

The Transformation of Public Space in Hanoi

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Summary

The following article is a research note concerning an ongoing project on the transformation of public space in Hanoi, Vietnam. The research itself focuses on the changes in power relations between the state and society and how these are reflected in the physical environment of the city. Since the introduction of the Vietnamese *Doi Moi* economic reform programme in 1986, a physical transformation of public space has been observed as well as a shift in its symbolic meaning. Based on the assumption that diverse social groups attach different meanings to urban objects, power relations in the city's landscape become visible. While the private sector dominates the development of new public and semi-public spaces like New Urban Areas and shopping malls, the general public in Hanoi constantly redefines existing public spaces by utilising them for private economic and social activities. Embedded in the discipline of urban sociology, the project seeks to contribute to the discussion of the correlation between the public sphere as a sociological/political category and the morphology and practices of public space.

1 Introductory notes on the topic of public space

According to Evers (1984: 481), access to urban land is one of the basic human needs in urban areas. It is the basis for the production of living space as well as for the reproduction of manpower. In this sense, access to urban space determines patterns of living and working in the city. In the context of the ongoing global urbanisation in particular, regard has to be paid to the transformation of public space. Zukin (1995: 45) defines public spaces as "places that are physically *there*, as geographical and symbolic centres, as points of assembly where strangers mingle". Sennett (1990: 27) adds to this by pointing out the attraction of several diverse activities as a further determinant of public space. That is why public space is crucial to the 'liveability' of a city. It offers space for the residents' recreation and social interactions (Douglass et al. 2002: 4-39). High population densities as well as a lack of housing facilities in emerging mega cities endanger its existence, however. Public spaces mainly consisting of parks and city squares are easily transformed into building land. A current trend in cities all around the globe is the privatisation of public space. Private companies take over control and maintenance of public spaces and create new, so-called