

INVESTIGATING SPECIFICITY

ETH Studio Basel has been working for five years on urban portraits of international metropolises. This research was part of a joint program dealing with “specificity”: Our aim was to show why cities that are drawn into the undertow of global developments do not, as might be expected, become immersed in placeless uniformity, but develop new differentiations. In the most general sense, this research raised the question of which role “identity” will play in a world that tends to set off similar mechanisms of urban development across the globe. In brief, the results can be summarized as follows: The differences and specificities that these metropolises develop are different from the traditional hallmarks of identity in organically evolved cities. But they have retained the dual – and ambiguous – character that has always distinguished the special traits of cities. The new qualities, of course, also exhibit the characteristics of a “culture of difference”; they showcase the determination of an urban society to establish non-exchangeability, i.e., identity, under the new conditions. But urban differentiation is by no means only a matter of agenda. Differences that are not the result of intentional action are evidence of the fact that globalization is inevitably subject to the physical nature of the location and the anthropological conditions. Globalization can neither overcome topography or the climate, nor can it exceed the limitations of resources or the local exposure to the forces of nature. “Specificity”, one might say, is also the doomed attempt of mankind to shed the bonds of discrete, conditional existence completely in favor of a global promise.

During the past several years we have learnt a lot about the transformation processes of contemporary cities under globalization pressures. But what is the impact of these forces on territories, beyond the clear gravitational fields of metropolitan centers? In order to find concrete answers we have ventured this year to the territory of Northern Vietnam, named once Tonkin by the French, an ancient, levelled, intricate and rich agricultural landscape, where the whirring of the 90+ million inhabitants has caught our attention. This project continues ETH Studio Basel’s territorial researches in Switzerland (1999-2005), the Nile Valley (2009), Rome -The Adriatic (2010), and Florida (2011), which clearly show ways in which densely populated environments invent new types of space: traditional natural or rural areas turn into urbanized territories characterized by a multilayered occupation of landscape, overlapping structures and meanings.

In the recent past the Vietnamese government has consciously shifted its paradigm from introvert ‘keeper’ of collective ideals and identity, toward an extrovert ‘mediator’ working now as a filtering agent between outside and inside, inviting globalization but under scrutiny. In the ‘Doi Moi’ economic reforms started in 1985, the country has introduced the notion of ‘possibility’ into a formerly rigid system. All of a sudden it seems, people are able to move around looking for opportunity, change who they are, or better yet, become it. The Free Market Economy, albeit still heavily facilitated by the state, is the promise of this opportunity. The consequences of this shift are immediate, the generation that is coming into its own today has already disconnected and uprooted itself from the life of their parents. Such a delicate state of society seems to offer a unique case study into our own investigations.



THE RED RIVER DELTA – RICE BOWL OF ASIA

The Vietnamese landscape has been formed incrementally over a very long period of time, starting as far back as the Neolithic Early Bronze Age 4000 years ago, when the people first settled the flatlands of the delta of the Red River. Wet-rice cultivation, which dates back to 1200 BC, formulated the landscape into what it still looks like today, as the method for it's cultivation scarcely allows for modernisation. Traditionally, the Vietnamese revered two natural deities, one of Water, and one of Land, and have always perceived their territory as marked only by mountain and river elements, which can be seen in most depictions of the countryside up until the arrival of the French. The French soon introduced a different reading of the Tonkin as they sought determinacy in a foreign land, a cartographic precision was introduced, and infrastructural interventions, especially within settlements (cutting off river armlets, canalizing water flow) all applied mathematical order on top of this natural system. However, if we stick for a while longer on the Vietnamese interpretation of nature, we discover an interactive relationship with the landscape where transformation and reclamation of land has a fixed tradition. This is easily comparable to for instance developments of the Dutch in the Netherlands, which were also quite barely exposed to the elements and had to adapt to the harshness in order to survive, and later on flourish. As a way to create permanence in the Delta, already beginning in the 12th century, Vietnam has implemented an elaborate system of dikes and more recently dams that have tightened the territory, a condition that today still remains frail. Furthermore, the ease of transformation that has been apparent in the last 20 years can also be read in this tradition, and does not come as entirely surprising, it is even unique: our investigations have led us to discover that it is also individuals who independently reclaim land, and have done so long before the government thought of large scale reclamation projects in the tourist zone around UNESCO protected Ha Long Bay.

The desire to adjust, or tweak the land is however not the defining tendency towards the territory. Once reclaimed, and fixed, the polders were ruled by a need for management, constantly keeping the land safe. Historically, the necessity to create dikes necessitated the formation of community, or civilization, in the Delta. This condition, and the constant historical threats that Vietnam has faced from various outside conquerors, has inspired a collective ideal, and it is no surprise that this took a political embodiment once the country finally reached actual independence for almost the first time in history. However it is not only habit that maintains a homogenizing tendency, as we have mentioned already with rice production, it also natural and technological restrictions that don't allow for the process of transformation at all. The meaning that rice production has for Vietnam should not be ignored as a factor: currently Vietnam is the worlds second largest exporter of rice, and the amount of rice that is exported annually is merely 10% of the overall production in the country. This means that a remarkable 90% is consumed locally, which qualifies it as still the most important national product.

LOOSENESS – A HOMOGENIZING TENDENCY

We have described that transformation and inertia can both be considered traditional attitudes towards the landscape. However a special attention is given to discerning contemporary and global forces, and how they fit in, or interact with the territory that has been formed by these traditions.

Similar to our discoveries in the Nile Valley, a global connectivity creates an upward tendency in migration and mobility, requiring very little apparent change, in particular to the way of life. An Egyptian farmer, although now highly mobile via informal transport systems that have emerged almost spontaneously, still remains just that, an Egyptian farmer. In the Red River Delta, migration, in particular rural migration, means a more permanent change, both socially and physically. What is most interesting about this vector of movement is that it is not as was the case in Europe under its 19th Century industrialization period, i.e. a move from periphery to center, from rural hinterlands to quickly clogging cities. Here, people leave the countryside only to settle to a more opportune countryside, however in this process they introduce an entirely urban type into the countryside, the vertical shop-house. The phenomenon spreads evenly across the Delta, evolving to no further hierarchy: a road classified as a highway will have an entirely similar small scale development as a smaller road close a secondary intersection. The phenomenon doesn't accumulate but disperses evenly in a homogenous manner.

A comparable phenomenon has been observed from the urban core of Hanoi outwards. An ease of movement perpetuates a flattening of commercial activity over the territory of the city and outwards of it: again small scale clutters of this commerce seems to be the upward limit. Instead of accumulating and consolidating, and thereby evolving with a hierarchy that would also signal a metropolitan scale for Hanoi, the energy is diffused and escapes into the periphery. This characteristic of a looseness that avoids the large scale, paints an interesting territorial occupation scenario that covers the flat Delta with a fine grain of urban presence, embedding itself onto the natural and agricultural landscape which survives in between much as it has done before.



ITERATIVE TRANSFORMATIONS

This volume frames student work that has explored, observed and described a series of novel processes and their physical and at times societal consequences, which we feel are critical to understanding the transformation of a way of life, as well as the transformation of a territorial entity which seems to have newly re-acquired a state of fragility.

We have been witness to a process of becoming that is very young, the outcome of this becoming we can discuss only as a projection of the initial findings, however something must be said about the dynamism of transformation occurring in different economic and social fields in the Delta. The introduction of Doi Moi economic reforms released forces which were lying latent in the population, and which are seeking out their own natural balance. What remains to be seen in the near future is what sort of influence this current state will inspire in the formal forces, i.e. the political top down forces, which inserted the concept of the Free Market into the Delta in the first place. Although the outcome is unpredictable, the nature of the Doi Moi feels a lot like a conscious experiment, characterized on the one hand by several fixed invariants (the concept of ownership, a liberal market, an orientation towards development for export) coupled with multiple unknown variables that slowly become apparent, to which from the beginning it was imagined a counter reaction would be allowed. Wittingly, the state of affairs shows a maturity of governance in the sense that it is subconsciously recognizing its limits to control all processes happening in the territory.

To put it in legalspeak, since Doi Moi is in effect a set of laws governing this 'new nature', it was conceived as an open law, one that would then be reformulated on a regular basis, as a reaction to observations on the behavior of the variables, back and forth, finally striking an understanding between formal and informal tendencies on the territory. We can clearly observe this if we reflect on the long list of ameliorations that have already been established since 1985, practically on a yearly basis. In the end, one could even say that this iterative logic between the dominant forces in itself need not be finite, but could become the status quo that accompanies and nurtures the fragility of the balance.