

## Conservation and development | Cholon | Ho Chi Minh City



Final Report  
July 2011

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- **HCMC People's Committee:** HCMC Natural Resources and Environment Department, HCMC Transportation Department, HCMC Planning and Investment Department, HCMC-PMU for Urban Transport Projects, Office management and exploitation of road traffic, HCMC Construction Department, HCMC Culture, Sports and Tourism Department, Vestige Conservation Center at HCMC Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, HCMC Steering Center of the Urban Flood Control Program, HCMC Planning Information Center, Ho Chi Minh Institute for Development Studies, HCMC Water supply companies (Cholon Area), HCMC Electric supply companies (Cholon Area).
- **Embassy of Spain,** Economic and Commercial Counsellor Office.
- **HCMC People's Committee of District 5:** Vice-president, Economic Division, Urban Management Division, Cultural Division, Ward 11 and Ward 13.
- **HCMC People's Committee of District 6:** Urban Management Division.
- Ho Chi Minh City Architecture Association, District 5 Business Association; Chinese Sub-Committee; Chinese Association, Architecture University and PADDI.
- Residents and shop owners from District 5 - Wards 10 and 11, and District 6 – Ward 1.

# Executive Summary

# Executive summary

**Background.** Design Convergence Urbanism SL (the Consultant) was appointed in October 2010 by the Department of Planning and Architecture (DPA) of the People's Committee to undertake a study for the preservation and improvement of Cholon, Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). The study is being funded by the Government of Spain.

**Objectives.** The report would provide an actionable framework for conservation and development in Cholon which would support DPA in (1) the rehabilitation of historic assets, (2) the enhancement of public space and (3) the development of tourism. Studying an area of 68 hectares in Cholon, the Consultant will provide recommendations to the People's Committee on:

- Integrated area upgrading, including guidelines for conservation and rehabilitation of its historic assets, the sensitive integration of new development into the area, and the improvement of its public spaces;
- A conceptual urban design for a detailed pilot area of 14 hectares that illustrates application of these guidelines;
- An integrated approach to urban planning and design that could be considered by DPA in future projects in the City.

**Approach.** In undertaking the assignment, the Consultant has sought to:

- Take into account UNESCO's Historic Urban Landscape (HUL), an approach to conservation that understands cultural and urban landscapes as an "ensemble";
- Preserve intangible value, livelihoods and the distinctiveness that the resident community gives to Cholon, not considering gentrification and social displacement as unavoidable outcomes in conservation;
- Reduce the gap that so often occurs between planning recommendations and what can actually be delivered on the ground, by ensuring the practical experience of implementation stakeholders into the early stages of the planning process;
- Conduct social mapping workshops and household interviews to ensure that the views of the community are integrated into its recommendations;
- Discuss emerging concepts in workshops with technical staff of various departments in order to understand the implications of all proposals early in the process and to foresee possible hurdles;
- Build a GIS database to consolidate information obtained from different municipal departments and from community and heritage surveys;
- Divide the detail area of the study into three sub-areas linked to pilot projects, and identify potential implementation agents for these;
- Hold preliminary meetings with potential implementation agents, including local and international property developers, to consider issues relating to the rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of shophouses and new development;
- Provide design recommendations in a visual manner for the three pilot areas.

**Context.** Doi Moi, Vietnam's shift from a centrally planned to a market oriented economy was initiated in the mid 1980s. National GDP growth averaged 8% per year from 1990 until 1997 and 6.5% in the third quarter of 2010. Vietnam's urban population increased from 19.8% in 1989 to 30.4% in 2010. HCMC is Vietnam's largest urban area with a population of 6.2 million. Its floating population is estimated at 2 million. HCMC accounts for about one fifth of Vietnam's GDP.

The Master Plan 2025 envisions HCMC as a world class industrial, services-oriented, scientific and technical node in the South-East Asia region, with a population of 10 million, in a multi-polar territorial arrangement covering 245,000 hectares. HCMC's administrative core would remain in the current inner-city districts. Thu Thiem, on the East side of the Saigon River, and the area of Cholon are also considered as urban sub-centres, and will be linked by the East-West Highway. The highway cuts across the entire city and is currently in its final construction stage. Six new satellite

districts will be connected to the existing urban area through elevated highways, bridges and tunnels over the Saigon and Dong Nai rivers, and mass rapid transit lines. The development of an urban rail network is seen as the backbone to addressing growing traffic congestion. The network would comprise six mass rapid transit lines, with a total length of 160 kilometres including two monorail routes and a tramway.

Cholon is located within HCMC's District 5. Immigrants from the province of Guangdong in China first settled in Cholon in the 17th century, about 11 kilometres away from Saigon. The study area has a stable population of 67,000, with low rural immigration. With 41,100 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>, the population density in the area is amongst the highest in HCMC. Cholon grew as a commerce node to become Southern Vietnam's busiest business hub. Trading and services is District 5's most predominant economic sector, with a total sales volume of 62.744 billion VND in 2009 and a labor force of 43,976, over half of which are employed in household enterprises.

**Diagnosis.** Although the area's character is still legible through a handful of temples, the Binh Tay market, and numerous traditional shophouses, Cholon is exposed to significant development pressure which may threaten its cultural heritage. The preservation policy has prioritized conservation of monumental assets and disregarded "everyday heritage assets", historic shophouses and streetscapes. While it has ensured preservation of magnificent Chinese pagodas and clan association premises, the policy has proved ineffective for preserving Cholon's urban ensemble.

Shophouse demolition and replacement, proliferation of new typologies, addition of extra floors, and loss of historic features are some of the direct impacts of overall deregulation. Environmental degradation of the canal system, uncontrolled traffic and public space invasion due to unmet demand for parking and trading areas are further cross-cutting issues that add to the area's deterioration. Tourism development, a top priority for all relevant stakeholders, is undermined and far from reaching its maximum potential.

**Recommendations.** The Consultant divided the pilot area of 14 hectares into three smaller areas to (i) analyze three different sets of urban conditions, thus proposing recommendations that tackle a broader number of issues; and (ii) facilitate the identification of catalyst projects in terms of scope, stakeholders and implementation processes.



## Detail Area 1

### PUBLIC SPACE IMPROVEMENT

DA1 covers 42,077 m<sup>2</sup> and its key features are the Binh Tay market and the Hang Bang canal. Binh Tay is Cholon's economic engine and community landmark. It is the city's largest wholesale market and provides direct employment for about 10,000 people. The local community and DPA envision that the market could play a key role in the development of tourism. However two issues greatly undermine this potential. First, the market is operating at over



capacity, and as a result the public space has been invaded with chaotic traffic and goods movements. Second, the adjacent Hang Bang canal is severely polluted and there are about 1,000 illegal households with no infrastructure settled above it.

Two large scale planning interventions, the expansion of the Binh Tay market and the canal system rehabilitation would be pre-requisites for achieving strategy objectives in DA1. While they are outside the assignment's scope, planning

guidelines are provided to support the People's Committee and related District Committees when approaching those interventions. Assuming their successful completion, the proposed spatial planning guidelines aim to transform Binh Tay market and its surrounding public space into Cholon's main tourist hub.

**Create an urban plaza around the market.** The Consultant's conceptual urban design aims to strengthen the role

of Binh Tay market as an economic and tourism anchor, proposing a new public space along its southern side that can accommodate mobile street vendors. The reorganization of street traffic, with traffic calming and pedestrianisation measures, will allow a large civic plaza to be created, which will re-connect the market with the Hang Bang canal. The urban design of the plaza includes green areas, sidewalks, and street furniture including

kiosks for vendors. An illustrative proposal for landscaping, which would be implemented following rehabilitation of the canal, describes a linear park along the banks, helping to overcome the scarcity of public space in Cholon.

**Rehabilitate the canal into a linear park.** The Tau Hu, Lo Gom and Hang Bang canals span for about 15 kilometres. The canal network urgently

requires comprehensive rehabilitation. This suggests a project with three critical components: (i) water quality improvement, (ii) relocation of encroached shanties, and (iii) urban design and landscaping of its banks. As (i) and (ii) are outside the scope of the assignment, the Consultant has proposed a conceptual recommendation for (iii). An option to box cover the canal was declined by the People's Committee, which instead has expressed a desire to clean up the canal system and to transform it into an important civic space. A project of such magnitude would require international assistance.



## DA 2

### PRESERVING AND ENHANCING CULTURAL HERITAGE

DA2 covers an area of 46,130 m<sup>2</sup> and comprises Cholon's historic core; the area includes the bulk of its historic buildings, both religious and vernacular. Religious assets include Minh Huong Hoi, listed as a historic relic in 1993, Tue Thanh Hoi Quan, and Phu Nghia Hoi Quan. The area features possibly the highest concentration of pre-1945 shophouses, especially on Trieu Quang Phuc, Tran Hung Dao and Nguyen Trai streets.



The inspection of the exteriors of buildings located in the detail area in April 2011 revealed a considerable negative change when compared to the 1995 baseline study. Numerous heritage assets have been lost entirely, while many others have had additional floors of accommodation added at roof level or have had their historic features and/or decorative elements replaced or masked by unsympathetic new work. In spite of this, for the moment, much of heritage

interest remains in the study area. The classified temples and pagodas and other buildings are in good order and provide a historic heart of great importance, while a sufficient amount of 'everyday' heritage survives in the form of largely unaltered 19th and 20th century shophouses for the former character and lifestyle of the area to remain legible to the visitor.

**Create Special Conservation Zones.** Following an assessment of heritage significance and the creation of a 4-tier hierarchy of heritage value that encompasses temples, classified monuments and shophouses, the Consultant formulated a Conservation Strategy to address main architectural and urban design issues threatening heritage assets and urban ensemble integrity. Two Special Conservation Zones have been delineated in DA2

and DA3 where shophouses from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century still remain. Specific protective, rehabilitation, development control and enforcement measures are provided to encourage good conservation. They include traffic calming, pedestrianization and public space improvement of selected streets, new parking areas, retail promotion, and the designation of a tourist route. Altogether, they will reinforce conservation goals and foster tourism development opportunities for local residents.

**Provide incentives for conservation.** Policy incentives and legal tools that have encouraged good conservation elsewhere are proposed and include rehabilitation subsidies, transfer of development rights and adaptive reuse. Additional cross-cutting actions that will strengthen overall conservation goals are also provided. The financing section packages all project subcomponents and identifies tailored funding sources ranging from multilateral development loans to earmarked city taxes.

**Set up a Conservation Development Agency.** A Conservation and Development Agency (CDA) is proposed as the institution charged with the implementation of conservation related components. The CDA Director will be supported by three committees, namely experts, HCMC, and residents and business owners committees, respectively. Acting as a one-stop counter, its organizational structure will comprise planning, technical services, community affairs, permitting, administration, and studies and data management.



## DA3

### ACCOMODATING NEW DEVELOPMENT

DA3 covers an area of 52,096 m<sup>2</sup>. Its north side, along Hai Thuong Lan Ong boulevard, is one of Cholon's most representative areas with heritage assets of high significance at the intersection with Trieu Quang Phuc. On its southern edge, the demolition of buildings for the construction of the East-West highway has resulted in an incomplete urban edge which has opened opportunities for new construction. Here, two mixed-use developments with towers of up to 150 metres have obtained planning permission prior to this assignment.



**Provide guidelines for new development.** Development control guidelines designate a higher density development zone aimed at accommodating existing development pressure outside DA3 Special Conservation Zone. The guidelines, which include FAR, setbacks, and maximum heights, propose residential tower and retail podium developments on a strip along the E-W highway.

**Create a network of public spaces.** A series of human-scale public plazas connected with pedestrian streets would build on the tradition of Cholon's alleyways and create a transition between the area of new development and conservation zones. The commercial character is reinforced with commercial facilities in new building's podiums and in the ground floor of existing residential buildings.

**Recuperate the park over the Hai Thuong Lan Ong boulevard.** A walkable, green space of 5,000 square meters is proposed on the median of Hai Thuong Lan Ong boulevard, which will also feature an underground car park facility.



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