residents, yet to achieve it we used the humblest of materials and a strategy born of poverty.

This reinforced my perception that, because of a construction environment geared to very large-scale production, the U.S. had lost its fertility—its ability to support creativity in making. It made me feel that I had received a gift in the form of the environment of Vietnam.

Since Avalon was our first tower to be constructed, we splurged on a large banner with our company name to be displayed on the side of the building under construction next to the signs of the other consultants. When completion neared, we waited too long to retrieve our sign from the site and it vanished. As I travelled through the city, I kept my eyes open for it in one form or another, perhaps as part of a shop canopy or street cafe umbrella—I am quite certain it was not thrown away. Though I never saw it again, I felt it to be our first contribution back into the system of repurposing and adaptation in Vietnam—our ante for admission into the game.

The development of this design strategy attuned to opportunism with materials would become the theme of several ensuing projects, but it also had an associated vein of design—one opportunistic in attitude, even when it could not be in materials.
ARRIVAL
Sky Garden Penthouse

This penthouse, built in 2006 and destroyed in 2008, was to be contemporary in language, but the aesthetic of using reused or misused items was not acceptable to the client. Instead, we used an opportunistic mindset to take advantage of Vietnam’s possibilities for custom making to imply space and shape lifestyle in ways that our modest construction budget could never afford in the U.S.

Negotiation

The site was an unfinished two storey interior space with an unbuilt developer floor plan that had dictated where windows, exterior doors and plumbing had been placed. This forced us to take extra care in making changes. The project became a negotiation between the developer’s original intentions and our desire to enhance the lives of the inhabitants, a couple with a baby on the way. It was also a negotiation in built form between the given envelope, the objects added and the void spaces implied.

The original plan chopped the penthouse into isolated rooms, raising the perceived value of the apartment by increasing the number of rooms, but largely squandering a double-height space and forcing an isolated lifestyle for the residents. Our response was to eliminate as many walls as possible, bringing more space into play by adding the circulation area to the living spaces and making as many spaces as possible open to each other.

The approach of combining functions into a large loft-style living environment was, of course, familiar, but here it was locally informed by the many social situations I had observed taking place in the public spaces of Ho Chi Minh City directly adjacent to other social encounters. These reinforced to me that different or even simultaneously occurring social situations did not necessarily require separate rooms.
We transformed the plan using a loft approach, loosely defining spaces through placement of furnishings that supplanted the walls that were planned before. We designed to filter light and background noise from the presence of other inhabitants throughout the apartment to enhance the quality of time spent in the spaces—to take advantage of the humanising presence of others.

On the main floor, we combined an enclosed kitchen, a corridor, a dining room and a living room into one open living area including a double–height space and an adjacent stair, removing all solid walls adjoin extending the double–height space to spread light and activity throughout the apartment.

**Implied Spaces**

Using thrift, elegance and sustainability as drivers, we implied divisions of spaces by inserting several custom designed furniture pieces. It was an exercise in seeing how little mass was needed to manipulate the nature of the resulting implied space. The thoughtful placement of a minimum of built interventions minimised cost while defining space and maximising flexibility.

We separated the dining room from the service access with a large piece combining storage, a wine cooler and art display. We used carefully chosen appliances combined with a sculpturally crafted island to make the kitchen a design feature inviting exposure rather than enclosure. We inserted a custom fabricated hanging light fixture to visually connect the upper and lower windows in the double–height space. We designed a tall hearth feature (with a video screen instead of a fireplace, enabling the contemporary hypnotism of endless manic jump cuts to replace the ancient hypnotic flickering of a fire) to house the entertainment machinery and further emphasise the verticality of the double–height space.

Right Above: Looking through the dining area with the divider piece screening the service corridor to the toilet. The divider also was equipped with niches for a wine cooler and storage on the corridor side. The kitchen beyond shows the custom island and shelving.
District 7, HCMC, 2006 © Archie Pizzini

Right Below: Looking through the dining area towards the double–height living space with the furniture pieces of the hearth, the custom lighting fixture, the dining room divider and the living room table visible.
District 7, HCMC, 2006 © Archie Pizzini
We spread light throughout the apartment and created an expansive feeling of space by borrowing views through adjoining spaces, lessening the feelings of isolation engendered by an apartment consisting of opaque boxes. The result was an informal, but cleanly detailed living space designed to encourage social interaction in a large apartment housing only two adults and one child.

**The Rasquachismo Mindset**

Even though I had been eager to develop the line of misuse and improvisation we had explored in the Avalon lights, here the display of improvisation and rough elements was limited by what this client would find acceptable. Still, I felt that Vietnam offered so many opportunities that it was still possible to use the strategy of thoughtful consideration and access to craftsmanship to enhance the project even though it was not possible to use misused, improvised or repurposed elements.

This mindset, geared to supplementing a modest budget with whatever opportunities the situation offered, was an attitude that I found closely aligned with rasquachismo. In this case, the opportunities we exploited were the availability of affordable custom fabrication and the accessibility of the craftsmen who would build the project. It was improvisation, not with specific materials, but with strategies.

This was the first project after my arrival to use custom designed elements throughout. In it we pushed the possibilities of what could be accomplished through close collaboration with our craftsmen. The overall design was the product of an opportunistic attitude, a mindset attuned to close assessment of the situation for unexpected possibilities, in this case, the non-material resources for construction specific to Vietnam.
Left Group:
The double-height space of the penthouse showing the custom table and the custom lighting fixture crafted by the contractor. To the side are sketches (by the author) of the development of the lighting fixture.
District 7, HCMC, 2006
© Archie Pizzini

Right Above:
A view of the kitchen showing the custom island and shelving.
District 7, HCMC, 2006
© Archie Pizzini

Right Below:
Looking through the dining area towards the double-height living space with the furniture pieces of the hearth and the dining room divider visible.
District 7, HCMC, 2006
© Archie Pizzini

Far Right:
Sketches (by the author) of the development of the lighting fixture, the kitchen island, the hearth piece and the living room table.
District 7, HCMC, 2006
© Archie Pizzini
Articulating a Context and a Role

In 2008, we addressed a forum of local architecture professionals, academics and students at Ho Chi Minh City’s Architecture University, giving us an opportunity to develop several key ideas in-depth.

The Fertility of Vietnam

This was the first time I reflected on what had provoked me to begin photographing Vietnam. I began to understand the photos as a detailed description of Vietnam. I began to break this down into separate topics addressing sustainability through several key areas including kitchen design, climate mitigation, indigenous architecture, food distribution systems, and transport systems. Rasquachismo was singled out as a major separate topic.

Seeing in Adjectives

We articulated the way makers saw objects they encountered in the world as a way of evaluating objects and materials not by their names or brands or their prescribed usages, but by the qualities they possessed. This emphasised their value for usage, rather than a value applied to them based on things like price or status symbolism. We made a distinction between things with inherent worth based on beneficial qualities and things with value only as symbols or branded signifiers, later finding a parallel with Leon Van Schaik’s thoughts on the subject. ¹

Vietnam Already Works

We articulated the advantages of Vietnam’s urban and social fabric in comparison to the West and that Vietnam was very much a valid and functioning network of efficient systems—many of which surpassed those in the West in terms of sustainability and social benefit. This
was a surprisingly radical idea for the young Vietnamese present to hear. Our impression was that they had the idea that everything that came from outside of Vietnam was by definition superior. One of our young staff who attended the presentation later told us it was the first time he had ever been truly proud of his country. This inferiority complex, perhaps the residue of colonial subjugation, may be one of the factors contributing to the startlingly rapid acquiescence to globalised products and systems in Vietnam in recent years. Another might be the relatively young median age of the Vietnamese population, 28.5 years in 2010, up from 18.2 in 1980.²

Vietnam/Global

We traced the drive to turn Vietnam’s cities into ones patterned on a western model, but one from 40 years earlier promoting automobile domination, sprawl and the replacement of true urban public space with controlled environments like shopping malls.

We addressed how the then still plentiful cyclos, indisputably sustainable forms of transport, were being marginalised in Ho Chi Minh City to make room for more automobile traffic at a time when such automobile-dominated urban design had already been discredited in most of the West. Major cities including New York, London and San Francisco were already moving in different ways to reduce the influence of auto traffic³ and increase accommodation of bicycles and pedicabs (the western equivalent of a cyclo), as well as pedestrians.

We mentioned how compact living, prevalent in Vietnam, was being disparaged here in the marketing of detached, single-family houses, even as compact living was rising as a design sector in the West. We mentioned how living in close communities like Vietnam’s gives rise to social networks unavailable to those in western-style suburban neighbourhoods and that the advantages of close communities were an area of serious study in the West, even as those types of communities were being actively disparaged in Vietnam.

We showed examples of the use of public space that makes Vietnam’s vibrant streets play such a big role in a large part of the population’s livelihood, and noted how areas of public space, especially sidewalks, previously open for public use are now increasingly patrolled by security guards, effectively removing those area from the city in terms of informal urban commerce. We observed that Vietnam’s cities, working so well in many ways and possessing so many of the very qualities that western cities were trying to regain, were actively destroying those same qualities.

We asked why, when we already knew what the mistakes of the West were, it was necessary to knowingly make those mistakes in Vietnam only to try to undo them later?

Was there a way to skip the step of destroying the social and cultural vibrancy of a city only to try to recreate enough of it to make a difference decades later after so much irreparable urban and social fabric had been eradicated? Was there a way to circumvent the drive to maximise enablement of fast fortunes for speculators that in so many cities in the world is the only real factor in decisions of how a city should move into the future?

Architect as Mediator

At the time of the forum, we articulated our role as architects as that of being mediators between all the interests producing pressures on the design. Some pressures were from other disciplines such as structural and mechanical. Some were from groups of people—our clients, the end users, the immediate neighbours, the population of the district, the people of the surrounding city. Some of the pressures were regulatory—limitations imposed by codes and laws. We saw ourselves at that time as the ones who mediated all of these pressures to form the finished design.
ARRIVAL

Left: Districts 5 and 10 feel very much like working peoples’ districts. There are markets for used electronics as well as used motorbike parts and rows of shops selling things like salvaged springs, from tiny to gargantuan. A warren of streets off Hong Bang Street contains rows of shophouses turned into steel working shops. Each tiny venue works cuts, welds and saws plate steel and pipes, evidencing the resources for small-scale making available in Ho Chi Minh City.

District 5, HCMC, 2013
© Archie Pizzini
The Unsterile Environment

Inhabiting Vietnam’s situation, with its relaxed control and flourishing culture of improvisation, strengthened my earlier conclusions about the relationship between control and fertility.

In comparison with Vietnam, Texas had so much more of everything—more cars, more soft drinks, more disposable razors, more television channels—yet there seemed to be an aridity about the place, a sterility that centred around the systemic suppression of opportunities for making. There was more to buy, but doing and making for oneself was much more difficult.

Vietnam seemed less filtered. Rough solutions to daily tasks such as fixing a motorcycle or mending a rolling door had fewer guarantees, but more possible permutations. There also seemed to be no age limit on the working life of a machine or appliance. As long as there was a majority of the thing left, it seemed, it could be fixed.

There also seemed to be more possibilities in play in each endeavour. Things could be forged or welded or adapted from other parts in ways not considered in the West. It was a more open situation; less clean, in the sense that there was no definitively prescribed method of doing anything. But the un-sanitised nature of the situation, and the mutation through improvisation that it encouraged, made the entire system more resilient.

Vietnam felt organic, strong, and anything but sterile.
Inundation

Though we resisted the pressure to grow our office radically, by 2007, we were forced to expand our working space. There were more projects offered to us than we could give appropriate care to, and the timeline expectations of our potential clients were shifting from overly optimistic towards ridiculous. Construction growth was clearly trending towards exponential and the general investment atmosphere was becoming frantic. A steady stream of inexperienced developers approached us with huge projects for preliminary design. They rarely had financing, ideas of what they wanted or any inkling of how they would implement it. What would be built and the effects it would have on people, was often completely outside of their scope of consideration.

As overheated as the environment was, widespread damage to the central city had remained fairly limited since most of the development seemed to have been aimed at yet-to-be urbanised locations. The Eden Building and 213 Dong Khoi were still populated with residents and housed bookstores, magazine stores, embroidery shops and gift shops at ground level. The triangular lot at Nam Ky Khoi Nghia and Le Loi was a collection of small shops with residents above. It housed, among other things, au dai shops, beauty parlours, noodle shops, shoe shops and La Fenetre Soleil. It had not yet been cleared to become the parking lot it has remained for the last five years. Elimination of the cyclos and pressure on sidewalk businesses had yet to begin in earnest. The density and its energy were still there.

We were making serious evaluations about what we wanted our practice to transition into. Feeling a bit overwhelmed, we began to filter out potential jobs, potential clients and potential employees. At the same time, I was becoming more and more fascinated with the design approaches and solutions I encountered every day on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City.

When our growing workload and staff forced us to enlarge our working space, we decided to incorporate within its design several things:

A clear expression of our design sensibility—contemporary with a strong affinity for improvisation.

A new identity as a professional practice—an atelier, rather than a corporate-style office.

A function of the new space as a filter—attracting, through the design those who felt an affinity with our design sensibility and discouraging those who did not.
The budget was low and the schedule tight, but because of the design freedom I sensed an opportunity to do several things.

There were many signifier-based client preconceptions I wished to challenge, among them the idea that there were ‘noble’ materials (stone, certain metals, expensive woods); that nothing built without those materials could be taken seriously, and that any building that used those materials, no matter how badly, was itself ‘noble’. I wanted to demonstrate that quality design could be produced affordably through ingenuity, understanding and thoughtfulness. I also wanted to contest the notion that quality had to be the result of the inclusion of gimmicks—i.e., the current one being transparent lifts—applied cartoons of artefacts from earlier cultures such as Mansard roofs, or prefabricated plasterwork. This last notion I had encountered as often in Texas as in Vietnam. This demonstration was for the public encountering our space—clients, potential clients, consultants, other architects, staff. But it was also for myself as it was the first chance I had ever had to build a full project using this strategy.

Left: View of my desk: Glass-topped table with standoff of plastic hosing. Top shelf of countertop fragment found on street. Bench from repurposed Vietnamese bed platform. District 1, HCMC, 2007 © Archie Pizzini

Right: The bright orange accent wall and the screenwall with reused salvaged shutters and doors. District 1, HCMC, 2007 © HTA + pizzini

**HTA + pizzini atelier—Le Loi Street**

This 2007 office project, constructed for our own use, enjoyed total design freedom at a moment when my understanding of the possibilities inherent in the **rasquachismo** culture of Vietnam was expanding rapidly. We explored how to gain maximum design impact with a tiny construction budget and a short construction schedule by utilising design approaches related to that culture.

With little holding us back and being somewhat delirious with the possibilities we saw in the cultural environment, we developed this project as an unbounded exploration of Vietnam’s design fertility. It felt as if I was, for the first time, producing a built environment from my true design identity.

Designed to exhibit the inherent value of Vietnam’s culture of improvisation and its root qualities of ingenuity, observation and care, it was also meant to refute the ingrained reverence for signifiers many clients expressed to us every day—signifiers like the expensive stone finishes and vaguely European appliques. It was also meant to question the impulse I saw in architects to design projects as expensive foreign objects imposed onto a situation with an agenda dominated by self-promotion.

Our atelier aimed to show the value of observation and ingenuity, tying the concept of value back to something more deeply representative than preconceptions, price or self-branding.

**Opportunism and Economy**

I had for years harboured a hunch that one didn’t need a large budget to produce a well-designed space as long as one employed thoughtful consideration. This hunch was directly related to the **rasquachismo** mindset. This was the first project in which we had a chance to
explore the utility of that mindset at the scale of a full project with no restrictions on how far we could take the approach. We evaluated the site, the local resources, what had been left behind by the previous tenants, what our craftsmen could produce and what we could put together ourselves with inspiration from the improvisations we saw on the streets.

We cleared the space, a rectangle with a terrace on two sides, making a loft, into which we inserted three main elements: an entry accent wall, a screening wall and an accountant’s room.

The bright orange accent wall delineated the reception area and caught the eye immediately as one entered the lift lobby.

Taking advantage of a close relationship with our craftsmen, we inserted a custom screening wall designed around odd-sized salvaged doors mounted on pivots to filter light, sound and views between the partners and the main office, while providing a connection to Vietnam’s history.

The carefully inserted free-standing accountant’s room generated, with one economical move, implied spaces throughout the open area, creating a reception area, a meeting room, a side gallery and a drafting room. The loose boundaries of the resulting spaces increased flexibility, saving us time and money countless times in the life of the space.

We designed the whole office to open up to the adjoining terrace—a pleasant overflow space with a garden of potted plants and later developed a close relationship with the building’s gardener, which enabled us to arrange the terrace’s larger and fuller plantings to filter the harsh afternoon sunlight that came through the windows.
Misuse, Originality and Collaboration

The entry featured a wall piece that set the theme for the office. It was an agglomeration of cheap handmade copies of a French impressionist masterpiece. The copies, picked up in tourist shops, varied wildly in size, colour, texture and workmanship.

Each was an original in itself—an interpretation of another painting that none of the copyists had ever physically seen. The copies were arranged to produce a new piece that treated the paintings as blocks of colour and pattern working against the colour of the wall behind it.

The wall piece itself was a new original, but also a collaboration between myself, the copyists and the impressionist master. This played with the meaning of the term ‘original’, broadened the idea of collaboration, and highlighted the energy possible through misuse.

The wall piece was a celebration of the wild way in which everything in Vietnam at the time seemed to be regarded as simply material for a new use. The entire city seemed to me to be a collaboration of all the previous inhabitants, with everyone invited to join in.
Embracing the Medium

Investigating How to Work in Vietnam
Considering Vietnam is an environment of individual endeavours, it is inevitable that it would be full of inconsistencies. The messiness of human relationships spills over into the craftsmanship.

We didn’t expect or get a perfect translation from our drawings and sketches to the finished product. We accommodated this by designing a roughness into the overall aesthetic to adapt our design intention to what was possible in the situation.

At the time, a close friend in Vietnam was attempting to produce a lamp whose design success hinged on the crafting of the lamp’s elements to very close tolerances. He was frustrated by the constant variations in craftsmanship he was encountering. In the sense that artists have their mediums, such as paint or film or sculpture, his medium was Vietnam and he was at war with it. He was trying to accomplish through it something that it was unsuited to produce. Vietnam is suited to unapologetically handmade items, improvised and adapted where necessary in perhaps unexpected ways.

Unexpected outcomes must be expected.

Rough Edges
We were quite conscious of the need to align our design and our medium. We anticipated modification by the craftsmen, producing the antithesis of a meticulously detailed and proportioned minimalist design that falls to pieces if one element is moved slightly or if one detail is incorrectly executed. We conceived our design to accommodate unforeseen developments, gaps in craftsmanship and eventual reconfiguration, all elements we expected given the situation. The roughly crafted look of the interior ensured that the many small inconsistencies would simply become part of the aesthetic.
Unscripted Collaboration
The wood framed screening wall with the salvaged wood doors was drawn up as a straightforward example of standard U.S. residential wood framing. The framing itself was meant to be exposed, as is not typically done in America, creating a pattern of pieces and voids to enliven the wall. I expected that it would be taken by the carpenters as a starting point, rather than an exact template, and so I emphasised to them that the crucial dimension was the openings that accommodated the already existing antique doors. I was actually anticipating the surprise of seeing what they would build from this drawing of a completely foreign and unfamiliar system.

What was constructed resembled what I drew, but the details, dimensions of the members and the method in which it was assembled, differed in many ways—yet it worked perfectly. The framing still gave the look of assembly and scaling that related it to the old wood shutters. It still provided opportunities for making nooks and shallow shelves inside the framing. It was flexible, sturdy and easily accommodated things being attached to it—and there was something refreshing in the unexpected way it had been interpreted, not replicated. The small surprises in the details added to the experience of interacting with it every day. The ‘mistakes’ had added to the design. Collaboration had expanded to include the craftsmen.

We reused planks of go wood from old bed platforms to make meeting tables, benches and display shelves. Other salvaged items included rubber bushings, bungee cords, springs and plastic hoses used to detail furniture connections. A four-metre high glass divider left by the previous tenant was cut up to make shelves and tabletops. We glued acoustic ceiling panels to the meeting room walls making pin-up space while reducing sound reflection. Since we were uncertain how long we would occupy the space, we glued MDF sheeting to the floor as a quick, cheap response to our need to move in and start working. Stock fluorescent lights and power/data outlets dropped from the ceiling maximised flexibility in the main office.
We were flexible with tolerances, transitions and details, but still produced a contemporary space that was a combination of several examples of cleanly improvised design artefacts.

Symbiosis with our craftsmen went beyond depending on them to construct our design. We exposed them to the production of a type of space uncommon in Vietnam at the time. We supported them with our business, but in addition increased their relevance by giving them experience producing a type of design most had not yet encountered.

Building a Design Identity

We displayed our office through a transparent wall to the corridor and lift lobby, providing a built example intended to expand our clients’ and colleagues’ ideas of what was possible and attractive.

We built a design identity with the atelier, proving to ourselves the worth of care and thought in the design process and further developing a symbiosis with Vietnam as a working environment, particularly with respect to the craftsmen.

As planned, HTA + pizzini atelier became an interface between us and the general public, especially potential clients. Besides acting as a bridge, presenting our design ideas in built form, it served as a filter, screening out clients who were unable to move past the prevailing preconceptions of the time. At that time, we were regularly offered mid-rise projects with client-mandated design elements such as mansard roofs or ornate balustrades. While we saw nothing wrong with such elements per se, we understood that a client committed to signifiers rather than substance would be unlikely to value our designs. Furthermore, such specific requirements were a sign that there would be little autonomy for us in the design process, making it impossible to design in the manner we wished.

We indulged our impulses to push the possibilities for making, and we proved even more to ourselves that the ideas and approaches
that we hadn’t had latitude to build before were not only buildable but also successful aesthetically and functionally. Highlighting the construction made possible by the situation in Vietnam was a way of rooting the design to the location and its culture, but even so, the subject of this project’s design largely remained the aesthetic itself.

Right Top:
Model shot showing office layout as seen from the common corridor.
© HTA + pizzini

Right Bottom:
Two photos showing the office as seen from the common corridor.
Photos: © HTA + pizzini
Repurposing an Opportunity

We misused a 2009 Google/Guggenheim competition framework to fit our own agenda of illustrating what Vietnamese ingenuity has already produced with found materials. This project was a quick exercise in communicating details and ideas that already exist in Southeast Asia, a compilation of various designs by designers unknown as such even to themselves.

The competition called for a 3D model of a small space without a stated function. We chose a site in the Mekong Delta and produced a model incorporating ideas and techniques we had seen throughout the region into a representation of what already existed here, but highlighting the opportunistic mindset, the creative and resourceful approach to making shelter that permeates the countryside.

Many competitions carry an implication that cutting-edge solutions should be an exploration of innovations in technology and architectural thought. This is not always untrue, but if we assume we must always discard what was known before and constantly reinvent the process of making space to meet the needs of the future (to great profit for the suppliers of these new technologies), we, as a profession, can lose sight of sustainable and proven methods of making space that already exist.

Valuing What Exists

We aimed to highlight the ingenuity of rasquachismo and its strategy of using thoughtful design with an eye to economy and sustainability to circumvent constraints. We also sought to question the globalised reflex of throwing technology at ecological constraints, often fostering unanticipated new problems and generating more production, more consumption and more accompanying waste.
We aimed to show the value of a strategy of solving problems by accepting and going deeper into the context rather than constantly rejecting it and trying to redefine it.

I felt that observation of Vietnam and its *rasquachismo* gave me grounds to question the unspoken but often implied assumption that good design demanded constant reinvention of things, whether they were already functioning well or not.

**Transporting Ideas, Not Products**

Perhaps the knowledge of these working solutions is one of the missing elements in the system today. Knowledge is the easiest and least environmentally damaging thing to transport in the making of architecture. The design ideas illustrated in the project were developed by people limited in skills, equipment and resources. They have already been refined down to the bare essentials, have already been proven feasible for construction by lay people, have already been prototyped. Moreover, they circumvent much of the environmental damage that mass production and long-distance transport produce.

The reduction of waste was an aspect central to the entry. Even sustainable building practices in globalised societies still often require transportation of standardised building materials and components to a site where building materials already exist except in unstandardised form. This has its own element of waste.

What if the materials and the products were not the items being transported? What if ideas and knowledge were the items to be distributed—the knowledge to utilise the materials, manpower and technology already available at the site?

This competition provoked reflection on an old idea for a website designed to provide knowledge of how reclaimed, repurposed and
indigenous material could be gathered and used in construction of small-scale dwellings and service buildings using a minimum of heavy equipment and complex technology. The knowledge could be provided free of charge available for all to use, except for entities seeking to mass produce items on a large-scale. This distribution of knowledge to individuals for their own personal use could curb the loss of making-related knowledge that is one of the drivers of the cycle of consumerism in the globalised world today.

I suspect that websites of this nature now exist, but revisiting that old idea helped clarify the relationship of globalised mass production to Vietnamese individual endeavours in the area of sustainability.

Our entry was designed to sketch out the resources for making that exist here, and, more importantly, to call attention to the use of ingenuity to enlarge the scope of what is available— to suggest that possibilities are not limited only to items that can be bought.

It reinforced the understanding that ideas, abilities, ingenuity, knowledge and experience were things perhaps even more valuable than physical objects.

In our earlier projects, we had already explored ways of incorporating these qualities into the design process, but doing so while putting them into the service of a larger design purpose was something we hadn’t yet attempted. It took upheaval, reflection and redirection to bring about the next phase in our work.
Floating Vietnam

Shaped long and skinny like a serpent, Vietnam can seem to be nearly all coastline when viewed on a map. Add to that marshes, bays and rivers, and the end result is home for a water-dwelling population of thousands. Some water towns are well organised and exist year-round in permanent locations with stable structures and livelihoods. Ha Long Bay has fishing villages with floating schools, post offices and shrines. Other clusters of dwellings are less permanent. Some travel, disappear or change form with the passing of the seasons. Some villages are land based during the dry season but float during the floods. A house perching flimsily on bamboo stilts during the dry months might float during the storms, the community’s occupants riding out the rainy season on a loosely linked raft of tiny arks.
Redefining My Role

In 2006, it had been obvious Vietnam was hitting the last years of a bubble, so Hoanh and I decided to cap growth of the company, rejecting the assumption of an endless boom and the accompanying radical growth that many of our colleagues embraced.

This was done chiefly to maintain design control over the work, but there was also an element of sustainability, in that we were consciously avoiding the situation of having to accept any work we could find just to maintain a large organisation.

By 2008, Vietnam was overheating into heavy development resulting in hyper construction and destruction. We began to prefer small projects over large speculative development projects and redefined our practice and atelier space to encourage that.

By 2010, I realised that five of our key projects had already been lost. Our small company had only been in existence for six years. The physical and cultural fabrics of Vietnam were undergoing more rapid and intense change than I’d ever experienced before.

In 2012, after the crash and after a period of downsizing, we relocated to a 1930s apartment building in central Ho Chi Minh City. We reoriented the practice environment towards a workshop to emphasise custom design and making.

Though most big projects in town were stalled, the pace of destruction seemed to accelerate as dozens of low-budget, low-quality pocket skyscrapers gnawed holes into the central city. Several block–sized or near block–sized projects in District 1 went ahead with construction. Some or those, though underfunded, went ahead with demolition phases even though construction was unrealisable at the time—the depopulating and demolition of an existing building being a phase where the property valuation increases greatly for a relatively small amount of outlay.
Urban Adolescence

Hoanh and I often discussed the projects that were available, the agendas of the clients and the relative scarcity of projects demonstrating a desire to benefit the community, either through thoughtful design within the urban fabric or enhancement of the urban situation through the addition of public amenities aimed at benefiting the population in general. We understood the lack of interest in historical fabric as a ‘boom-town’ mentality, a phase that all cities go through periodically, which abates only when it begins to emerge as a true landmark city.

It felt to us like part of a cycle, preceding a maturity that would arrive someday, as it did in New York after old Penn Station was demolished. Penn Station was of course not the first wonderful piece of architecture to be destroyed in Manhattan, but it was the one that was destroyed at the time that New Yorkers, as a whole, were capable of understanding the cultural richness of what they had lost and the cultural poverty of what they had been given in return. The loss also happened at the point when the general public was in the position of having enough political power to do something about it. This event marked a point in the cycle that requires the driving forces of a city, top and bottom, to have matured past short term maximisation of personal profits into a long-term reckoning of civic benefit.

The dearth of appreciation for Ho Chi Minh City’s urban heritage indicated to us a city in an immature phase of that cycle. Having watched Houston grow by millions in my lifetime without ever passing a preservation ordinance, and having seen so much working urban fabric reduced to parking lots and strip centres, I wondered if the city would ever manage to ‘grow up’.
At Anh Thiep’s corner in District 1, the landlord hiked the rent drastically in 2011 (fourfold, we heard, from 5,000 to 20,000 USD per month) and JAVA cafe closed. This phenomenon, which has a devastating impact on the existing neighbourhood fabric, is becoming more common in many places in the world today. Even though JAVA had been a long-term tenant, renovating the space at least twice, the landowner found it more attractive to drastically hike the rent and weather the instability that followed in hopes of luring a global corporation with very deep pockets. In the uncertainty that followed, several cafes ensued, some friendly to Thiep and some openly hostile. At least one tenant called the police to clear Thiep and the xe om from the corner. This effectively removed it from the city’s viable public spaces as public space is understood in Vietnam. Thiep moved down the street, taking a hit in business, but the hostile tenant closed after a few months and Thiep and his xe om friends retook their places. At the new rent level, however, local businesses, even those funded by foreigners, have been effectively excluded from the space.

The possibility of individual proprietorship has now been removed from that piece of the city.

In late 2013, Starbucks was renovating the cafe space—it remained to be seen how they would treat Anh Thiep. None of their other venues allowed street businesses in front of their stores.

The targeting of spaces specifically towards deep-pocketed global corporations is a common strategy documented in New York City, Barcelona and apparently, now in Ho Chi Minh City as well. What kind of city this produces, and for whom, or what purpose, that city ultimately exists is currently being defined on Broadway, the Ramblas and Hai Ba Trung.

Slowing down the rush towards headlong development would give an opportunity to evaluate what will be destroyed instead of simply accepting a dynamic that has already been set in motion. This evaluation would not centre on nostalgia for objects, forms or styles because of a sentimental fantasy they evoke. Instead, this evaluation would be one focusing on ideas, approaches and agendas as well as the built urban fabric. Transience should be addressed by actually evaluating what is being discarded before it is decried as being obsolete and worthless. This is especially true in aspects of sustainability, but it is important in terms of social qualities engendered by the urban fabric as well.

Destroying neighbourhoods and history is a lucrative process—much more so than preserving or repurposing. This seems a much larger driver than ignorance in the rush towards obliterative redevelopment. The speed of change in Vietnam has now become so fast, often by design, that things are ‘lost’ before the gap they will leave in the city can be assessed.

By 2010, I was finding it very difficult to operate in the role of architect as I had always defined it. I had been trained to create relatively permanent structures whose quality was judged in large part by the lasting benefit it afforded to the end users. The environment of Vietnam in flux removed major underpinnings of that role as I understood it.

I realised that I had to consciously incorporate rapid change as an element of design, since it was an inescapable force in the situation. I had to rethink the model for practice I had always accepted as an ethical mode of operation—that designing a building that met the client’s needs and was equipped to last for decades or more was part of an ethical design process. I had to find a new way to judge architectural quality within the framework of a very short anticipated lifespan.
All of this changed my understanding of the relationship of myself to the Vietnamese context. In a context that changed constantly, how could I define the urban environment and my role in it? Buildings I passed every day could no more be taken as a part of my life than people sitting next to me on a bus. I might very well never see them again.

I felt my role as an architect had to change. Transience had become the overwhelming reality, and the only constructive path had become to own it, rather than being owned by it.

In response to the new context, I began to see most projects as temporary interventions or insertions. I accepted the context as being constantly in flux. I still saw the utility of the product to the end user as important, but the expectation of building for a long timeframe had been removed.

I was forced to shift my time focus. A short lifespan increases the importance of the present. I re-examined my understanding of the product itself, generating several questions.

When I make architecture, what am I supplying?

If projects have a short anticipated lifespan, then how should their construction be validated, given the cost, ecological as well as economic, to make short–lived architecture?

How usable will the building be after the designed–for occupancy has run its course?

How can architecture provide benefit that outlives the architecture itself?

Change and Opportunity

Dieter Roth’s teaching techniques, notorious for the inscrutability of their direction as they were implemented, sometimes seem to focus on development of flexibility. In one exercise related by a former student, he first instruct ed his students to each take 50 cents and purchase a book. After many of the students laboured to find a “worthy” book, they were told to make a tower of it, essentially instructing them to destroy its usefulness as a book. Later in the exercise, he instructed them to take words from the books and make poetry to affix to the tower they had built, and so on. Among other things, this exercise forced the re-evaluation of the book for different purposes, essentially subverting the conception of the book as a book and repurposing it as a collection of raw material with many different possibilities. This exercise, together with other of his works, develop the idea that destroying the usefulness of something for one purpose, but with careful attention to the results, brings into existence new possibilities.

This is a useful way of building an attitude suited to working within situations saturated in rapid change—an attitude that is always forward looking and alert for the possibilities within the new situation. It’s very much a rasquachismo mindset, designed to break down the nouns, and perhaps their related expectations, that limit us in our roles as designers.
Occupying Temporality

Wait, later this will be nothing

Many artists such as Havel and Ruck, Gordon Matta-Clark, Xu Bing and Dieter Roth demonstrate that opportunity can be found in flux. Some also demonstrate that objects made with their own destruction in mind enjoy greater freedom and possibilities than works that must endure for the foreseeable future. Some, like Roth, even demand that their work change, grow old and decay. ³

Perhaps Roth felt the lifespan and all of the incarnations of the work in its lifespan were part of the work; stopping the cycle of decay was eliminating a large portion of the piece. If one stopped the piece from dying, it immediately ceased to live. This attention to the cycles of life, reiterated in so many different ways in his work, makes Roth an artist whose work instructs me as much about the nature of life as it does about the nature of art.

Andy Goldsworthy and Patrick Daugherty ⁶ incorporate lifespan into their work. The creation and the disintegration are more than the moment before it exists and the moment after it is gone, they are part of the art piece itself. This type of art has sometimes been characterised as incorporating loss and mourning as a component, but it might also be interpreted as an incorporation of the natural order of things, a clear-eyed matter-of-fact realism articulated in some Buddhist teachings that ask the question of whether you can operate within the world effectively if you deny the reality of what the world truly is.

Temporality as a conscious factor turns up in architecture as well, from ice hotels that make use of plentiful construction material while marking the passing of the seasons, to older ritual structures like temporary Shinto shrines intended to be built and burned. Graham Crist, in his Ph.D. document, *Sheds for Antarctica*, ⁷ proposes design as a framework for change, inviting accretion to buildings
IMMERSION

consciously conceived as a starting point for architecture, not the end result.

A frank acceptance of temporality is now part of our designs. In recent projects sited in culturally charged locations, we’ve foregrounded the uncertainty of the situation and tried to tie it to the larger situation of constant change. Even uncoupled from the current situation in Vietnam though, temporality is now so much a part of our global situation that it must be addressed functionally in almost every project, whether it becomes a theme or not.

It’s become necessary to look, as the Vietnamese do, for the opportunities that flux generates. The destruction creates a period in which a temporary statement is possible. The rasquachismo mindset takes advantage of this moment by inserting open-air restaurants while a project waits to be constructed (see photo page 64), but I’ve come to understand that these fertile moments can be anticipated and sought out and don’t necessarily have to be stumbled upon.

This parallels some of the contemporary ideas for dealing with the city such as ‘urban acupuncture’ and ‘urban agriculture’. By understanding the system, you can anticipate where the opportunities will pop up. Now even some of our ‘permanent’ projects like Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi have such frankly fleeting life expectancies that they naturally focus on the situation of the moment rather than taking a long view.

Right:
The demolition of the Metropole Hotel for construction of a new hotel revealed a pair of painted walls that had been covered for over half a century, which made tangible the layering of the city’s history. The foreign corporation’s new design is well thought out as a functioning hotel, but it lacks a tie back to the specific location and history of Saigon, which could have been wonderfully communicated to the hotel guests through the murals. Instead, the walls were painted beige. Could a more locally-informed, opportunistic and flexible mindset in the designers and clients have avoided this lost opportunity?

District 5, HCMC, 2012
© Archie Pizzini

Left: Demolition of an old villa on Vo Thi Sau Street.
District 3, HCMC, 2011
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Ideas and Understanding

Reflection on the HTA + pizzini atelier and the MEKONG competition submission, however, revealed a shift towards architecture demonstrating ideas that supplement, and in some cases even exceed, in importance the built spaces they are embodied in.

Ideas, knowledge and understanding are things architecture can produce that impact the situation beyond the life of the architecture itself. *The rasquachismo* mindset, the worth of ingenuity, the understanding of the cultural shoreline—all can be demonstrated through architecture and the information stored compactly and sustainably in the minds of people who experience it either physically or otherwise.

Though both ideas and built form had always coexisted in my work, my architecture shifted towards ideas as the dominant product. What I built was shifting more heavily towards being a method of communicating those ideas.

Value and Price

For consumer cultures like the U.S. and increasingly Vietnam, a central shortcoming is that there is only one measurement with which to evaluate the worth of something—the monetary price one can successfully charge for it. The implication that the price of something is a direct representation of a thing's indispensability ignores that the relationship between value and price is deliberately blurred through marketing. It's important to note that, while most Vietnamese don't play a role in the major decisions that are changing the texture of their cities and society today, they are not opposing to a great degree the changes that are taking place either.

While it is often said that old Vietnam is currently being lost, it could arguably also be said it is being thrown away. People don't value...
it. To be sure, poverty, and the hardship and dangers it brings, is not a situation to be advocated for anyone. The question is, can the beneficial aspects of life in Vietnam today be separated from the poverty of the people who live there?

The question has already been answered by societies in different parts of the world that have made the transition to the ‘developed’ world and are now trying to reinstate or recreate the things they destroyed on the way. For example, cities like Paris, Milan, New York and even Houston are limiting cars, promoting pedestrian areas and bicycle lanes and even introducing pedicabs, which are nothing more than updated cyclos.

In America and Europe, localised networks are being forged for everything from farm-to-table food chains to service-based cooperatives—systems that are trying to reconstruct networks that already exist and are being actively erased in Vietnam.

Much of the bias that is causing the unquestioning acceptance of all aspects of the globalised world is due to misinformation, both from abroad and from within Vietnam. But it’s been shown this can be changed. For example, there is a growing awareness among Vietnamese of the unbeneficial aspects of industrialised food. There is also a growing trend towards the appreciation of genuine colonial era architecture.

Perhaps it might be possible to also infuse an appreciation for the value of intangibles such as the ingenuity of improvisation, the delight of the unexpected, the self-sufficiency of making.
Lost In Saigon

Political scientist James C. Scott studies cultures in Southeast Asia that have resisted assimilation into the larger nation-states whose borders they live within. He notes that, though these peoples were once a worldwide phenomenon, the group in Southeast Asia spreading across highlands in parts of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, India and China is now the last large concentration of such peoples in the world. *He refers to this region as ‘Zomia’, after the work of Willem van Schendel, noting among these people a deliberate bent towards smaller scale, flexible and resilient societies.

Historian Prasenjit Duara, in his lectures at San Art in Ho Chi Minh City in 2014, *referred to this cultural division between people aligned with the pre-nation state world, Zomia, and those in the globalised culture of the developed world, when positing a link between a population’s spiritual beliefs, their conception of time and their actions towards their environment. He saw pre-nation-state peoples’ beliefs as being historically rooted in animism, which sees power as coming from the surrounding natural environment. This contrasts with the monotheistic view held by much of the globalised world that sees power coming from a creator outside of and more powerful than the universe. Furthermore, he said, in the modern era atheism has begun to replace even monotheism, giving rise to the view that supreme power lies within man himself—that man is outside of and even more powerful than the environment he lives in.

In pre-nation-state societies, time is circular and ever repeating, with the basic cycles of history unchangeable—one knows one’s place in history, and, by extension, the world. In globalised societies, time is linear, with the relevance of the past vastly reduced in relation to the present and future—one makes one’s own destiny. So there is the Zomian who sees power coming from the eternal world around him and respects that power and adapts himself to be sustained by that power, and there is a globalised man who sees power coming from within himself and constantly reinvents the world to suit his needs...or whims...or manias.

But the world is not constantly reinvented without a cost. Before I arrived in Vietnam, Hoanh designed a small bar called Lost in Saigon. Recalling his years in New York, he used rough finishes and raw steel, evoking an East Village aesthetic of the 1980s. It was a great bar and quite popular, but it closed after a few years as the city changed and so the bar was itself lost, tied to another Ho Chi Minh City that has largely passed. When I think of it now, I can’t help reflecting on the irony that it was dislocated, ‘lost’ from the day it opened, a reconstructed piece of a past era from another city on the far side of the globe.

Sometimes displacement happens without a change of location at all, as when Saigon, in Indochine passed through decades of upheaval to emerge as Ho Chi Minh City, in Vietnam and everyone and everything in it was dislocated without moving a single centimetre.

Time dislocates us. The situation changes, and though we stay in one place geographically, what that place is changes and we are somewhere else, distanced from what the place has become. Today Vietnam is the cultural shoreline, but tomorrow the shoreline may be elsewhere or perhaps even non-existent.

Dislocation occurs metaphysically as well. Describing where you are might mean describing the difference between understanding yourself to be working within the framework of the world or floating above and outside of it. This situation should bring a measure of uneasiness, since thinking you are in one place when you are really in another can be a very dangerous thing.
Notes - IMMERSION


4. Dobke and Becker, Dieter Roth in America, (Thames and Hudson, 2005): p. 20


6. Andy Goldsworthy uses many types of natural materials found on site such as leaves, thorns, stones, ice, and water to produce his work. These works are often tenuously assembled into art pieces in ways that often simultaneously evoke concern for the fragility of the piece and wonder that the piece could exist at all. For an idea of his concerns and working methods, see the film Rivers and Tides: Andy Goldsworthy Working With Time (2001). Patrick Dougherty also collects materials from the site and its surroundings, in his case mostly branches, that he then weaves into surprisingly resilient structures that morph as the pieces collapse over time. For an overview of his work, see his book Stickwork, (Princeton Architectural Press 2010)


10. For a more detailed information about these peoples, their region, their cultures, and their roles in French colonial and Vietnamese history, see the following book, Tim Deling, Mountains and Ethnic Minorities: North West Viet Nam, (The Gioi Publishers, 2010)
Saturation

District 1, Ho Chi Minh City still has a collection of mixed-use colonial-era buildings. Some were originally built as loft-style factory spaces for the generally small-scale industries of the early twentieth century. Later, some had upper floors converted to flats in the late French colonial period. Others were built as multi-storey apartment blocks with shop spaces at the ground level. Many of them still show the old open lift shafts with the staircases wound around them. The apartments have been used as housing for a half-century or more, depending on the age of the building.

Of course much of the housing was originally occupied by well-off colonialists, probably foreigners, who were replaced by Vietnamese as the buildings aged. The buildings have been mostly working-class housing since the changeover in 1975. As the Vietnamese occupied the buildings, they densified the flats, sometimes inserting sleeping lofts into the high-(and even lower) ceilinged spaces. Some of the buildings support a rooftop colony of improvised housing—hems in the sky complete with tiny gardens, and areas for cooking and relaxing.

The contrast between District 1’s main streets, which feature an increasing number of global brands in eating, drinking, banking and shopping and the remaining hems and inner courtyards of the remaining housing blocks still occupied by working-class Vietnamese, can bring to mind a feeling of flooding where global culture is saturating the streets and the interior blocks are surrounded and becoming inundated. The cultural shoreline is visible in many of these blocks now, the ones where the old buildings have not been removed completely.

In recent years, the rush to clear the centre of the city of all old buildings paused due to the financial crisis. In this respite, many of the remaining old buildings began to be colonised by small businesses—cool hidden cafes, tiny fashion boutiques, and offices of different design ventures such as graphics, branding, architecture and interiors. The blocks are changing from the inside as well as from the outside, providing these gentrifying occupants an interesting and perhaps informative vantage point from which to view the transition before they too are displaced.
Identity

In 2012, we moved our practice back to District 1 after an interlude in a quiet villa on a dead-end alley off Hoa Hung Street in District 10. Moving our identity even further away from that of a corporate office, we felt we were completing the transition from office to atelier through studio to workshop. The large specialised staff of the 2007 atelier is now just a few multi-talented assistants. This space, as much a place to make things as it is a place to do business, is filled with raw materials: paints, panels, stacks of large photos, marker boards and a rough sketch of an exhibition system slammed together from old doors. The focus is on the development of ideas by the partners, rather than production of a large quantity of buildings.

Our latest shift in the way we present ourselves to the public has as much to do with location as well as it does with interior design. We are now in a well-used 1930s era apartment building in the heart of District 1. Entry is past a building manager/motorbike parking attendant who operates a small cigarette stand. A long approach through an old entryway filled with motorbikes leads to a staircase wound around a disused lift shaft enclosed by grimy wrought iron grilles of a blocky, workaday design. A grilled air shaft that at one time accommodated a lift, now terminates in a tarped—in storage and sleeping area at ground level. We are up two flights of stairs. The public walkway/balcony areas one sees on the way to our door are occupied with plants, rabbit cages, birdcages and small cooking areas. Uninvited inhabitants include pigeons, bats and rats.

We changed our 44-square-metre space very little from the condition we found it in. We surface mounted electric and data wiring and added cheap fluorescent lights, keeping the existing colonial tile floor and the original wood—framed windows and wooden roll—down shutters. We choose to house our practice within a tiny enclave of old Vietnam. No one who visits us can do so without being exposed to it.
Archie Pizzini | OBSERVATION & NEGOTIATION at the CULTURAL SHORELINE | Vietnam, Rasquachismo & an Architectural Practice
Occupation

Books, magazines and old project folders are housed in a system agglomerated by piling together the bookshelves from three previous HTA + pizzini locations. This jumbled archaeology in shelving units of various colours and sizes is arranged in an opportunistic manner that takes care to leave room for strange serendipitous spaces. The haphazardness of its look ensures flexibility—getting the arrangement ‘wrong’ would be very difficult.

Work surfaces follow the lead of the bookshelves. There are several types of tables in varying sizes, surfaces and materials including no-nonsense white worktables from our first office, the two-meter-long heavy wood meeting table from our atelier made from repurposed bed platforms, and rolling steel tables surfaced with repurposed gach bong (the heavy patterned cement floor tiles that were ubiquitous in colonial-era buildings) that came from the Hoa Hung studio. They are arranged less by design and more by necessity—very few have a permanent position. They move freely according to the needs of the moment.

The history of our partnership and the various incarnations of our practice are visible here through the agglomeration of furniture. This workshop has literally been assembled from our history.

Embeddedness

When we moved in, we were the only non–residential tenant in an apartment building populated mostly with working–class Vietnamese. We displaced an office of sorts, but we do not pay an exorbitant rent, just the going rate. While we were the first foreigner tenants, our arrival did not upset the rent structure. We were among the first in the wave of creatives that usually begins a gentrification process. Someday though, perhaps very soon, we will be displaced by rising rents as the next part of the cycle we helped begin plays itself out.

In the time I have been living in Vietnam, a real estate boom has displaced me from my old neighbourhood in Montrose, in Houston. I can’t afford to live
in my old neighbourhoods in Manhattan or Brooklyn either. I fully expect us to be displaced from our place in Ho Chi Minh City in the future as well.

Though I think of us as beginning a cycle of gentrification, in reality it is hard to say where a cycle like this truly begins. The Vietnamese residents of our building live in spaces that once housed French colonials. The building itself replaced an earlier French colonial structure, probably shop-houses. Going back even further, the French displaced the Viets’ city in a series of armed conflicts, erasing their citadel and the surrounding settlement and building a new city in its place.

Where is the line between gentrification and erasure? Perhaps the distinction between ‘normal’ development and runaway destruction should centre on scale. The old city fabric promotes a certain type of social interaction and enables a certain range of possibilities. Erasing blocks of city fabric makes possible the exclusion of an entire population through new architecture in a way that gentrification of existing structures alone cannot.

For the present, we remain part of this puddle of old Vietnam and intend to embed ourselves further. Our continuing plans for the studio design include occupying our own balcony/public walkway area to give back to the community as some of our neighbours do. We will add plants, benches, some lights and perhaps a bird or two. We are working on a design for a lighting fixture to construct in the old open lift shaft to bring a bit of brightness to the stairwells, which can be forbidding and hard for the elderly residents to navigate in the evening. Even as we are part of the force changing the building, we aim to try to reinforce the community of neighbours while it still exists.

Even though I have lived in a hẻm, a Vietnamese alley, since I arrived in Ho Chi Minh City, this workplace relocation has forced me to focus more carefully on what is required to successfully coexist as a foreign professional in a local residential environment. I developed a deeper understanding of the difference between simple occupation of a space and embedment within a community. Much of it was extrapolation of what I had learned living in my own alley as well as what I learned through observation.
of the way Hoanh and his wife Thom had woven our previous studio into the community of the alley during our time in District 10.

It’s very difficult to be accepted by the residents if one is a visitor to the building, but acceptance can’t be taken for granted by new commercial tenants either. To be present in the building is not the same thing as to be embedded in the community. Offering benefit to others in the building is important, through small favours, gifts when appropriate, or simple kindness. It can be a daunting task for a foreigner, especially one without Vietnamese language skills, though it is almost reflexive for someone brought up in Vietnamese culture.

Tet is important, it’s a time when there is a cultural excuse to give gifts to those in your community. Other holidays and festivals as well as wakes, weddings and birthdays, provide similar opportunities to become ‘one of us’ instead of ‘one of them.’

Conclusion
We are aware that our latest reincarnation has already cost us some projects. This happened with the HTA + pizzini atelier on Le Loi Street as well and it was not unintentional. Our focus as designers has shifted to concentrate on things we enjoy doing, preserving our autonomy to choose our projects and approaches, finding clients motivated by more than the exclusive maximisation of commercial gain.
Left Top:
Detail of the front door showing the old steel gates and the cigarette stand.
District 1, HCMC, 2014
© Archie Pizzini
Near the old opera house in District 1 is a three-storey French colonial building with shops on the ground floor. It contains a passageway leading to a filled-in courtyard and stairs ascending to more shops and cafes upstairs as well as the apartments of a few remaining residents. This is a building that changed locations without moving a single centimetre—originating in French Indochina, but existing now in the People’s Republic of Vietnam, it was constructed in Saigon but now stands in Ho Chi Minh City. Even its street address has changed. It first stood on the Rue Catinat and later on Tu Do Street. It is now at 151 Dong Khoi.

Dong Khoi is currently being socially un-placed; transforming from a connector of social networks to a simple conveyor of traffic from...
venue to venue. Across the street from 151 are two global brand hotels below which luxury shopping venues line the sidewalks. Security guards ensure that street vendors are not allowed to even walk on the sidewalk at these locations. The sidewalk fronting 151 is one of the remaining outposts of vendor freedom. Street coffee vendors and hot waffle cake vendors mix with magazine sellers, xe om and other street businesses—here, sidewalk occupants are still allowed to have a purpose other than that of potential luxury consumer, but when 151 goes, so will the vendors.

On the third level of this building is the newest location of the contemporary art gallery Galerie Quynh, designed by us in 2013. Its position touches two very different groups of people and abuts two very different cultural systems. The space faces out to the Caravelle Hotel, Sheraton Hotel, luxury shops and the old Opera House that line Dong Khoi Street that, though not wide, continues to be one of the major streets of the city centre, channelling the dominant trends of the region and the wider global situation. The gallery also faces
into a courtyard still lined to a large degree with the dwellings of working-class Vietnamese.

Progression and Discovery
The approach to the gallery from busy Dong Khoi Street is down an arched passageway to the back of the building. One passes through a partially obscured moderne era portal marking the transition out of the front portion of the rumoured-to-be nineteenth-century factory building with its cast iron columns. One passes into the 1930s era rear addition with its public passageways, turning and proceeding through a high shadowy space and passing a row of motorbikes parked along a dimly lit tiled mural on an adjacent building from the 1950s or ’60s, probably built as a small cinema. Ascending the stair into the light, one walks past apartment doors on a balcony corridor overlooking a collection of buildings that have filled in the internal street and courtyard behind the building over the past century. Looking out, one becomes aware of the dwellings occupying the upper floors of the surrounding buildings. It’s the living part of Ho Chi Minh City unknown to most visitors.

The progression spans more than a century architecturally and, by connecting foreigner-infused Dong Khoi street through layers of history to the hidden residential courtyard, gives visitors a sectional understanding of Vietnamese city layering that most foreigners never even suspect exists.

Displacement and Re-Placement
Until recently, most of the blocks in District 1 had similar alleys and inner courtyards where, unbeknownst to most foreign visitors, Vietnamese residential life went on literally a stone’s throw away from the increasingly globalised boulevards. The buildings had avenue walls of ground level shops topped by residences and passageways leading back into inner alleyways. These hems were the neighbourhoods of Vietnamese who worked in the central city’s shops, streets, soup stands.
Facing Page:

Far Left:
Global brands on Dong Khoi Street.

Near Left:
Looking back down the passageway into the building towards Dong Khoi Street.

This page:
Leaving the entry passageway, one passes into a back passageway that once adjoined the open courtyard. There is a mid-century building, once a cinema, with tiled murals under which motorcycles are now parked. The bike watchmen also sell cold drinks from an ice chest. Here, the neighborhood office occupies a tiny space opposite the shops’ back doors. There are stairways at each end leading to the upper floors.

All photos listed above © Archie Pizzini
Recently, the street walls have been breached and the tiny alleys and inner courtyards penetrated, forcing the remaining residents to deal with an increasing presence of outsiders in the hems. As medium-sized plots disappear, passageways are revealed, evoking the inside of an ant bed brought abruptly to light by a football or a car tyre. They speak of a different scale, a different rhythm of life; the circular repeating movements of home life as opposed to the noisy mass streaming of the avenues.

But in the main districts, it is not only small- and medium-sized plots of land that are falling. Entire blocks and even groups of blocks have started to disappear. As they are wiped clean, their mix of working-class apartments and small shops are replaced by shopping malls, office towers and luxury apartment blocks. With the city fabric crumbling and development plans in motion for nearly every block of central District 1, this is almost certainly the prelude to erasure for what was once the heart of Ho Chi Minh City. This is not simply a story of disappearing architecture. With the erasure of this type of city fabric, the culture and social structure that was intrinsically tied to it will also be erased.

The Reaction Chamber

Our initial impulse was to ‘occupy’ the gallery space with the necessities of a gallery existing almost as furniture in the existing space. We wanted to keep the original Italian terrazzo floor tiles and the backs of the residential blocks show accrued facades where walkways have been added, balconies walled in for additional apartment space, roof terraces have been covered over and a balcony has been fenced in as a kitchen. Overlooking all of this are the glass towers of the recent building boom. District 1, HCMC, 2015 © Archie Pizzini

Architecture and Re-Placement

In writing about indigenous architecture in Southeast Asia, anthropologist Boxana Waterton describes how the houses of some societies are so ephemeral as to be nearly non-existent. She cites an ideological commitment to non-materiality within these societies arising from lives lived constantly on the move. These people (she lists the Semang, the Punan and the so-called Sea Gypsies who live entirely on their boats) also have little impetus to display wealth and rank on their dwellings since their societies’ egalitarianism exceeds that of most societies.

She wonders how such slight architecture as is generated by these peoples could bring any sense of place at all, then widens the scope to show that their beliefs, the animism and the knowledge of the individuals’ places in the larger cosmos, cause place not to be conferred by man-made structures, but by the entire environment.

“(In these societies) religion and myth reflect this attitude, in which humans see themselves as embedded in nature, cooperating with it and maintaining reciprocal relationships with its different elements.”

She states that architecture developed as a way of insulating mankind from that environment, alienating us from nature. “Only then did nature come to be seen as an antagonist—something to be dominated, owned and exploited.”

She notes that the more time and effort we expend on a structure, the more it mitigates our relationship with our natural environment. Architecture can un-place us, insulating us from our true environment, leaving us without a location.

Vietnam is a living environment that is as much the systems of connections between people as it is natural and ecological systems. Vietnam’s old society favours individuals working within a network of other individuals who know they are dependent on others. Their universe is the context of people, and they work to find their place within it.

Perhaps the globalised architecture of sprawl, with its single family houses, its drive-through encounters, its long solitary commutes and its large hermetically sealed buildings, isolates people not only from the environment of nature but from the environment of people as well. Does this isolation reinforce the modern notion of real estate ownership, which bestows wide-ranging rights to destroy not only city fabric, but culture, community, environment, resources and personal dwellings, while demanding little in responsibility towards the rest of humanity?

If architecture can be used to un-place us, can it also be used to re-place us?

In 1999, James Terrell produced a ‘skyspace art installation in Houston as part of a small church sanctuary.” It opened up a square of ceiling to an unobstructed view of the sky for two hours at sundown. With no artificial lighting during the time the sky space was open, it simply focused the viewer on the natural environment, forcing an engagement with the passage of time and subtle changes in colour. These are aspects of the world that perhaps people think they deal with constantly, but in reality things such as the subtle second-to-second changes in colour forming the transition between daylight and dusk more often than not pass unobserved. The installation gave the viewer an opportunity to reconnect himself not only with the infinite variations of light in the sky, but the internal rhythms of our experience of time.

The room was an instrument to re-place people consciously within the natural environment.

Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi, with its spare main space and its framing portals, was designed to make people aware of their existence within context of people—and more specifically to make them aware of their existence within the context of the global confrontation between these two different cultures.

It was a device for observing the context, and through observation, re-placing oneself within the social context.
The austere main gallery space we designed is literally a connector between the ascendant global consumer culture on Dong Khoi Street and the dense but fast disappearing Vietnamese social environment of most of the local population. This bright void is the receptacle for the artists’ interpretation of the contemporary human situation.

Building for Seeing

Our familiarity with this location and its history, and our understanding of the site’s rich texture gave rise to our central design idea—to facilitate recognition of this richly layered location and its position between two worlds, and in doing so, to orient visitors historically, urbanistically and culturally. This impulse was a result of the close observation of the city and its social fabric and our understanding of this site in particular as a microcosm of that fabric.

Observation proposed an architecture for observation.

Framing the Shoreline

A lengthwise axis through the space passes through the four portals defining two views through the entire gallery; one from the courtyard, where the receding past of Ho Chi Minh City looks through to the future of the planet, the other from Dong Khoi Street where the future glances back to the disappearing Vietnamese culture as it
Accretion and History

Different cultures have washed across Southeast Asia in its history leaving an accumulation of layers. The walls of Angkor Wat, the great Khmer temple in Cambodia, are carved with Hindu myths, though it’s currently a Buddhist temple. Many temples in that area have undergone preservation, but the current population of Buddhist monks and nuns is accepted as part of their living identity. The nearby temple of Ta Prohm was also preserved and stabilised, but only to the condition it was found in by European explorers—a ruin with jumbles of stones gripped by the huge roots of towering trees growing within them.

Ho Chi Minh City was also an ancient Khmer settlement before the Viets came. One of its most popular temples is a Hindu Temple on Truong Dinh Street, where crowds of Vietnamese Buddhists go to pray to the many gods whose likeness populate the interior.

On the Dong Khoi face of Galerie Quynh, an antique window, the last one on the facade, was intended by the client to be kept and repaired, as were the old doors to the garden and the corridor. We could have adopted this intention into a larger approach resembling preservation architecture, but we felt that this would not serve the owner’s larger intentions—nor ours. Instead, we evaluated each element separately in terms of the aims of the design as we understood it. Quynh’s new gallery was an attempt to reach the clientele that visit and stay in that area, so visibility took priority in the design process.

We opened the wall at the entry to the gallery, removing the original doors and window to provide a stronger connection between the gallery and the public corridor. On the Dong Khoi facade, we removed the old windows and retractable wood sunshade, making a large window and giving a presence for the gallery on the street. When we removed what we thought was the original window and cabinetry, we discovered a shallow balcony that it had encased well over half a century before.

We kept the new/old balcony, leaving the finishes exactly as we found them, reinforcing the idea of an insertion of new into old. It further set apart the clean interior space from the accumulated history of the original building. In an instance where the removal of a historic element revealed an even earlier one, destruction not only facilitated creation, but the rebirth of something lost and forgotten long before.

Photos we found later on Tim Doling’s website about Ho Chi Minh City history revealed the building had had an even earlier upper veranda running along its entire face. Even the balcony that we uncovered was not original. The facade was as much a product of accretion and improvisation as the interior and structure were. This reinforced our approach of not treating the building as a pristine artefact of historic, pre-Ho Chi Minh City Saigon. We were merely another accumulated layer on an artefact that is an incarnate record of countless acts of adaptation.

This deepens the discussion of what ‘historic’ refers to.

Does it refer to the original structure of a building, as it was when it was first constructed and before any people had ever inhabited it?

Do we ignore the ensuing generations and their needs and aspirations since the building was made—everything from the fall of an ancient civilisation to a hard-won revolution to the launch of a young family’s first shop to the addition of a room for a newborn child?

Can historic refer to a structure that embodies the events that have passed through it by showing the marks and residue of different circumstances, impulses and ventures?

What type of building, the pristinely preserved, or the densely accreted, is most deeply infused with history?
existed through the end of the colonial years and the early decades of independence.

The gallery, the instrument through which each era views the other, is a series of contemporary interventions in the form of four rusted steel portals (one since removed) inserted into the old colonial building. The entry portal to the gallery was originally designed as a large opening for greater visibility, but it soon became a heavy transition marker that multiplied as the transitions between eras, cultures and spaces inserted themselves into the design. The addition of two outer portals framing the view to the courtyard and the view to Dong Khoi Street followed naturally. We began to understand each portal as an instrument of narration and the portal system as a device for highlighting the cultural meeting in Vietnam.

Designer as Narrator
The innermost portal, a large frame floating atop the parapet at the entry corridor, framed the view to the old inner courtyard. It was added at the end of the design process to state the narrative nature of the portals as one entered the space, but was to be the first portal a visitor encountered. It was the first portal installed, but it was removed by the building officials. The second portal marks the entry to the 1930s addition through the garden space. The third portal is the entry into the nineteenth-century building and the gallery space itself. The fourth portal frames a view onto Dong Khoi Street. The building is a semi-permeable membrane between two sociological groups. The series of portals were conceived to highlight that aspect. The portals each delineate their situation to the adjacent space, implying a flow of eras and relationships clear through the space.

The portals, each handmade to fit its situation, have a neutral gravitas that fits their function, looking into the past in one direction and into the future in the other. Disconnected from individual human lives, they impassively reveal the surrounding scenes. It is up to the individuals to take what they will from what they see.
Assimilation and Mediation

Negotiation in Design and Construction

This short narrative of some main design and construction issues highlights the process of negotiation between the designers and the clients, the contractor and the building manager—and between the designers themselves.

The rusted steel was to imply a scale-less, timeless feel while adding a tactile, non-uniform and uniquely coloured finish to each portal. Chosen early on as a visually striking surface that evoked age and timelessness simultaneously, it was scrapped by the client at one point for lack of a guaranteed level of quality.

When the rust was eliminated, I thought the project itself might take on a different feel. The portals could become internally lit, reassuringly bright and flawless, but perhaps somewhat sterile; or they could become more emotionally buoyant, perhaps painted an airy light blue or a lemony yellow, lending a more human and optimistic look to the project. Hoanh refused to consider an alternative and his gut connection to the rust finish drove us to make an extra effort to retain it through a very uncertain point in the project. I found some simple methods for quick rusting and also sourced a coating that would not diminish the brightness of the rust. We made a series of new models with various finishes to show the client while making it clear that we favoured the rust.

The client agreed to go forward with the untried rust finish based on their long association with the contractor. Our own experiences with the contractor further reinforced that trust. The ability to deal directly with the contractor and have him agree to experiment and improvise so heavily with untried techniques in such a small project is something more common in Vietnam than in developed parts of the world.
The entry gate, originally hideaway metal grilles, later became a large swinging panel masking the kitchen while providing a bar for events through fold-down flaps. In the built version, the gate swings open flush into a wall niche, the glowing panel becoming a backlit entry marker immediately visible from the top of the stairs. At the clients’ request, it allows a glimpse inside after gallery hours while still providing security.

The gate developed into a collection of expressed functional elements composed into a striking opening statement. It was made of raw, layered plywood with the edges and patches exposed as a design element. A supporting wheel inset into the gate aligned with the raw steel rod pull matching the raw steel of the plasma cut backlight signage. The lighted panels were screened with stainless steel factory belting misused as an inexpensive, glowing light filter.

The garden was to be a nature-clad mediator between the public corridor and the minimalist gallery space. Hoanh envisioned a vertical garden and was enthusiastically supported by Quynh, but the building supervisor prohibited any plantings in the garden to “avoid drainage problems”, though the space has been open to the sky and rain for the entire life of the building. The garden was left stripped of everything that would have given it texture. An unbuilt re-design for the garden involves non-living materials—negotiation continues.

The project met resistance from the building manager throughout the process, affecting the skylight, the outer portal, the gate and the garden. In Vietnam, for better or worse, all relationships are personal and none had been initiated between the client and the building manager before construction began.

Our communications with our craftsmen used methods and tools opportunistically, combining western high-tech with local face-to-face interaction and hand-sketched modifications. The portal details, for example, were roughly blocked out on a computer.
printed at A3, clarified, noted and otherwise finished after hours with pen and white-out, usually in a cafe or at lunch, immediately photographed with my tablet and emailed to the contractor from wherever I was at the time. This amalgam of different levels of technology allowed me to sketch details quickly, untying me from my computer and avoiding the lost time to make check prints, redlines, revisions, and final prints. The craftsmen appreciated it too.

It was quick and communicated my ideas to them with a minimum of complexity or delay and affirmed the value of working across cultural situations, taking advantage of aspects from both sides.

Sustainability
To mitigate the owners' loss in construction investment and to avoid generating excess waste, we designed the gallery as a series of insertions. Knowing about the coming demolition of the building, we concentrated on making insertions the owners could take with them when they left rather than concentrating on the next life of the space.

The steel portals were designed to be fabricated off-site and inserted into the building, making them easier to dismantle and reuse in a new gallery design when the building is destroyed. The wood floor, the reinforced art-hanging wall surfaces and the high-tech ceiling lighting fixture were also intended from the start to be someday dismantled and reused by the clients, aligning with the concept of the gallery as an instrument for observation and reflection inserted into an existing fabric.
The Certainty of Uncertainty

The population of the building, while trending towards gentrification in shops and cafes, still had a fair number of Vietnamese working-class residents at the time the gallery was built. This created a rather sensitive situation of foreigners and Vietnamese from out of the neighbourhood overwhelming the residents during the day, traversing areas of semi-public space that had before been the sole domain of families.

Certain passageways into the courtyard are still off limits for non-residents, and disapproval is expressed either with a loud admonition or an even louder silence. The tension arises from so many of the passageways being used as an extension of the tiny home spaces as is the Vietnamese way. Areas where items are left out and children play must now be patrolled, whereas before, trust of one’s neighbours sufficed to provide security.

For Galerie Quynh, though, the task of assimilation into the building’s old guard is complicated by the residents’ knowledge of the economic distance between the world of buyers of contemporary art and the world of the working-class Vietnamese.

It doesn’t help that their rents are probably rising. The population is changing. The building used to house a mix of Vietnamese-run shops on the ground floor with Vietnamese-occupied apartments upstairs, but now includes several global brands downstairs and new cafes, boutiques and other businesses upstairs with fewer and fewer apartments still occupied by Vietnamese families. As gentrification continues, the Vietnamese occupants of the old courtyard would eventually be priced out of the location—if the building were not going to be demolished first.

The historic building housing this latest incarnation of Galerie Quynh will, like many other venerable structures in central Ho Chi Minh City, be transformed. The public realm unfolds as the community is redefined by a new set of users. The Certainty of Uncertainty is offered up in this transformation, with the past, present and future of the space all playing their parts in the reconfiguration of the community.
City, be destroyed in the next two years. A major development corporation already controls the building and dispersal of the tenants is in its early stages.

Quynh herself is no stranger to the abrupt displacements that have become the norm in growth-focused cities, having built four galleries in less than a decade. She did a very involved and expensive renovation in another wonderful old colonial building on Nguyen Thi Minh Khai Street in District 1 a few years ago only to have the building demolished one month into her occupancy. Nobody knows better than Quynh that in Vietnam a lease is not even close to a guarantee. She too has been displaced before and soon will be again.

This type of uncertainty has become the norm in Ho Chi Minh City as it has in many cities in the world, and, to best serve our clients, we have incorporated this situation into our designs. But this should not be seen as a blanket acceptance of all development as being desirable. At the moment, it is the norm. Whether it can be characterised as normal is another question.

Conclusion

Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi was an atypical project—richer in possibilities, richer in setting, richer in design autonomy—and we brought to it a complex combination of ideas that we had been developing over the history of our practice. In many ways, it is the conclusion (to date) of my architectural practice research in built form.

The same themes are present, Fertility, Negotiation and Transience, but playing different roles than they did when I arrived in Vietnam.

The fertility of Vietnam, with its approachable and accommodating craftsmen and its availability of unusual materials, is no less exciting, but the role of fertility has broadened from something to be
explored, through something to be celebrated, to a powerful resource to be utilised in the service of whatever design agenda we choose to pursue.

We trusted our craftsmen to develop from my initial input a reliable method for rusting the steel, which they succeeded at, meanwhile accommodating us as we developed the steel portal designs with construction already under way. They produced the layered plywood reception desk in 48 hours, providing a beautifully clean-lined piece of furniture using a totally unfamiliar method of fabrication.

Negotiation expanded from balancing the different forces on the project, to a larger role of mediating the interests of the many groups of people whose lives are affected by this project. In this case it led us to make a sociological statement addressing the cultural situation of the city and referencing the greater global situation.

Transience, the rapid change that has redefined the task of designing architecture in the world today, became part of the theme of the project as an unavoidable product of the interplay between the two cultures. It was also incorporated into our design process, influencing both the general design approach of insertions as well as the design of reusable elements such as the lighting fixture. We accepted the current Vietnamese situation as being unavoidably subject to rapid change and the uncertainty that it brings.

My process has come full circle, with an architecture rooted in observation of the city finally producing architecture as a device for observing the city. With this development, my two types of research, that of observation and that of design, have blurred into each other.
Ms. Mai is still at her corner on Dong Khoi daily, selling drinks and collecting laundry, having added T-shirts and postcards to her small street corner shop. Her daughter helps her out quite a bit these days. Mai’s entire community just across the river in Thu Thiem was recently wiped clean so that construction of the huge new Sasaki-designed development could begin. The old ferry that for decades took pedestrians, pushcarts, bicycles and motorcycles back and forth from District 1 to Thu Thiem has been closed—the ferry boats have been taken away, some say scrapped or perhaps sent to the Delta to work the Mekong.

It’s doubtful any of the venues in the new development will be for people like Mai—average Vietnamese with an average Vietnamese income. The emphasis will be on high-end apartments, luxury shopping malls and office buildings. The plans show no hems for Vietnamese neighbourhood life to exist. If the new development is run like Phu My Hung in District 7, people like Mai will be prohibited from running a small business like hers. Mai’s part of the city has been erased and is now being replaced by an entirely different city for an entirely different population, one that may not include her.

She now lives in Binh Duong, about an hour away by motorbike, whereas Thu Thiem was 5 minutes away. Taking laundry to her house and bringing it back involves hours of travel time not counting the time needed for washing. In early 2014 she had a motorcycle accident. Her arm was in a cast for a few weeks. In November, she was diagnosed with high blood pressure after having a severe headache that didn’t let up for days. Some days she looks tired, but she smiles and perseveres.

Recently, Mr. Hieu, the xe om, disappeared from his post at the alley corner on Le Loi Street—some health problem, we heard. Later we found that he had had a seizure right there on the sidewalk and was taken to the hospital. For a long time we never dug deeper into the outcome, maybe deliberately, both Hoanh and I preferring to hold out hope that he simply retired to play chess under a tree all day, perhaps napping in the early afternoons.
I still use xe om often, though some tell me their lot is tougher now. In District 1, the tourists are scarcer for the moment, and there are more semi-professional xe om brought into the mix by the recent uptick in unemployment due to the economic downturn.

In 2014, the annual Houston Art Car Parade took place on May 10, getting under way on a grey morning that turned bright and hot by noon. A large number of people came to browse the cars and meet old friends. Families came with lawn chairs and ice chests.

There were over 200 entries from all over the country. The types of entries were mixed. There were sponsored advertisements such as the Saint Arnold’s Beer car and the Idaho Potato truck. There were low riders and rolling band platforms.

There was also a small core of oddball entries hand-fabricated by truly committed people who simply love making things. Some of these people have been fielding entries for years. Encountering these vehicles up close, at least a few young people were introduced to the idea that what can exist does not have to be limited to what is available for purchase. For those with a strong enough need—or desire—something can always be made.

Not far from Hieu’s corner, Anh Thiep still fixes bikes on the corner of Dong Du Street. It has been a few months, but so far he has not been evicted by the new Starbucks. The one-man motorbike repair shop powered by a box of hand tools and a lifetime of experience tenuously shares the corner with the global coffee shop giant.

My bike broke down again recently. It was a rather involved problem, but Thiep didn’t dismantle the engine there as he used to, instead taking it elsewhere to repair it and returning with it later. I wonder if his space and activities are being squeezed.

Before, I always made the gesture of taking coffee and a snack at JAVA cafe during repairs to demonstrate to the cafe owner that Thiep’s business helped support the cafe. The owner, often there at his cafe, seemed to take note. This time though, with JAVA long gone, I went into the Starbucks instead to have a coffee and make the same point. The owner of Starbucks was not present.

The cultural shoreline runs right through Thiep’s street corner—for the moment.

Recently, Houston passed its first preservation ordinance with any real ability to prevent the destruction of historic buildings. It is expanding its light rail service through the city, and the parks and other urban amenities are showing tangible signs of improvement. Downtown there is a visible effort to add street frontages and replicate the street life that late twentieth-century development subtracted from the city centre. There are signs that a certain level of maturity is being approached as the maverick developers of Houston’s early boom age out of the picture and the city settles into its role as a major urban centre of the U.S. The city is trying to make up part of what development destroyed in the last century, but the scale and detail of what was erased can never be replaced. This, as Ho Chi Minh City rushes in the opposite direction.

The recent brightening economic picture brought mixed results to Vietnam ranging from a few good new designs appearing in Ho Chi Minh City to a loosening of the financial constraints that had delayed demolition of some of its most beautiful and venerable buildings.

The entire block of buildings surrounding the old Maison De Ville, now the People’s Committee of Ho Chi Minh City, is slated for demolition, including one of the oldest French colonial buildings still extant in the city, as well as an Art Deco masterpiece at 213 Dong Khoi, which has already been destroyed. Very recently, however, instructions have been issued to the firms designing the new block of municipal buildings for the block, instructing them to preserve the old building at Dong Khoi and Ly Tu Trong.

This change of attitude came too late for 213 Dong Khoi, however. Behind a hoarding featuring photos of other Ho Chi Minh City landmark buildings not yet obliterated, the 1920s era apartment building was demolished after a year of unoccupied limbo. While much of the etched Art Deco window glass was smashed out by sledgehammer, and many of the wrought steel gates and balustrades no one could duplicate today were chopped out and sold for scrap, some were salvaged with an aim for reusing them in new structures. I heard from a mutual friend that Tran Binh, the owner of Cuc Gach Quan, salvaged as many doors,
windows and steel elevator grilles as he could for reuse in new designs.

The old Dong Khoi Deco masterpiece with its lofty ceilings, generous canopy and gracious stairs with relatively intact detailing, was an obvious candidate for renovation into a boutique hotel, something Ho Chi Minh City has many of in name, but utterly lacks in reality.

One block away, a new ‘boutique’ hotel tower is rising, to be festooned with pre-manufactured plasterwork meant to somehow transform the building into an example of the ‘traditional’ (presumably French colonial) architecture of Saigon. HTA + pizzini was approached to do the construction documentation only, as the design had apparently already been finalised. We responded with a fee proposal to generate a new design along with a full package of architectural services. I don’t remember receiving a reply.

On a diagonal corner to 213 Dong Khoi is the Catinat at 26 Ly Tu Trong. A building from the same era, it is currently enjoying a renaissance. Long understood to be next in line for demolition after 213 Dong Khoi, it is now being colonised by design offices and new loft-style cafes and eateries and has become a hub of activity for the new crowd of young design-oriented Vietnamese and foreigners. It is at a plateau in the development cycle – it will probably be demolished within two years. Still, the increased profits to be made from renting to increasingly upscale tenants skew the math in favour of postponing evicting the inhabitants for a longer interval. The building has a wealth of good details even though it is more modest than the building just reduced to dust in front of it. It is one of the best the city still has, for the moment.

Our own building, at nearby 42bis Ly Tu Trong, has acquired three new fashion boutiques in the upper floors. At ground level there is a new 24-hour cafe, directly adjoining the sidewalk cafe of one of the older tenants. For better and worse, we were the first in the increasing trend of gentrification that is rejuvenating the building, enriching some apartment owners even as it disperses their old community by making it more profitable for them to live elsewhere and rent out their old apartments. More tenuous is the situation of the renters who stand to be displaced as rents rise.
A new trend of design using a loft approach and straightforwardly occupying the remaining old buildings is making itself seen across the city, catering to the young and trendy crowd. Ironically, this new appreciation of older city fabric may owe a lot in its origins to the Internet and the global Brooklyn style and its siblings such as the ruin bars of Eastern Europe.

Ho Chi Minh City, ironically, is having a DIY moment, colonising the old chung cu for boutique startups and trendy homegrown vintage shops. In many ways, it resembles in miniature the worldwide punk/DIY movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s. This is being fuelled by the youth of the population (the median age of Vietnam was 29 in 2012), their energy, and cheap rents (for the moment, until the building is destroyed). Boutique shops and vintage shops are now sprouting in the old apartment buildings slated for destruction, but with the recent added twist that they resemble more the squats of the 1980s East Village than a self-consciously trendy establishment.

In the trendier boutiques, however, this interest in older buildings has overtones of aestheticisation. In our building, I see 1930s terrazzo tile flooring being covered by new vinyl flooring coloured to look like raw concrete. Apparently there are signifiers for ‘authenticity’ as well. Still, the trend has had a role in promoting the existing urban fabric in Ho Chi Minh City at least for the moment. This colonising of the old apartment buildings by commercial venues has also effectively opened the buildings up to visitors who are not residents or their visitors. This has raised the profile of these types of buildings and helped normalise them in spite of unfavourable local press decrying them as unsafe. Saigon reflected back at Saigonese through the mirror of New York might have been the key to changing the mindset of Vietnamese regarding existing colonial buildings.

Could this be a viable starting point for communicating the value of all of the other worthwhile aspects of Vietnamese culture that are being discarded as Vietnam globalises?

Did HTA + pizzini play a part in this reset in understanding?

Vietnam continues to work—in its own way. The networks by which the city feeds, clothes, employs and transports its inhabitants continue to evolve, informed by the two systems opposing each other across the cultural shoreline. Where on the spectrum the new culture of Vietnam will situate itself is still an open question.
Notes - EMBEDMENT


2. Ibid.


4. www.saigoneer.com
Right:
In District 1 of Ho Chi Minh City, the block of Ton That Dam Street in District 1, between Huynh Thuc Khang and Ham Nghi Boulevard, is said by some to be the oldest market in District 1—old Saigon. This is a street still mostly lined with low-rise buildings in front of which a line of stalls has been erected. For such a tiny market, it sells a surprisingly wide variety of things and even includes a row of meat sellers, two stalls of which are shown here. The Bitexco Tower, at the time of its construction the tallest building in Vietnam, stands one block beyond in the background.
District 1, HCMC, 2012 © Archie Pizzini
CONCLUSIONS

Summation

My research focuses on the context of Vietnam, a place where Vietnamese and global cultures are on full display and available for comparison. This close study of this current Vietnamese cultural situation, which offers a microcosm of the global situation, can furnish understanding benefitting the global practice of architecture.

This document covers two bodies of research, the first being the close observation of Vietnam through photography and the understanding gained through reflection on that body of work; and the second being the exploration through architectural practice of how that understanding can be used to better contemporary architectural design, especially with a focus towards sustainability, resilience and the empowerment of individuals.

My research through photography produced the following understandings:

- Vietnam has a fully functioning culture very different from global culture that offers many alternatives superior, in some aspects, to global culture.
- Central to those alternatives is a situation favourable to individual endeavours and personal networking, enabling localised systems.
- Knowledge gained from Vietnamese culture can be incorporated beneficially into a contemporary practice of architecture.
- This has global relevance.

My research through architectural practice tracks several progressions in my work:

- The role of Vietnam's opportunities for making as it changed from an interesting local anomaly to be explored, to an intoxicating resource for making—the subject of projects, to a tool useful in the service of a higher agenda.
- My role as an architect as it changed from that of a negotiator of project needs in the service of a client's agenda, to that of a keeper of an agenda separate from the client's arrived at by an in-depth understanding of the context and the forces to be negotiated within it.
- My attitude towards change and uncertainty as it shifted from an adversarial relationship to one of acceptance into the design process.

This research process has produced a framework for my continued architectural practice consisting of three things:

- a mindset
- an approach to design
- an expanded role as architect
1 A Mindset

I have put forward a mindset for contemporary designers that fosters connection to one’s social and physical environment. Based on rasquachismo, it contains a thrift-conscious bias towards adaptation fuelled by ingenuity and enabled by an environment of face-to-face relationships that favours individual endeavours.

This proposed mindset draws from characteristics of Vietnamese street culture, a repository of examples of how cultural features, urban fabric and contextual limitations can be synthesised into a way of life. One purpose of this research has been to understand this disappearing and often disparaged street culture, document it in detail and show its advantageous aspects through photography, teaching and architecture.

The following are key elements of Vietnamese street culture useful for building that mindset.

a) Empowerment of Individuals through Loose Controls
A large proportion of the Vietnamese population makes a living through self-employment. Loose controls, especially over the use of public space, enable these people to support themselves through micro-businesses and individual entrepreneurship. The environment of loose controls and the society of face-to-face networking empower individuals to support themselves outside of corporate structures. Individual entrepreneurship discourages wasteful practices since the consequences are visited directly on the individual. Repair and adaptation are also encouraged for the same reason.

b) Systems of Localised Networks
Individual enterprises link themselves into systems of small local networks that tend towards thrift and reduction of waste, supporting sustainable behaviour by necessity. These systems are intertwined with Vietnamese culture and the urban fabric, so maintenance of these interconnected systems demands a different type of architectural space and urban fabric than the one many foreign firms import. Close observation of this intertwining can give insights for design. People’s lives have shaped these spaces, making them excellent examples of how spaces can be made to accommodate or shape lives.

c) Seeing in Adjectives
Vietnamese street culture contains a specific way of seeing attuned to the qualities and usefulness of objects and materials. It sees beyond options excluded through naming and marketing, and foregrounds adjectives rather than nouns. For example, an item is not simply a used rubber inner tube, but a closed membrane of waterproof elastic material. This makes the difference between whether an inner tube is thrown in a landfill after it is punctured several times or is cut up to create rubber bands or bungee cords, or even re-configured into zip bags and pouches. Seeing in adjectives runs parallel to an acknowledgement of the worth of ingenuity, which creates a place for improvisation and making in the process of design.
e) Respect for Context  
Rasquachismo operates from the standpoint that the context contains the solution to the problem. Using rasquachismo requires becoming more connected with one’s environment, both social and natural. It favours a mindset of working within a system and trying to negotiate a solution while fitting into the context. This can be preferable to ignoring or erasing the context, which are both strategies that can be costly in terms of sustainability.

2 An Approach to Design  
This approach is based on close observation, reflection and understanding. It acknowledges an uncertain lifespan while focusing on ideas as well as built space.

a) Observation, Reflection and Understanding  
Before beginning design, I propose first commencing the process with close observation and reflection leading to an understanding of the complex web of systems that underlies an urban situation. Fuller understanding of the context precipitates knowing what to design, suggesting that a detailed analysis of the context, both architectural and sociological, should precede even programming the brief. Embedment in the situation helps. Getting to know the cultural networks from the inside is a quicker and more thorough path to understanding the bigger picture.

Arriving at the right response requires a deep evaluation of the situation—physical, cultural, temporal together with an assessment of the full range of possible responses that could be employed. These could be from global culture, local culture or pieced together from elements of both. The appropriate response might be a permanent structure or a temporary one, an intervention or an implied space. Sometimes it could be a subtraction or excavation. Sometimes the best approach might be to do nothing at all. The first task should not be to build, but to understand.

b) Incorporation of Transience  
In an increasingly unstable built environment, impermanence can be incorporated into the design process, shifting focus from the longevity of a building to how a project interacts with people on a minute-to-minute basis and how it accommodates shifts in function with a minimum of waste. Trying to ensure permanence is less fruitful than accommodating change. Designing for flexibility might favour insertions and interventions to avoid the waste incurred when architecture is completely destroyed and completely rebuilt. This inclusion of flexibility is closely related to an embrace of collaboration.

c) Ideas  
Ideas are at least as important as buildings. Making architecture can consist as much of communicating ideas and understanding as it does of constructing objects and spaces.

3 An Expanded Role as Architect  
The architect can fulfil a role as the mediator of the interests of all parties affected by the project and an agenda including sustainability and valuing the context that supports the existing society.

a) Mediating Outside the Brief  
The body of knowledge the architect keeps custody of for society includes not only spatial intelligence but systemic intelligence as well—the way the project and its context, both physical and sociological, interconnect. The architect should endeavour to understand the context and its systems and strive to benefit the existing society, not only the client, by striving to ensure the health of the system.

This is an old idea, but one that has become muted as mechanical means have become prevalent in dealing with the physical environment. Design forms are now often transplanted globally without consideration of context, and societies have become more homogeneous, losing ties to their immediate environment.
The architect’s design process should mediate not only the limitations and requirements on the project, but also the needs of the people that are affected. The architect should consider all parties involved, excluding as few uses and populations as possible.

The architect’s role should expand beyond that of simply producing a building that satisfies a client’s professed needs. The architect must mediate the different temporal, cultural, ethical and sociological conditions involved, each of which carries with it limitations and opportunities. The architect must negotiate between old and new, global and local while encouraging nuance and complexity, meanwhile building in opportunities for adaptation and the use of ingenuity.

b) Preservation
My position is not to advocate preserving every bit of the built context. Such a position is not realistic for many reasons including the obsolescence of much of the city’s existing infrastructure as well as the momentum of developers. I do see value in preserving the ideas and strategies embedded within the culture, however. The situation of Vietnam is one where individuals and micro-groups experiment daily with ways to reap benefit from the tiniest of opportunities, minimising waste through necessity. These strategies can be preserved, not as dead artefacts, but as active considerations underpinning future development. They cover a wide spectrum and include such things as: changing daily rhythms to avoid unpleasant weather instead of depleting resources to negate it; seeing the environment with a mindset alert to identifying anything with possibilities for repurposing; and being willing to use adaptation, repair and improvisation in the service of thrift and efficiency.

To a certain degree, this involves preserving certain qualities in the architecture and urban fabric. This is not to say that I advocate stopping change, but change could be better planned with an informed understanding of the culture and the architecture and urban fabric that supports it.

c) Sustainability
Sustainability can be promoted not only through the use of sustainable construction practices but also in the type of society that is advanced through the design. This could be accomplished through the following:

• Facilitating localised networks that promote sustainability though scaling down quantities and distances.
• Studying sustainable design in indigenous and colonial structures that provide in situ examples of proven strategies.
• Promoting sustainable social practices that have evolved to deal with the climate and that mitigate the climate’s effects with minimal ecological costs.
• Reinforcing thrift and the reduction of waste promoted by the small scale of commercial enterprises in the culture.
• Promoting sustainability by using local and small-scale enterprises for implementation of projects. This also strengthens the systems that provide it.
• Seeking opportunities through design to avoid the waste inherent in destroying and building anew.
• Seeking ways to do more with less through adaptation, flexibility, reduction of built volume and repurposing.
CONCLUSION

Adaptation, repurposing and mis-use in aspects of several projects, presenting them frankly as low-cost, high-ingenuity refutations of the assumed superiority of factory made and/or branded products.

I have utilised close cultural observation of Vietnam into my practice of architecture in service of supporting the existing population, their lifestyles and livelihoods; and connecting understanding from different disciplines into the synthesis of architecture. I observe the social systems in Vietnam and use it to inform my architectural design. I augment it with understanding from other practitioners including anthropologists, artists and architects.

This has global relevance as global corporate firms design large projects (including large-scale projects in Vietnam going back to the 1990s (see page 70) without ever attempting to understand the cultural complexities of the lives they will be affecting.

Implementation

Finding a Role for Change

I have incorporated transience—the rapid change evident throughout the contemporary environment—as a catalyst for new design strategies. I have re-oriented my design process to accept and utilise change, promoting resilience and flexibility in my designs by concentration on building less, implying spaces through placement, and designing for reuse. Ideas and communication have been foregrounded making relative permanence a less crucial aspect of my work.

A Counterbalancing Voice

I am promoting an alternative view to the assumption that unlimited and unquestioning growth and globalisation is the most desirable course in all places and situations. I promote awareness of the richness and ingenuity within the existing society that is being erased. I developed my architecture as an instrument for observation, while embedding our practice within the existing Vietnamese context and using local craftsmen in the projects. Through focusing attention on the erasure of this context I also question the effects and motives of currently unquestioned development.

Architectural fabric cannot be separated from social fabric. Architecture grows out of social fabric just as social fabric generates architecture. New architecture dictates a type of social fabric and uninformed new architecture has far greater repercussions than design opportunities lost.

In current large scale development, new architecture is often dictated by entities...
that measure benefit in narrow terms not always tied to broader benefit to society as a whole. This should be recognised and questioned. Some measures of benefit used to justify development are tied to notions of worth and value that should also be questioned. This document suggests a framework for that questioning.

This is not a call for the elimination of globalisation; it is an attempt to foster balance in a situation where extant alternatives are being eliminated.

I don't see the situation of Vietnam as flawless, and I am not advocating a return of worldwide society to the type of city I have documented in my photos. I am presenting this knowledge as raw material to be incorporated where it is useful into the new design strategies that are being developed to deal with the needs of present day societies.

Tying Architectural and Urban Issues to Interdisciplinary Knowledge

My method in engagement and in architectural practice is to tie the practice of architecture to close observation of the context and deepen my understanding through incorporating the viewpoints of disciplines such as, but not limited to, history, anthropology, sociology and psychology.

At the moment, the global situation seems to encourage developing new technological systems for developing cities and lifestyles. This constant re-development often comes with a high ecological cost and bears an implied antagonism with the social fabric of cities as they exist today. The perspectives of other disciplines can deepen understanding of the way that built fabric is intertwined with social fabric, economics and cultural attributes (to name just a few aspects), broadening the ways in which current biases antagonistic to the existing natural and social environment could be re-evaluated in favour of ideas rooted in thrift, sustainability and resilience such as those embedded in the culture of Vietnam.

Engagement

Through teaching, presentations, photo exhibitions and architectural work I disseminate my understanding of Vietnam and suggest how it can benefit architectural design in the world today.

I expose visiting students and associates to unfamiliar concepts through immersion in the cultural situation. This immersion, supplemented by advice on where to look and what to look for, permits close observation of unfamiliar situations in situ and dispels questions of feasibility. It is the most powerful way to bring new ideas to others.

Within the context of Vietnam are design ideas for enhancing the lives of people without adding layers of often monetarily and environmentally expensive products, as can be the case today. These design ideas have not only been tested, they have evolved over decades of symbiosis with the lives of the people they serve.

This ADR, my presentation and my exhibition are part of an effort to organise and make available the knowledge within Vietnamese society as well as to put forward ideas about how this knowledge can advance the practice of architecture in contemporary society.
Ca Phe May Bay, the airplane cafe, is closed now; the old airliner is derelict, acquiring graffiti (a relatively recent addition to Vietnamese cityscapes) and awaiting what comes next.

Maybe it will soon be gone, cut up for scrap—re-recycled, perhaps to fly again in some future incarnation after its long rest under the trees.

The block in District 1 where the original La Fenetre Soleil and its wonderfully strange staircase existed is still empty after five years, but the owner, Takayuki Sawamura, wasted little time in opening a subsequent La Fenetre Soleil in the building next door to our current office location. It is popular with Japanese tourists, hip young Vietnamese and their foreign counterparts. At first it hosted salsa and swing dancing in the late evening like the previous cafe did, but it’s now trending towards electronic music and a hipster clientele. Recently, their prices jumped noticeably. Perhaps their rent is rising.

In the park across the street, skateboarders and BMX riders, unknown in 2005, hone their stunts at night, but in the hot afternoons, people still take ca phe sua da in lawn chairs on the small plaza, just as they have done for years.

The old French colonial villa where Hieu’s sister, Thao lived is gone, replaced by a third-rate office building, yet the community of the alley corner survives.

We recently heard that Hieu survived his stroke, but was left unable to drive a motorbike. Ms. Thao still serves drinks at the mouth of the alley at Tet when the boulevard is closed to motor traffic—an on most afternoons she serves banh mi, Vietnamese sandwiches in the alley. The old xe om and his wife, the cigarette seller, still occupy their posts daily as does the gregarious drunk (now somewhat reformed!) xe om/mechanic.

Incredibly, the old French colonial villa on Nam Ky Khoi Nghia Street that Hoanh repurposed into Bun Ta restaurant a decade before survived the downturn, albeit fenced in by hoardings and empty since 2010. In early 2014 it reopened as a new dining venue, in many ways little changed from
CONCLUSION

the design Hoanh enacted when he saved and renovated the old house in 2004. It occurs to me that the villa probably survived until now because of his design, the turning point having come when he saw value in the old structure and brought it into a state where all could recognise it.

With the recent morphing of the old villa into a new iteration, Hoanh became part of the layers of Saigon, another collaborator enmeshed in the fabric of his city.

In late December 2014, we learned that 151 Dong Khoi, the historic building housing Galerie Quynh, had been acquired by a very large entity controlling many properties lining Nguyen Hue Avenue one block over. 151 Dong Khoi will probably not survive 2016. The process of evicting all tenants, commercial and residential, has been set in motion.

Quynh and Rob have already found a new space, not only because of Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi’s imminent destruction, but also because of the closing of their other gallery location on De Tham Street. The new space will be their sixth in eleven years. They have come to view all of their spaces as temporary, you could say they have adjusted to the transient nature of Ho Chi Minh City, and the world in general, at this moment in history.

Nguyen Hue Boulevard, now under renovation, is fenced off up to the sidewalks of the buildings that adjoin it. A pedestrian promenade is planned for the boulevard occupying the site of the old canal from several centuries ago. Its a brave move for a city so pressured by traffic congestion, which could return the street to an earlier, less auto-centric conception of street usage, but it also seems to be part of a larger dynamic said to involve the consolidation of most of the adjoining properties under a very large development group. This may not bode well for the remaining small-scale commercial spaces and historical buildings. The renderings of the new spaces of the centre city give clues to the type of spaces to be built, the activities it’s envisioned will occur there and the population those spaces might welcome. Which way the new space drives the central city all depends on from which side of the cultural shoreline the definition of public space is taken.
Exhibition and Presentation—**IN SITU**

The exhibition, entitled **IN SITU HIEN TRANG**, took place in Galerie Quynh Dong Khoi from April 10 through May 2, 2015. It was designed and executed in tandem with Hoanh Tran, my business partner, and was the location for both of our presentations and examinations.

My presentation covered the context of Vietnam aided by the exhibition of five enlarged photos taken from the ADR and its appendix as well as five large text/photo pieces taken from the pages of this ADR.

The aspect of rasquachismo was also covered, aided by the display of several handcrafted improvised artefacts collected in Vietnam in the last decade.

The exhibition also included a large piece entitled **You Are Here** overlaying several maps of Saigon through history with corresponding images, which was used in the presentation to demonstrate Hoanh’s and my differing, but aligned conceptions of the city. Though our conceptions of the city overlap, Hoanh’s core understanding of the city focuses on its historic/cultural layers. My core conception of the city is that of an organic series of systems that favours and supports a collection of micro-interventions.

As an architectural exhibition, the show was conceived of as including the gallery space itself and its immediate context. This was used in the presentation to illustrate and discuss the cultural shoreline by highlighting the gallery’s location within the city and our design approach to the gallery space.

Aspects of the gallery space were also used to discuss aspects of the project and my architectural responses to them, fleshing out the details of the architecture and how they came to be.
Left:
Invitation notecard for the exhibition
Layout by Rob Cianci for Galerie Quynh

Right Above:
One of the enlarged photos shown in the exhibition
© Archie Pizzini

Right Below:
Close-up of the table displaying items of rasquachismo and the ADR books.
© Archie Pizzini
Những ngày cuối của cuộc chiến tranh Mỹ, một chiếc máy bay dân dụng bay từ Sài Gòn đến Hồng Kong, rồi bị bỏ lại ở đó sau khi phi công và phi hành đoàn trốn về phía Tây. Nhiều tháng trời nó nằm đó chờ đợi mỏi mòn trong quên lãng cho đến khi có người biết lái chiếc máy bay dân dụng của Mỹ mang nó trở về. Ngay sau đó, nó lập tức trở thành chiếc máy bay đầu đàn trong đội bay của hãng hàng không Việt Nam, và tiếp tục phục vụ những chuyến bay thương mại. Tuy nhiên, chi phí vận hành vượt quá tầm với của ngành hàng không quốc gia vào thời đó. Chẳng bao lâu sau, người ta đưa nó vào đậu gần trụ sở của hãng hàng không, nhưng cuộc đời lao động của nó chưa kết thúc tại đó!

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