



From Dreams and Visions to Reality and Practice.

Walter Molt - Vietnam

Herbert A. Simon, a Nobel price-winning economist of 1978, wrote a little book: “The science of the artificial”.

What we are doing in planning is the design and making of arti-facts, man made structures of cities and transport system. There is no scientific basis for artifacts, they are born out of dreams of a better world, or more profitable world, what our thinking ever may be. But they have to meet the constraints of the real world: physics, chemistry, texture of landscapes, of human behavior and social structures. Urban visions have to pass the test of scientific scrutiny, if they are to morph into realistic plans. The best plan however will only become reality if it can guide the political process and motivate people. Building a city requires a certain enthusiasm of its citizens.

As I have been studying transport systems and urban development around the world, and sometimes looking into the history of remarkable achievements, I am a skeptical optimist. I am optimistic, because I think we dispose of the material means to create livable cities; I am skeptical, because I realize the limitations of the planning profession and the deficits of enlightened political leadership, most of all, I doubt the capability of a market, or should I say, profit driven economy, to generate the systems and structures, which could become home for a society and for individuals.

The dreams and visions.

There is not much urban tradition in Vietnam. Some temples and palaces apart, which are interesting pieces of architecture, there are some streets in Hanoi and in Hoi An, which can be considered remaining witnesses of urban life here. Than, there are the remains of French colonial cities. They have the charm that the people who planned and built them, wanted to live there.

If you study, what has happened in the last 50 years, you will not discover much urban planning, but, comparing with other big cities around the world, there is a remarkable absence of urban slums. This shows, that the Vietnamese society has an astonishing capability, to accommodate themselves to crowded urban conditions.

In the last 15 years, which I have followed the development of Vietnam, I run across many plans. These plans, some of them approved on the highest levels of government, remain mostly paper. I have also seen formidable plans of urban infrastructure projects, like Metro Systems in Hanoi and In Ho Chi Minh. Some have even obtained some partial commitment of financing from foreign funds. Of course I realize, that the interests of some international technology corporations drive these plans to a large part. The more they advance into technical designs, the more dissociate themselves from the urban plans.

Than I observe also that there are some big building schemes, driven by investment. Of course, international and Vietnamese developers have an eye on the fast developing cities in Vietnam. Without qualifying them, they are again dissociated from urban planning and from Urban Transport plans.

These visions have motives: to generate profits, to create impressive urban spaces, with super wide roads; I did not really get the impression, that these plans reflect the achievable ends of people. Looking at the places, where people succeed to build their own houses, in which they want to live, the houses and streets look very different. To a certain extend, they look



alarmingly different: people want to build their own houses and therefore they will adjust to whatever little plot of land they can obtain to do this.

In the history of urban architecture and planning, there were also movements, which created urban spaces with the intention of allowing people to feel at home or to create family oriented quarters. You can find here units, which function like villages inside the city, with high integration of neighborhoods, small shops and services, which make them very independent.

Looking at the constraints.

Huge volumes of statistical data accompany all plans. Collecting data is of course the way, how the social scientist tries to condense the multi facets of life into arguments. These compilations make the plans look, as if they are based on scientific facts. Data are necessary, to justify the plans, however, the same data can justify different plans. Very oft, they are not critical in the sense, that they support rather one plan in place of another plan. Worse even, they are often not even arguments. This means, if data would be different, they would require a different dimension of infrastructure for instance.

There are two ways to look at the facts:

1. Forget the facts! Realize your plan!

After 1850, Baron Haussmann, with the protection and leadership of emperor Napoleon III started to destroy the medieval city of Paris and to rebuild it on the way, in which we know it today. He bankrupted the empire, lost his job, Napoleon's rule collapsed shortly after, unable to defend itself against the Germans. Today, we all admire the master work of a 19th century capital thanks to an urban development, which disregarded all economic reason.

A few years later, the king of Bavaria, Ludwig II, started to build his fantasy castles. He created the festival city of Bayreuth to give a home to the operas of Richard Wagner. This disrupted the state finances. The king was declared insane and disposed of his throne. Today, his castles are the biggest tourist attraction, drawing millions of visitors every year to Bavaria. Bayreuth festival is one of the biggest cultural events in Europe. The king, more than hundred years after his tragic death, is still adored by the people.

I could add other examples of big achievements, which were economically insane at their time, and yet, turned out to benefit their city or country, but let us turn to the other side, where insane plans produce disastrous results:

We have all been reading these days about the hundreds of billions of dollars, which have been donated by the whole world, so that American citizens could realize their dream of an own house. It is not just economic insanity. Poor planning, wrongheaded building codes and the industrialization of building has produced urban sprawl or rather has dissolved the urban structures. Now you have monotonous settlements, covering the landscape. There are no shops, the next shopping mall may be 20 km away. You can there live only if you have a car, or rather a car for every family member. It is impossible to create public transport. As the price for fuel is mounting and the threat of climate change requires reduction of emissions, these houses are not sustainable, even if their owners could pay for them.

2. Respect the limits and constraints, adapt your plans to feasible and sustainable concepts: bring rationality to your plans.

Rationality alone will not produce great plans, but it is the check.

Limiting myself to transport related criteria:

- Accessibility refers to the quality, that all parts of the city should be accessible and connected, permitting reasonable travel times. This is the challenge for transportation. Above a certain size, cities need public transport systems.



- Density. Very often city planners aspire for low density. But it is high density, which creates urban variety and communication. Clusters or units of high density are the requisite for an affordable and efficient public transport, which in return structures the urban areas.
- Logistic net. The transport system, Public Transport, Individual motorized and non-motorized transport and transport of goods has to be organized in a net. I talk of a logistic net, because one has to take into consideration the flow of persons and goods and to adjust and monitor the capacity of transport means and their interfaces. Failure to achieve this creates the jams and traffic breakdowns, which make life in modern cities often so hard.

How to achieve a liveable city?

There are good examples and a lot of examples of failed development. Personally I should praise CURITA in Brazil as an excellent example, where urban planning and transport planning form a unity; the city of almost 2 Million inhabitants is almost free of traffic congestions and of course there the Mass Transit System of BRT has been invented. The most remarkable aspect is however the harmony of urban planning, green spaces, shopping boulevards and a functioning transport system.

I mentioned already the skill, how Vietnamese adapt their houses to urban conditions. Vietnam cities would have a good chance to have a very appealing aspect. Frankly speaking, the urban and transport planning does not impress me. Most striking is the disconnect between the different aspects of planning.

The limits of the international planners are evident. This is perhaps due also to the weakness of the local planning boards. Let me therefore terminate with a quote from Jaime Lerner, the city planner and mayor of Curitiba for so many years. I asked him, what he considered the most important condition of his success. Here is his answer: “We did not have the money to call in foreign experts.”