

Hanoi Youth Public Spaces

POLICY BRIEF



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Youth-Friendly Public Spaces

A collaborative research project between the Institut national de la recherche scientifique (INRS, Canada), the Institute of Sociology of the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences (IoS-VASS, Vietnam), and HealthBridge (Vietnam and Canada). This study draws a portrait of the provision of public spaces in Hanoi and of youth uses of these spaces to enter adulthood, along with the need for more and better quality public space in a rapidly urbanizing city.



Introduction



The challenge of providing public spaces where youth can actively play, do exercise and socialize has always been thorny in both developed and developing countries. It is a particularly acute issue in rapidly urbanizing Asian cities such as Hanoi, which combines some of the world's highest densities with limited formally-planned public spaces. The few existing spaces are often intensively used and face a competition between people of different ages and sexes, and between types of activities that occur at different times during the day, week, and year¹. In addition, the rapid urbanization process, open-door economic and pro-urban development policies have impacted the provision, form and accessibilities of public spaces in the city.

In this context, the research project focused on youth aged between 18-25 years old, a transitional segment of the Vietnamese urban population whose socio-spatial practices have received scarce research and policy attention. This study analyzed the evolution of the public spaces since the year 2000 (in terms of overall spatial distribution, available areas, quality, and usage) and provided an understanding of the driving forces behind these changes.

More specifically, this research sought to:

- Analyze transformations in the provision, form, and accessibility of Hanoi's formal public spaces between 2000 and 2010, a period marked by intense urban development;
- Critically review the evolution of the policy frameworks governing the production of urban public spaces in Vietnam;
- Characterize youth's uses of public parks;
- Formulate policy recommendations related to the planning, design, and governance of public space in Hanoi to better meet youth needs.

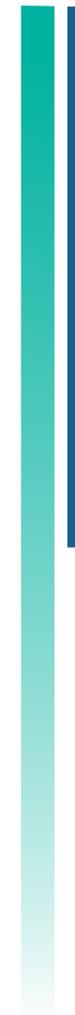
¹ Hien, Nguyen Thi et al. "Urban governance in preservation and management of neighborhood parks/playgrounds in inner-city districts of Hanoi," HealthBridge and The Asia Foundation, 2014.

The research focused on three types of formal public spaces: parks, public gardens (vuon hoa), bodies of water and their shores. It relied on a mixed-method approach combining: i) a document analysis including a review of the central Government's policies mentioning public spaces and a review of press clips in Vietnamese, English, and French about youth and public spaces in Vietnam published between 2009-2013; ii) qualitative case studies of three parks respectively located in the inner city (Lenin Memorial Park), a new suburban area (the 34T Plaza of Trung Hòa-Nhân Chính) and the outer edge of the city (Hòa Bình Park); iii) a geographic information system (GIS) mapping of geographic data about the evolution of the city's parks, public gardens and bodies of water; iv) and a quantitative survey on public space's accessibility and degree of "publicness".

The research was conducted between 2013 and 2015 with the field data collection implemented mainly in June-August 2014.



Key findings



1) There is a lack and uneven distribution of public spaces in Hanoi.

From 2000 to 2010, Hanoi's urban districts saw an increase of over 124 hectares in the area of parks (a 1.5 times increase) and the addition of 13.5 hectares in the area of public gardens (a three-fold increase). However, these new public spaces (and new parks in particular) were mainly established in peripheral urbanized areas with only a few spaces (mainly smaller public gardens) developed in the crowded inner-city. During the same period, the city lost 154 hectares of water surface area. This loss is attributed to a reduction of larger lakes' surfaces and to the disappearance of smaller bodies of water, many of which were filled and built upon during the 2000s. Over half of Hanoi's water bodies disappeared, bringing the number of water bodies in urban districts down to 123 in 2010 from 224 in 2000.

The Vietnamese capital is still far from reaching the target of 7m² per capita of "public-use green spaces outside of residential units" set by the Ministry of Construction in the 2008 Vietnam Building Code 2008 for special-grade cities such as Hanoi. To the contrary, the limited provision of new public spaces combined with demographic growth to bring the city's ratio of parks/public gardens per capita down to 1.58m² per capita in 2010 from the previous 2.17m² per capita in 2000. During the same period, the city witnessed an even more dramatic decrease in the area of bodies of water per capita (from over 11m² to less than 5m² per person).

Similar to the general population of the city, and as illustrated in Figure 1 below, youth in Hanoi have fewer public spaces for their use. The area of parks/water surface per young person has also sharply decreased during the 2000-2010 period while there is only a slight increase in the area of public garden per young person.

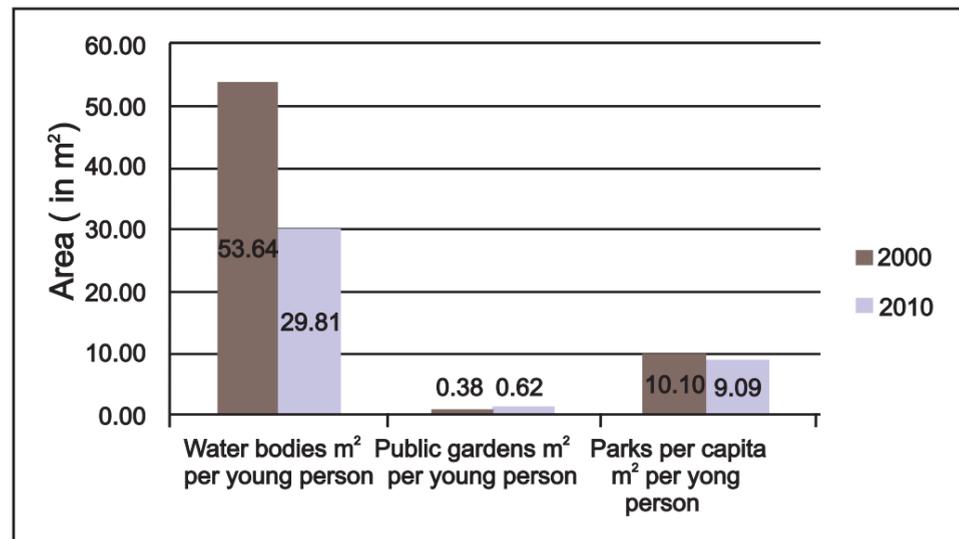


Figure 1: Change in the ratios of parks, public gardens, and water area per young person in urban districts of Hanoi between 2000 and 2010

In many areas of Hanoi, youth do not have access to a public space at a reasonable walking or biking distance from their home. Youth aged 18-25 years old are among the most mobile segments of the city's population. Our data indicates that this group is willing to walk up to 900 meters to reach a public space (500 meters is the usual standard mentioned in the planning literature as a distance most people are willing to walk to reach a public space). However, and as illustrated in Figures 2a and 2b, large portions of Hanoi's city center are situated at distances greater than 900 meters to a public park or a public garden with many zones being up to 2 or 3 kilometers away from a public space.

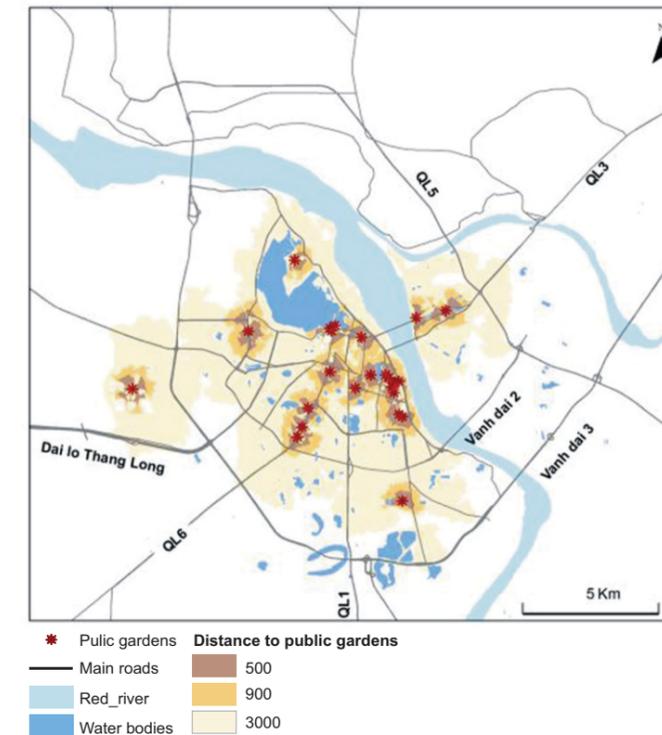


Figure 2a: Service areas of 500m, 900m and 3000m around the public gardens located in Hanoi's urban districts

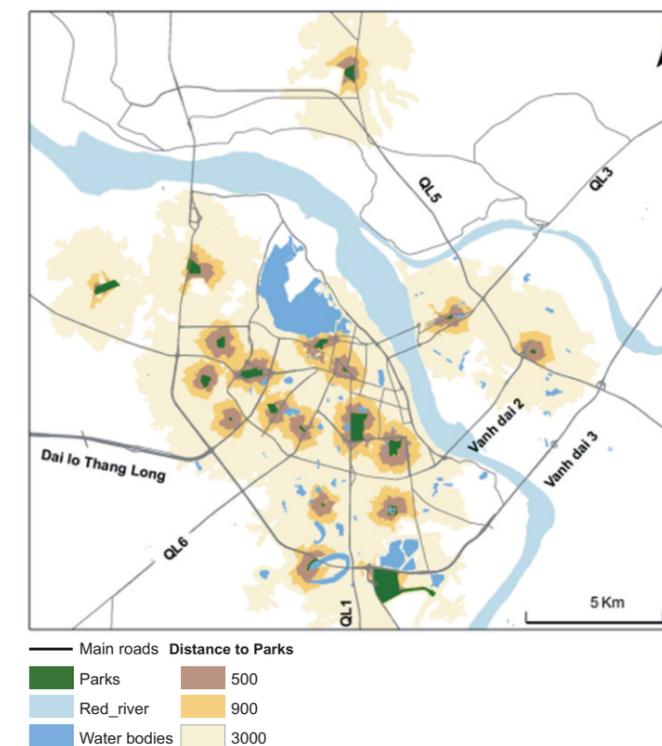


Figure 2b: Service areas of 500m, 900m and 3000m around the parks located in Hanoi's urban districts

2) Public space policies have seen positive changes but there is a lack of strong measures to effectively enforce them.

Public spaces have gained more policy attention in Vietnam in recent years. Illustrating this evolution, policy documents adopted between 2000-2014 referred to “parks” were eight times more often than the policy documents issued in the 14 previous years (1986-1999).

The content and focus of policies have also seen many positive changes since the early 2000s. Among these positive changes we observed: an acknowledgment of the positive contribution that public spaces make to cities' liveability; more attention paid to the spatial dimensions of public spaces; and recognition that public spaces must be protected from degradation and encroachment by private and commercial activities.

However, these new policy orientations remain too modest. Most importantly the current regulatory framework lacks strong measures to effectively enforce the changes listed above. Vietnamese public space policies still tend to focus on the spatial distribution of two-dimensional surfaces and favor quantitative targets (m²/per person, minimal surface areas, service radius, etc.) at the expense of qualitative planning criteria. Many of these targets are impractical or unrealistic. Attempts to meet them in master-planning exercises can lead to questionable decisions (for example, trying to meet a quota of green space by creating large city-parks on the outer-edge of the city which are hardly accessible to most citizens).

The lack of a consistent and clear definition of what constitutes urban public spaces in policy documents is also a problem. The absence of such definition leads to confusion and contradiction about what is an 'adequate' or 'good' public space in urban Vietnam, how it should be produced and managed, and what essential characteristics these spaces should have to fulfill their 'public' role.

3) The usage of public spaces contributes positively to youths daily lives despite the various constraints that they face to use these places

Youths go to public spaces not only for physical activities (playing sports or doing exercise) but also for socialization, personal relaxation and other activities such as people-watching, playing music/singing, or enjoying fresh air (see Figure 3). The practice of these various activities by young Hanoians is closely tied to their ability to access different types of public spaces, to the quality of these places (in terms of physical maintenance, atmosphere, etc.), and to the services and equipment available in each public space.

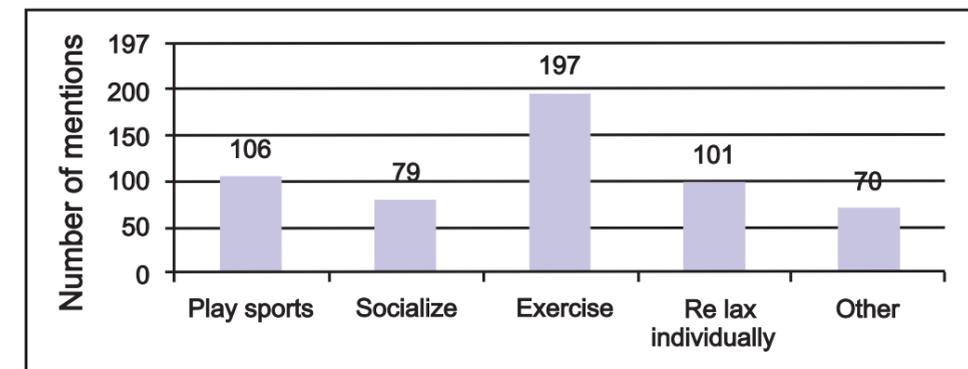


Figure 3: Types of activities practiced by youths in the public parks of Hanoi

Most of the youths who practice sport activities in a public space do so as part of a group. This can be a formal club or an informal group of friends. As opposed to the situation in Western societies, the public and other users do not perceive the presence of these groups in Hanoi's public spaces as a threat. Youths groups are not 'directly' associated to social evils, even if some of their behaviors can be more difficult to accept socially. Discussing expression of romantic love in Hoa Binh park a young user of this space remarked:

I think that [young people] can hold hand or even cuddle. But I think that kissing deeply or more than that is too much. [...] The park is a place for people from a range of ages, so those activities are not appropriate [...] I do not feel annoyed or in fret. I just think that youths' degree of awareness in public spaces is not good. (interview June 18, 2014)

Youth are aware that public spaces are important for their development and for the whole society

Public spaces play a significant role in the everyday lives of many youths: They spend long periods of time there, visit parks several times per week, some young users even using these spaces daily or even twice daily.

The youths interviewed for this study emphasized the mental and physical health benefits that they derive from the usage of public spaces. These benefits are closely related to the opportunities to be physically active provide by public spaces in a very dense city such as Hanoi and to the presence of trees and greenery that contribute to create a relaxing environment. We also found that public spaces give youth room to explore behaviors that are not imposed by adults.

This is particularly evident in the case of youths who engage in new urban activities in Hanoi's public spaces such as skateboarding, street dancing, or parkour. Known as "lifestyle sports," these activities allow their practitioners to explore self-directed ways of being and identities that differ from the values and models predefined for them by the state and by their families. In the words of a young traceur who practice at the 34T Plaza:

"[Parkour] is considered as an art because contemporary art is not competitive, each artist has his own style [...] This kind of art doesn't force us to practice to achieve anything, it doesn't force you to go to one or another direction to reach an achievement; it's free. [...] Because this kind of sports is not competitive so it's a lot of fun to practice together." (interview, November 16, 2013)

Members of lifestyle sport groups, along with other youths who use Hanoi's public spaces in groups, also report benefits in terms of peer support and socialization. These young people indicate that they often study together for exams, help each other finding jobs, and encourage each other to quit smoking or to stay away from drugs. As the member of a group of break dancers who practice regularly at Lenin Park remarked:

"I have become a good-natured person [since entering the group of break dancers]. I am not at war or bully others anymore" (focus group discussion, November 4, 2013).

Public spaces also play a positive role in the lives of young rural migrants by helping them to counter isolation and loneliness. This experience comes clearly across in the words of a female migrant interviewed at the 34T Plaza:

"[Spending time in public spaces] is the thing I enjoyed first when I set foot in Hanoi. [...] When I come here to play, I feel joyful and I can find things that I need" (interview, August 21, 2013).

Finally, youths enjoy relaxing in public spaces. They report that time spent in public spaces helps to improve their mood and may even keep them away from more risky ways of releasing stress through drugs and alcohol.

Youth see some constraints to their use of public spaces

Due to the lack of public spaces in Hanoi's inner districts, existing parks, public gardens and lakeshores are often over-crowded, especially during peak usage periods: mornings, late afternoons and evenings. Despite their desire to be among other people and to be seen in public spaces, youth consider this over-crowdedness as a constraint to their use of public spaces. The high densities of users who practice a variety of activities in relatively small spaces sometimes lead to conflicts both within youth groups and between youth groups and other users. Nevertheless, youth often compromise, adjust and tend avoid conflict with other users (either by leaving or stepping aside in cases of imminent strife).

In the competition for limited spaces, youths find that they are given less priority than other groups who also use public spaces such as vendors (who often bribe guards to use public space for their commercial activities), old people and middle-aged women (given the prevalent age hierarchy in Vietnam), and small children.

Other constraints to youth usage of public spaces include: the role of management and guards in tolerating or limiting youth activities in public spaces; the presence of vendors who mobilize scarce recreational spaces for commercial activities; entrance fees perceived as unaffordable, a hassle, and arbitrary; and social norms which makes some activities such as lifestyle sports and romantic expressions by unmarried couples more difficult to accept in public spaces.

4) Gender norms constrains young women's public space access and usage

We did not find widespread negative social perception or discrimination against girls going to public spaces. However, girls interviewed for this study reported that they have fewer opportunities to access public spaces than young males due to more limited free times (for doing housework, taking care of children). The same female respondents indicated that they sometimes feel unsafe in public spaces, especially when there are fewer people around or when they have to walk through darker zones. Their safety strategies to counter these constraints include: going to parks in groups, using the more crowded and well-lit areas of parks, and dressing 'properly'.

Furthermore, social norms regarding how young women are supposed to behave in public spaces and beyond affect the types of activities that young women engage in public spaces. Female youths favor what they call “softer activities” such as sitting to watch other users or chat with friends and strolling. When they engage in more active usage, they similarly favor sport activities perceived as “softer,” such as badminton. In the words of a young woman interviewed in Hoa Binh Park:

“[In society], girls are supposed to be gentle and charming, so they just take a walk or wander in the park [...] Women hesitate to do strong physical activities like those men practice; they are afraid of being noticeable in a public space because others may judge them” (interview, June 15, 2014).

Female interviewees nevertheless perceive those few young women who practice “stronger” physical activities such as skateboarding, street dancing, or rollerblading in Hanoi's public spaces as 'stylish.' They generally speak of these 'socially transgressive' activities in positive terms. Commenting on Hanoi's female skateboarders, street dancers, etc. a young woman interviewed for this project remarked:

“Normally girls express their femininity. But I find that, in joining such strong physical activities, those girls express both their femininity and their strong personality. They are very active and energetic” (interview, July 4, 2014).

Conclusion and recommendations

- Public spaces are very important for youth development as they directly support physical and mental health, active lifestyles, as well as interactions among youths and between youth and other social groups. In addition, public spaces help young men and women to relax and release stress in a healthy way. Therefore, **creating urban youth friendly-public spaces is a recommended strategy for Hanoi** to ensure youth's development into healthy and balanced adults.

- Youths have limited access to public spaces due to a lack of these spaces in Hanoi in general and in the inner-city in particular. The few existing formal public spaces are often saturated and overcrowded. We call for the establishment of new public spaces to improve accessibility across the city and for improving the maintenance of existing ones to ensure that they are used to the fullest. More specifically, we recommend:

- **Developing new public spaces** with a focus on areas of the city identified as having a poor degree of accessibility to a public spaces. The city might have to think creatively about adding public spaces to existing urban areas for example creating mobile playgrounds for youths, turning a parking are into a park, looking for underused spaces etc...

- **Improving existing public spaces and reclaiming the occupied ones.** Hanoi should take advantages of having a city-wide network of bodies of water with good accessibility – the Government should improve and strictly protect the lakeshores to create more public spaces. This will help to reduce the overcrowdedness in of public gardens and parks. In addition, existing public gardens and lakesides in particular should be rethought to accommodate a diversity of uses, rather than only favoring static activities. This will help to meet demands of a variety of users including youths.

- **Establishing an effective mechanism to monitor and protect existing public spaces.** This could include policy measures requiring that formal permissions from the competent authorities be delivered for any physical or functional alteration to an existing lakeside, park or public gardens (similar to existing policy measures protecting trees). Detailed maps of all public spaces, at both the city and neighborhood levels, could be created to monitor changes.

- Policy problems such as: a lack of strong policy implementation and coercive measures; no clear and consistent definition of urban public spaces in policy documents; inconsistent planning norms regarding the production of formally-designed public spaces; and, poor coordination between government agencies in managing public spaces. These problems are barriers to the effective planning, development and management of public spaces. The policy framework should be improved by:

- **Developing a more qualitative and integrated approach** towards public space planning and development, including policies that bring various departments to collaborate in urban public space development.

- **Adopting a broader definition of urban design in the public space policy framework.** Urban design guidelines should not only concern urban elements surrounding public spaces and vegetal landscaping issues but rather encompass all aspects of the public space experience (access, activities, equipments, facilities, lighting, etc.).

- **Developing and adopting more comprehensive and place-specific public space planning guidelines.** For instance, a detailed public space planning guidelines could be developed for Hanoi. A distinct Design Standard could also be envisaged.

- Youth still face constraints in their use of public spaces in Hanoi. In order to make public spaces more youth-friendly and increase the use of public spaces by young adults, we recommend to improve the design and management of public spaces as follow:

- **Revaluating the management system of public spaces in Hanoi,** with specific attention to the role of guards in order to set up mechanisms to ensure that they protect all users;

- **Setting up a system that structures vendor activities in space,** with stricter rules and guidelines for maintenance and the regulating of behaviors that are harmful for users (for cleanliness, no driving in the park etc);

- **Improving the lighting of public spaces** to increase young women's sense of safety while social programs to improve gender equity will help modify social norms which currently limit the range of activities that young women engage in in public spaces;

- **Removing entrance fees and the fences surrounding many parks and improving the environment and facilities offered in the city's public spaces:** this might include planting more trees and vegetation, installing more benches, creating more flat, open and hard surfaces that support unstructured activities;

- **Designing public spaces to welcome a mix of users** rather than developing youth-only parks.

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Project Website: www.hanoiyouthpublicspace.com

For full research report:

http://www.hanoiyouthpublicspace.com/links_docs

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HealthBridge (Canada and Vietnam): As an international non-governmental organization, HealthBridge works with partners worldwide to improve health and health equity through research, policy and action.

HealthBridge's Livable Cities Program aims to ensuring access for all urban residents, especially the most vulnerable, to healthy transportation, healthy foods, markets, parks and public spaces..

The Institute of Sociology at the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (Vietnam)

Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS) is the leading social sciences research institutions in Vietnam. It has the head-quarter based in Hanoi (Vietnam) and regional institutes in the Central region (Da Nang city and Buon Me Thuot city) and the Southern region (Ho Chi Minh City). In 2011, VASS and INRS signed a partnership agreement under which this research project was carried out.

Institute of Sociology (IOS) is VASS' leading research institute on sociology in Vietnam. IOS has conducted many scientific activities in collaboration with many ministries and sectors in the country, international organizations and foreign universities in the field of social and sustainable development.

