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HO CHI MINH CITY'S ALLEYWAYS AS THE KEY SPACE FOR METROPOLISATION

Rethinking the spatial layout of Ho Chi Minh City's
core element of urban identity

Thi-To-Uyen Marie Nefeli TRAN

DIPLOMARBEIT

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Ho-Chi-Minh-Stadts Feinstruktur als Schlüssel zur Metropolisierung

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Contents

Abstract

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) has existed for over three centuries and has developed into the financial capital and most important economic hub of Vietnam. Throughout the city's evolution, urbanisation has presented itself as an unavoidable step towards modernisation and industrialisation. The urban forms produced today reflect the urban utopia mainstreamed in many official discourses. Once low, dense and organic, the Southern Vietnamese metropolis has engaged into a steady pace verticalisation process, especially in new urbanized areas flourishing at the edges of the city.

The urban development of HCMC evolves within what can be called an "urbanism of projects", which is leading to a rupture with its historic organic urban growth.

However, after experiencing colonisation, decades of war, socialism and de-urbanisation, followed by the national reunification of 1976 and Đổi Mới reforms (Thrift and Forbes, 1986), HCMC reveals a very unique urban trajectory which explains the distinctiveness of its urban fabric. The core element of the city's urban identity is the alleyway neighbourhoods, who until this day form 85% of the living environment of the citizen. Shaped like a labyrinth network between the linear axes of the existing urban grid, the alleyways emerged during the uncertain times of the 1950s and 1960s as part of a migration movement to the city and a spontaneous densification and urbanisation process. Much more than just an infrastructural element, the alleyway system of HCMC forms an integral component of the urban territory associated with multiple usages and strong ownership of its space by the residents and is where the everyday production of the city takes place.

This calls into question the politics of contemporary projects led by the urban authorities replacing the organic system of alleyways with new vertical urban forms aiming to achieve the hygienist's vision of a modern city.

Thus, the goal of this research is to analyse how the metropolisation process affects the inherited urban patterns and the daily life of ordinary residents in Ho Chi Minh City today. Reading the contemporary production of urban space in this context provides insights not only on the evolution of an inherited spatial apparatus, but also on the social and political dimensions of the Vietnamese urbanity today.

The aim to strive is to tackle the inadequacy of the Western conceptual framework in urban studies. Applied out of its context, this hegemonical toolbox of globalised urbanism has become a 'black box' (Latour, 1999), invisibilising the specificities of Vietnamese cities. Therefore, it is essential to explore the possibility of transcending 'the West and the Rest' categorisation, inherited from colonial times.

The elaborated project, located in a typical alleyway system of District 5, proposes an alternative direction in the modernisation process of HCMC, demonstrating the high potential of HCMC's alleyway system in terms of inclusive design, supporting a strong sense of community, the capacity to welcome such a diversity of activities through a temporal rotation of functions throughout the day and the flexible, efficient and diverse space for every social range of local communities.

In this perspective, the street is envisioned as a highly multifunctional object, with its spatial organisation adhering to the local way of life and customs, and despite its low-rise urban pattern, can achieve a high density.

Abstract

(German version)

Ho-Chi-Minh-Stadt (HCMC) besteht seit über drei Jahrhunderten und hat sich zur Finanzhauptstadt und zum wichtigsten wirtschaftlichen Zentrum von Vietnam entwickelt. Während der gesamten Stadtentwicklung hat sich die Urbanisierung als unvermeidlicher Schritt in Richtung Modernisierung und Industrialisierung präsentiert. Die heute produzierten Stadtformen spiegeln die städtische Utopie wider, die in vielen offiziellen Diskursen zum Tragen kommt. Die südvietnamesische Metropole war einst niedrig, dicht und organisch bebaut und hat einen stetigen Vertikalisierungsprozess eingeleitet, insbesondere in den neuen urbanisierten Gebieten, die sich an den Rändern der Stadt weiterentwickeln.

Die städtebauliche Entwicklung von HCMC entwickelt sich in eine Art «Urbanismus von Projekten», die mit ihrem historischen organischen Stadtwachstum zum Bruch führt.

Nach Kolonialisierung, jahrzehntelangen Kriegen, Sozialismus und De-Urbanisierung, gefolgt von der nationalen Wiedervereinigung im Jahre 1976 und den Đổi Mới-Reformen, offenbart HCMC jedoch eine einzigartige urbane Entwicklung. Das Kernelement der städtischen Identität sind die Feinstruktur der «alleyway neighbourhoods», die bis heute 85% des Lebensumfelds der Bürger ausmachen. Diese Struktur entstand in den 1950er und 1960er Jahren als in der Stadt, durch eine Migrationsbewegung, ein spontaner Verdichtungs- und Verstädterungsprozess stattfand. Die «alleyways» von HCMC sind ein integraler Bestandteil des städtischen Territoriums, das eng mit den Alltagsaktivitäten der Bewohner verbunden.

Dies stellt die Politik der zeitgenössischen Projekte in Frage, die von den städtischen Behörden angeführt wird und das organische System der «alleyway neighbourhoods» durch neue vertikale Stadtformen ersetzen will, um die Vision einer modernen Stadt zu erreichen.

Ziel dieser Forschung ist es daher, zu analysieren, wie der Metropolisierungsprozess die vererbten urbanen Muster und den Alltag der Bewohner von Ho-Chi-Minh-Stadt heute beeinflusst. Die soziale und politische Dimensionen der heutigen vietnamesischen Urbanität sind in diesem Zusammenhang zu beachten.

Das angestrebte Ziel besteht darin, die Unzulänglichkeit des westlichen konzeptionellen Rahmens in der Stadtforschung zu überwinden, da es die Besonderheiten der vietnamesischen Städte nicht berücksichtigt.

Das ausgearbeitete Projekt, das sich in einer typischen «alleyway neighbourhood» im 5. Bezirk befindet, schlägt eine Alternative des Modernisierungsprozesses von HCMC vor und demonstriert das hohe Potenzial der «alleyway neighbourhoods» durch ein inklusives Design. Es soll ein starkes Gemeinschaftsgefühl unterstützen und die Fähigkeit zur Aufnahme von einer Vielfalt von Aktivitäten durch zeitliche Rotation der Funktionen im Laufe des Tages ermöglichen und Bewohner aus verschiedensten sozialen Schichten aufnehmen können.

Aus dieser Perspektive wird die Straße als ein höchst multifunktionales Objekt betrachtet, wobei die räumliche Organisation der lokalen Lebensweise und den traditionellen Gepflogenheiten entspricht und trotz der niedrigen Bebauung eine hohe Dichte erreichen kann.

Figure 1.1. Location of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, in South East Asia.

HCMC's History and timeline of events

- Early history

  4th century AD

  - earliest settlement in the area: Funan temple (current location of *Phương Sơn* pagoda)
  - Funan is an ancient Indianised state/ Hindu kingdom—or, rather a loose network of states located in mainland Southeast Asia centred on the Mekong Delta that existed from the first to sixth century AD.

- Cham Empire

  11th century

  - A settlement called Baigaur, part of the Cham Empire was established.

- Khmer territory

  - When the Cham Empire was invaded by the Khmer people, Baigaur was renamed Prey Nokor (Forest City) and was the most important commercial seaport to the Khmers that rivaled Phnom Penh as an important centre for international trade (Edwards, 2003).
  - The loss of the city and the rest of the Mekong Delta cut off Cambodia's access to the East Sea. Subsequently, the only area remaining the Khmer's sea access was south-westerly at the Gulf of Thailand.
  - In the Beginning of the 17th century, the colonization of the area by Vietnamese settlers gradually isolated the Khmer of the Mekong Delta (Khmer Krom) from their brethren in Cambodia and resulted in them becoming a minority in the delta.

  1623

  - The gradual move into land that was once part of the Khmer Empire started, when King Chey Chettha II of Cambodia (1618-1628) allowed Vietnamese refugees fleeing the *Trịnh-Nguyễn* civil war to settle in and around Prey Nokor, which was a flourishing port and mercantile community.

  1623- 1698

  - Thousands of Vietnamese families migrated from the Centre and the North to settle in the plains of the *Đồng Nai* and the Mekong rivers. Saigon at that time was already booming with agricultural production, trading businesses, and handicrafts, enriching the prosperous customs tax office.
  - Eventually, the Vietnamese presence in the Mekong Delta increased so much that Prei Nokor started to be called *Sài Gòn* in Vietnamese (Kim, 2015).
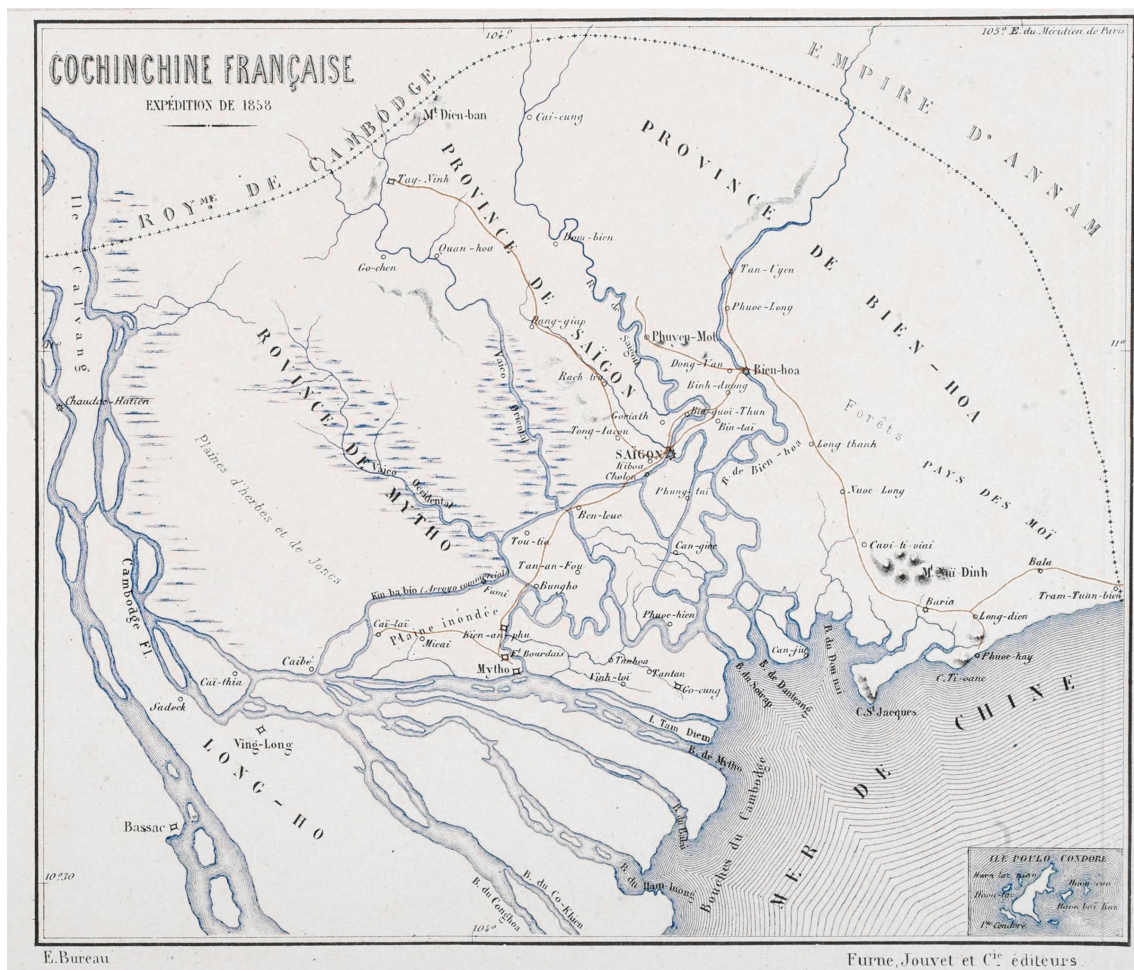
Figure 1.2. Map of Cochin-china showing in red the French expedition of 1858.

1679

- Among the early Saigon settlers were a sizable number of Chinese migrants. They originated from China's southern coastal regions, running away from the miseries of their war-torn country.
- In 1679 there occurred a great migration of 3,000 persons in 50 warships led by *Trần Thượng Xuyên*, a former Chinese general with the Ming dynasty who was escaping the Qing.
- The group initially settled in *Ban Lan (Biên Hoà)* before moving to *Cù Lao Phố*, an island in the *Hương Phước* River (a section of the *Đồng Nai* River). The island quickly became a hub for international trade.

• *Nguyễn* Dynasty rule- *Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh*- the founder of Saigon

1698

- Official founding
- *Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh*, a Vietnamese noble promote to Grand Mandarin, was sent by the *Nguyễn* rulers in *Huế* (Lord *Nguyễn Phúc Chu*) to inspect the South and establish Vietnamese administrative structures in the area and determine the territorial borders.
- *Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh* and his troops sailed off to the south and went upstream on the *Đồng Nai* River to arrive in *Cù Lao Phố* (Pho Island), the region's largest and busiest river port at that time. *Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh* inspected the area of Saigon and set up two administrative offices in *Phước Lang* and *Tân Bình* districts.
- His formation of Vietnamese authority over the area helped wrest the Mekong Delta from the Khmer control who were preoccupied with a civil war and fighting the Siam (present-day Thailand).
- The control of the city and the area passed to the Vietnamese, who gave the city the official name of *Gia Định*.
- At the time some 20,000 Vietnamese were settled in the Saigon area. They probably made up one-third of the Vietnamese population inhabiting the *Đồng Nai* River basin.
- This is the period that most Vietnamese historians consider the beginning of HCMC. So relative to thousand-year-old Hanoi in the North, HCMC is considered a young, 300-year-old Vietnamese city (Kim, 2015).

• The rise of Cholon

- After the persecution of the Chinese under the *Tây Sơn* brothers in the late 1700s, the surviving Chinese were assigned to live in Cholon.
- Cholon grew steadily, eventually surpassing Saigon in population and trade.
- The settlement at Cholon was about a mile wide, and roughly 20,000 people were housed in small homes and huts (Dolinski, 2007).
- When peace returned in 1802, despite the persecution and segregation that the Chinese had faced a few decades earlier, the newly united Vietnamese empire encouraged the Chinese to build the economy through industries like shipbuilding.
- Cholon grew to become a centre of commerce featuring major warehouses (Bouchot, 1927).
- Its collection of small and medium enterprises were an important part of Vietnam's regional economy and trade with China and Southeast Asia (Freeman, 1996).
- By the mid-1800s, the city of Cholon was significantly wealthier than Saigon and it was apparent in the higher quality of its built environment.

Figure 1.3. Colon in 1950. Intersection General Phuong – Dong Khanh (today Châu Văn Liêm – Trần Hưng Đạo). Streetcar rail was turning left into Dong Khanh street and heading to Saigon city center.

Figure 1.4. The new Bình Tây Market in Cholon, pictured in the 1930s.

Figure 1.5. Saigon in 1950. Rue Catinat (today Đồng Khởi Street)

Figure 1.6. A view from the Bùng Binh Sài Gòn traffic circle in 1955.

Figure 1.7. Saigon in the 1950s. Intersection Tự Do-Ngô Đức Kế in front of the Hôtel Saigon Palace.

Figure 1.8. The Continental Palace Hotel Terrace in the late 1950s.

- Colonial French era

1859 – 1954

- By the mid-1800s, Napoleon III began negotiating with the court in *Huế*, recalling his troops in exchange for greater commercial and religious freedom for France's merchants and missionaries (Meyer, 1985).
- But Napoleon's admirals had imperial ambitions, desiring to impose the sovereignty of France in the region. In 1859, the French invaded under the command of Admiral Rigault de Genouilly, finally capturing and destroying the Vietnamese citadel two years later in 1861 (Kim, 2015).
- During this era of European colonial expansion, the French and British carved up the region among themselves. Burma was conceptually joined to British India, and "Indochine" knitted France's colonial empire in Southeast Asia which includes present-day Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.
- Saigon became the capital of "Cochinchine" or southern Vietnam.
- A major debate about the colonies centred on whether to pursue a policy of "association", which would respect local culture, or "assimilation" which would not. Indochine was an assimilationist colony, evident in its French styled buildings whereas other colonies developed hybrid styles.
- During France's massive public works projects in Indochina, which included railroads, roads, and bridges, roughly 25,000 Chinese and Vietnamese died. Scandalized by costs, graft, and mistreatment of locals, the French public opinion turned strongly against the colonialists in Indochina.
- A new policy was put in place in 1909 to better attend to the needs and traditions of colonized peoples, but little of substance changed (Wright, 1991).
- Starting in the 1920s, Saigon became the centre of Vietnamese anticolonialism thinking among educated young people. The nature of the discourse evolved from a radical anarchism's desire for personal and social freedom from both tradition and colonial rule which later shaped the Marxist-Leninist focus on revolution for social justice and national liberation.
- The central critique was the miserable treatment of Vietnamese peasants and urban poor (Tai, 1992).
- Between the two World Wars, Saigon's poor developed a class consciousness and took part in hundreds of protests against French colonial rule (Cherry, 2011).
- After the 1954 Geneva Convention that ended French rule, the Vietnamese could finally more fully occupy the city.
- As tensions with the North rose in the 1950s and with new economic opportunities that emerged with the new US-backed South Vietnam's embrace of free-market capitalism, Vietnamese refugees and migrants started entering the city (Freeman, 1996).
- In 1931, a new "région" called Saigon–Cholon consisting of Saigon and Cholon was formed. Saigon and Cholon, meanwhile, remained separate cities with their respective mayors and municipal councils.
- In 1956, after South Vietnam's independence from France in 1955, the "région" of Saigon–Cholon became a single city called Saigon following the merger of the two cities of Saigon and Cholon.

Figure 1.9. Busy Bùi Viện Street in District 1.

Figure 1.10. Notre-Dame Cathedral and the emerging skyline of District 1.

Figure 1.11. Ho Chi Minh City skyline.

- Capital of South Vietnam

  1954 – 1975

  - In the 1960s, Saigon was the capital of America's global proxy war to counter the 'domino effect' of spreading communism, the focal point of the battle between ideologies. Most of the fighting, however, took place in rural villages throughout central Vietnam. In Saigon, life went on much the same as it had for years — except with more American soldiers around.
  - Throughout the Vietnam War, Saigon was seen as a safe hub for U.S. soldiers and government contractors, as the base of the headquarters of U.S. military operations
  - But the relative tranquillity of Saigon came to an abrupt end during the *Tết* festival in 1968. Under cover of firecrackers, a lunar New Year tradition, 35 battalions loyal to Hanoi launched a coordinated attack against over a hundred cities in South Vietnam. Among the targets around the city were the *Tân Sơn Nhất* International Airport, the Presidential Palace, and the US Embassy. But also other parts of the city were destroyed.

- The Fall of Saigon

  1975

  - On April 30 1975, Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam was captured by the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (also known as the *Việt Cộng*).
  - The event marked the end of the Vietnam War and the start of a transition period to the formal reunification of Vietnam into the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

- Post-Vietnam War

  - Communications between the outside world and Saigon were cut.
  - One objective of the Communist Party of Vietnam was to reduce the population of Saigon, which had become swollen with an influx of people during the war and was now overcrowded with high unemployment.

- HCMC today

  - Today, HCMC is a vibrant economic metropolis and the biggest city of Vietnam with a population of 8.45 million people (1 June, 2017) and 13 million within its metropolitan region.
  - The city is rapidly changing against the backdrop of globalization, but has preserved an almost rural character in many of its small alleys.
  - For many people, the city is a place of hope for a better future, a small share of new welfare.
  - One of the biggest challenges that HCMC is facing today is the risks of climate change as entire districts of the city are endangered to be flooded in case of rising sea levels.
  - The city has more than doubled its population in two decades and more than tripled its average income in less time. Official numbers from Vietnam's General Statistics Office counted the city's population at 3.64 million in 1999 and 7.162 million in 2009. These figures are commonly considered to be undercounting the number of people because of the unofficial migration into the city. The city's GDP per capita is recorded at $2,800 in 2009 and $810 in 1994.

Figure 2.1. Map showing the centres of Saigon and Cholon in 1882.

HCMC's Urban Development

Ho Chi Minh City's urban development has been shaped by the settlements of different ethnic groups living in the area in the past, migration and the course of history the city went through over the years. This cultural and historical background is important to understand the layers of HCMC's urban fabric.

If contemporary urban transformations are taking place in increasingly globalised contexts, they should also be understood by considering the long-term urban history that explains the distinctiveness of the Vietnamese metropolises' "art of being global" (Roy and Ong, 2011). Furthermore, their "openness" echoes the previous international links these cities kept during the historical contexts of Chinese Diaspora trade, French colonisation and the socialist bloc-cooperation period. Thus, after experiencing colonisation, decades of war, socialism and de-urbanisation, followed by the national reunification of 1976 and *Đổi Mới* reforms (Thrift and Forbes, 1986), HCMC reveals a very unique urban trajectory.

The contrasts between HCMC and Hanoi, the national capital, and its role in Vietnam

The role of Vietnam's two biggest cities is very contrasted. Hanoi, as the national capital city, is often associated with bureaucracy and Party enhances control. It is indeed where decisions are taken, while HCMC, usually depicted as the country's liberal and international vanguard, is considered to be the potential economic engine of the country. These dichotomy is becoming less significant these days as the two metropolises are now engaged in a similar trend of opening-up and metropolisation which leads to a progressive "convergence process" (Gibert, Musil, Peyvel, and Segard, 2016).

The difference between the North and South's principal cities echoes in their different mentalities and is also manifested in their differences in urban design. Hanoi, with its 1000-year-old history, is often referred to as the cradle of Vietnamese culture and heritage. Hanoi's urban design was influenced by traditional Chinese cities that, until the end of the autocratic Tang dynasty, had walled grids with strict regulations restricting the movement of subpopulations (Kim, 2015).

On the other hand, southern Vietnam's history of being frontier of the kingdom fostered the Vietnamese pioneers to let go of traditional state-society relations (Li, 1998b). For one, the economy in the South was based on international trade, particularly the export of rice, rather than the domestic agriculture economy of the North, exposing Southerners to a broader set of populations and customs (Kim, 2015). These characteristics of distinct mentalities also came to light when Kim interviewed Vietnamese urban historian *Nguyễn Đình Đầu* in January 2010: he noted that in contrast to Hanoi, Saigon is a younger city without an old quarter and with few regulations about public space use. For example, there were only a few places forbidding horse carts other than the king's. At temples, regular citizens were required to park their horse cart at a marker stone and then approach the temple on foot. He cites these few examples as an indication that ever since Saigon grew into an urban settlement of international trade, it developed a relatively liberal norm of public space use (Kim, 2015).

To understand the urban fabric of HCMC, it is important to go back in history and study the emergence of two towns, Saigon and Cholon. Previously independent cities, they merged in 1930s to the city of Saigon-Cholon, later renamed Saigon and today known as Ho Chi Minh City.
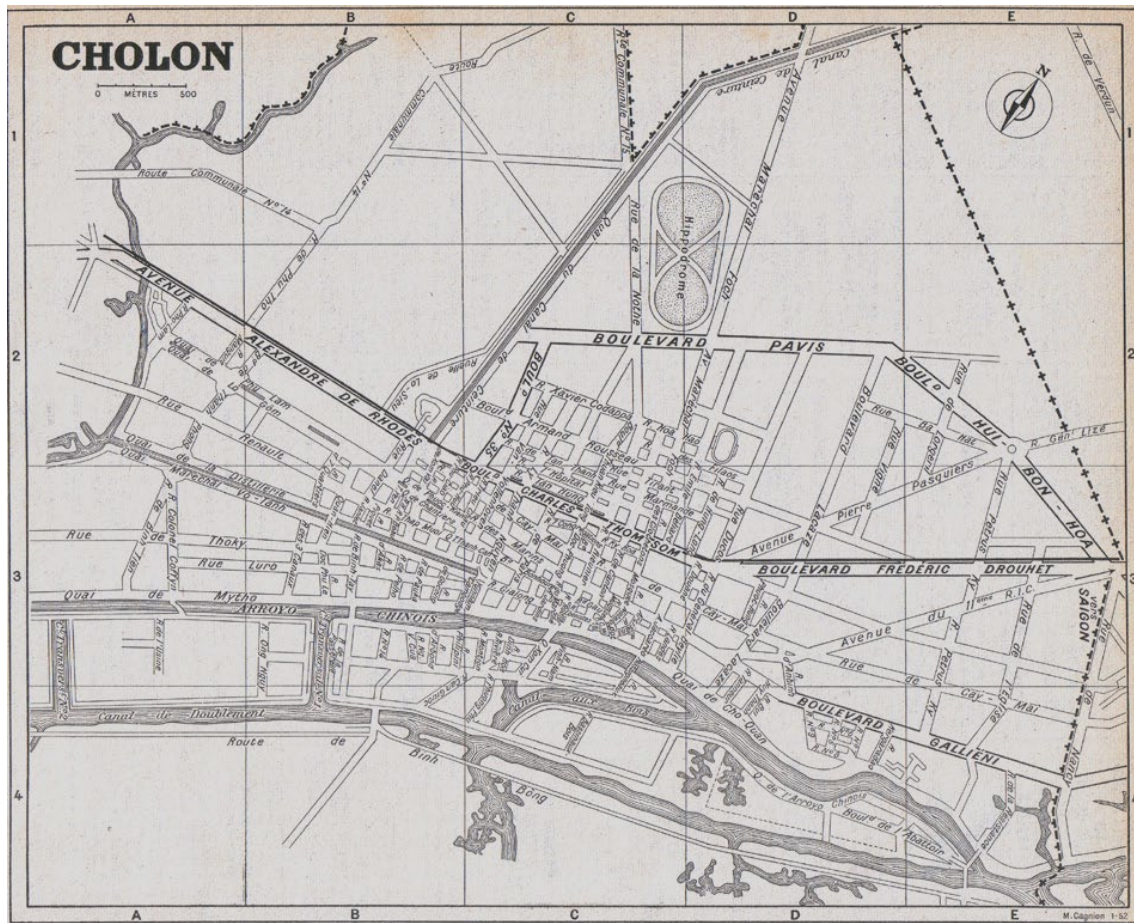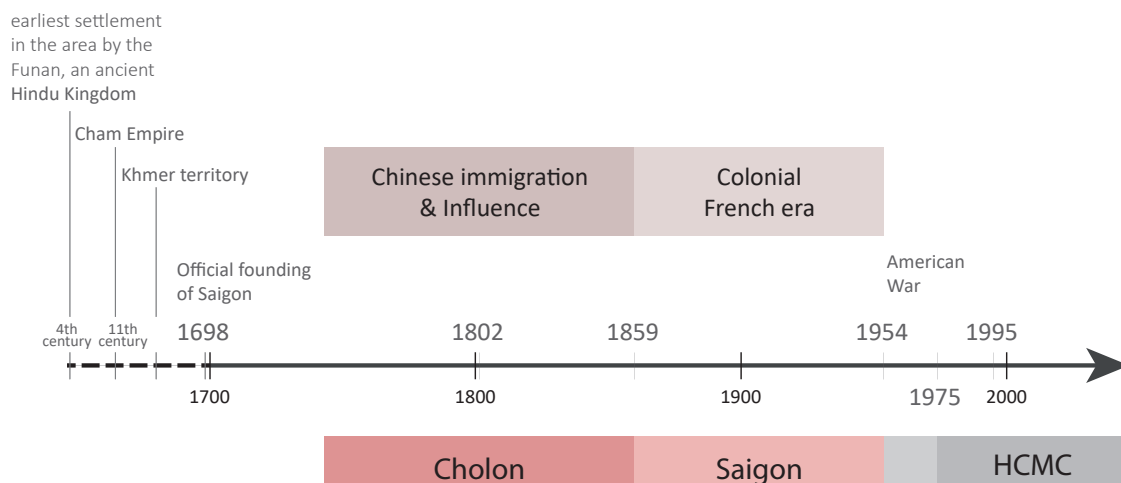
Figure 2.2. Map of Cholon in 1953.

Figure 2.3. Timeline showing the emergence of Cholon and Saigon, merging to Ho Chi Minh CIty, and the parallel historical events.

The relation between Vietnamese and Chinese and the emergence of Cholon

A recurring theme in the history of Vietnam is its historically antagonistic relationship with China. After the successful revolt against China led by Vietnamese *Ngô Quyền* in the 10th century, the country was renamed *Đại Việt*. But the Vietnamese leaders continued to be wary of the Chinese and in the 15th century began trying to control Chinese immigration by limiting ports of entry and monitoring residences and activities of Chinese in Vietnam (Chang 1982).

From the start, Chinese migrants were an integral part of Vietnamese territorial expansion southwards. In 1644, as the Ming dynasty fell and Chinese fled to Vietnam, three Ming loyalist generals aligned with the *Nguyễn* lords, and brought 3,000 Ming soldiers to help the *Nguyễn* conquer the Khmers. In return, the Ming were treated as permanent residents and allowed to settle in southern Vietnam (Li, 1998a). The Chinese eventually set up profitable trading and farming businesses in several areas in the South which became a sort of central place for the *Minh Hương* (Ming and Vietnamese mixed race), now called *Hoa* (Dolisnki, 2007).

However, in the late 1700s when the *Tây Sơn* brothers ultimately dismantled the two dynasties and united Vietnam for the first time in 200 years, the Chinese were massacred for their alliance with the *Nguyễn* lords (Kim, 2015). After the bloodbath, the surviving Chinese were encouraged to invest in the economy and submitted to the *Tây Sơn* forces were assigned to live in Cholon, a town adjacent to Saigon in 1778 (Joiner and Nguyễn, 1963).

Cholon's economic and social structure shaped its urban form. The city was organized into ethnic neighbourhoods specialized in different markets and each community centred around a temple. The buildings were lined along the streets that were oriented to access the canals built for transportation and trading.
Cholon's system of urban form and economic organization is similar to the settlements patterns which evolved in other cities in southern China and so there may have been some transplanting of ideas in the region by the migration process (Dolinski 2007).

The urban form can also be read within the context of an evolution of Chinese urban form. While older Chinese cities traditionally had walls to try to confine the movement of different classes, people often rebelled, digging through the walls to access the streets and building structures that obstructed public roads. Beginning in the more pluralistic Song dynasty (960-1279 AD), the walled ward system eventually eroded and commercial activity began to spill out onto the streets, creating an open city of mixed uses (Kim 2015).
The streets became the major public space, although the government constantly fought against encroachment (Heng 1999).

Cholon grew steadily, eventually surpassing Saigon in population and trade and became an important part of Vietnam's regional economy and trade with China and Southeast Asia.

Figure 2.4. Map of Saigon in 1898.
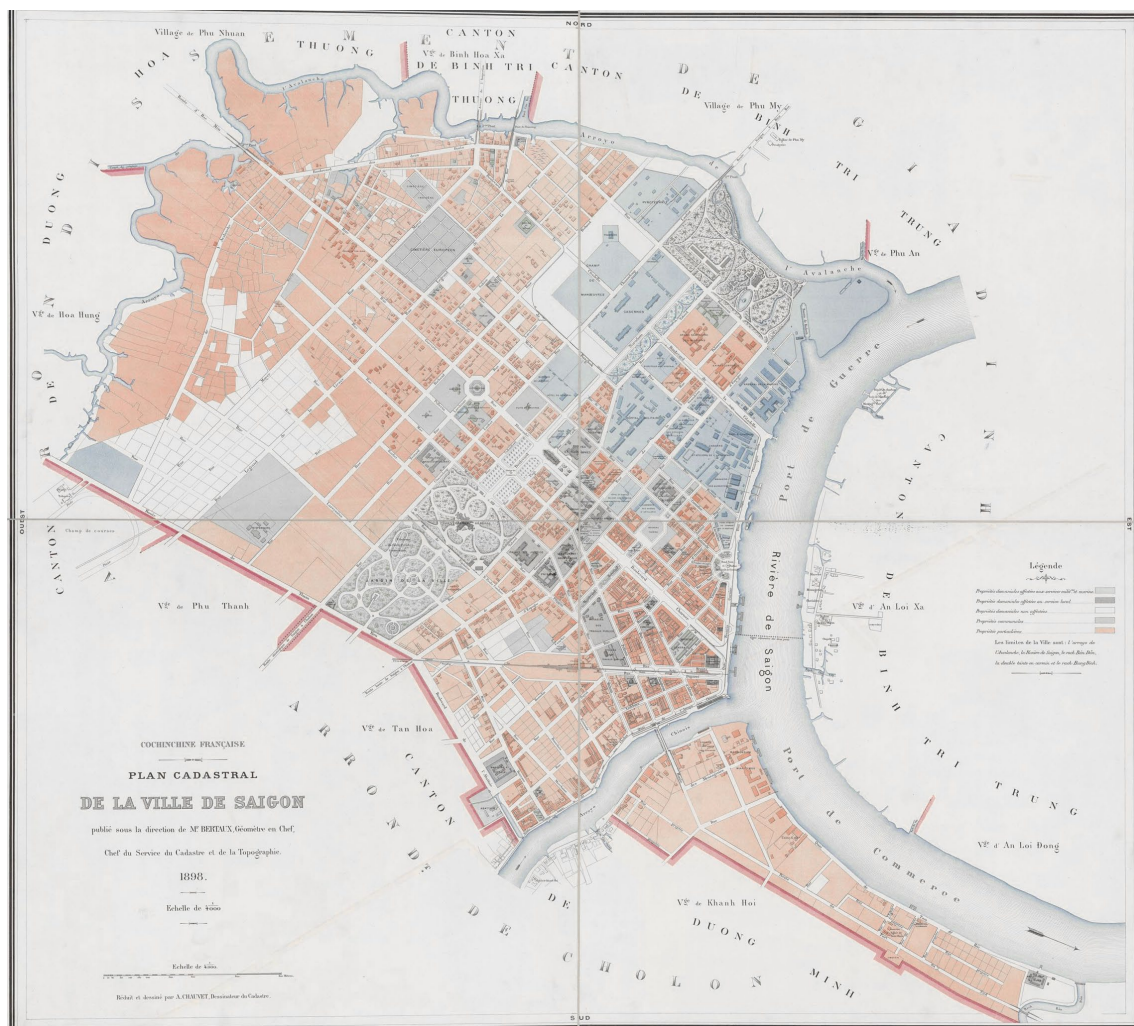
Colonial City Building (1859-1954)

In the 19th century, the colonist dark shadow covered the whole of Southeast Asia. In 1859 French colonists invaded and occupied Saigon. In 1861, Saigon was declared the capital of Cochinchina and the city began to expand and flourish. The first intervention of the French in urban planning is the demolition of the old citadel. They also burnt all Buddhist temples and houses built around the citadel and used this new land to build the first barracks and other buildings of the French army. In der colonial mind-set, they seized all land from indigenous residents and started to erect a new city. As their followed the regime of an assimilationist colony, their aim was to separate the residential areas of Europeans from the residential areas of indigenous people.

In the past, navigable rivers and canals have served as an important route into the city, often being the main approach to the city and an important asset for trade and the transportation of goods. But with the arriving of the French, all the channels in the city centre were filled up and replaced by three Western-styled boulevards. At the beginning of the 20th century, many channels were continually filled up in Cholon and the image of the waterfront city dimmed out. During that time, Saigon started to transform from a muddy settlement of wooden buildings to a city with paved boulevards with sidewalks and colonial architecture.

The French viewed colonial cities as laboratories for designing the ideal "métropole" that would synthesize planning for economic development, public amenities, and cultural identity. And since the colonialists enjoyed much greater planning powers in the colonies than within France, they used them (Kim, 2015). The rate of construction and investment depended upon the ambitions of the admiral installed in Saigon and the financial support he received from France. In 1845, a law mandated the implementation of sidewalks in Paris, calling for the equal distribution of costs between the city and property abutters (Kostof, 1992). This change made streets and sidewalks an important part of colonial urbanism in Saigon. The scale of the sidewalks was grand and landscaped for promenading and socializing. Riverfront sidewalks were built to be six meters wide and main roads were four meters wide, both lined with two rows of trees. Secondary roads had two-meter- wide sidewalks with one row of trees on each side (Bouchot, 1927). The new boulevards with their good proportions and harmony gave the city of Saigon once the name of "the Pearl of the Far East".

By the end of the 19th century, when the occupation of Indochina was completed, the major French buildings had been erected, such as: the Notre Dame Cathedral (1880), the Court of Law (1884), the Continental Hotel (1885), the Cochinchina Governor Palace (1890), the Municipal Theatre (1902) and the Town Hall (1908) (Tran, 2008).
In addition of building five boulevards and numerous streets, laying the structure for Saigon's urban grid until today, the French promoted economic growth through zoning the city into five land use categories: institutional, residential, recreational/ cultural, commercial, and industrial.
With the help of planning, even fancy department stores began to appear and cluster on Rue Catinat (now *Đồng Khởi* street) (Wright, 1991).
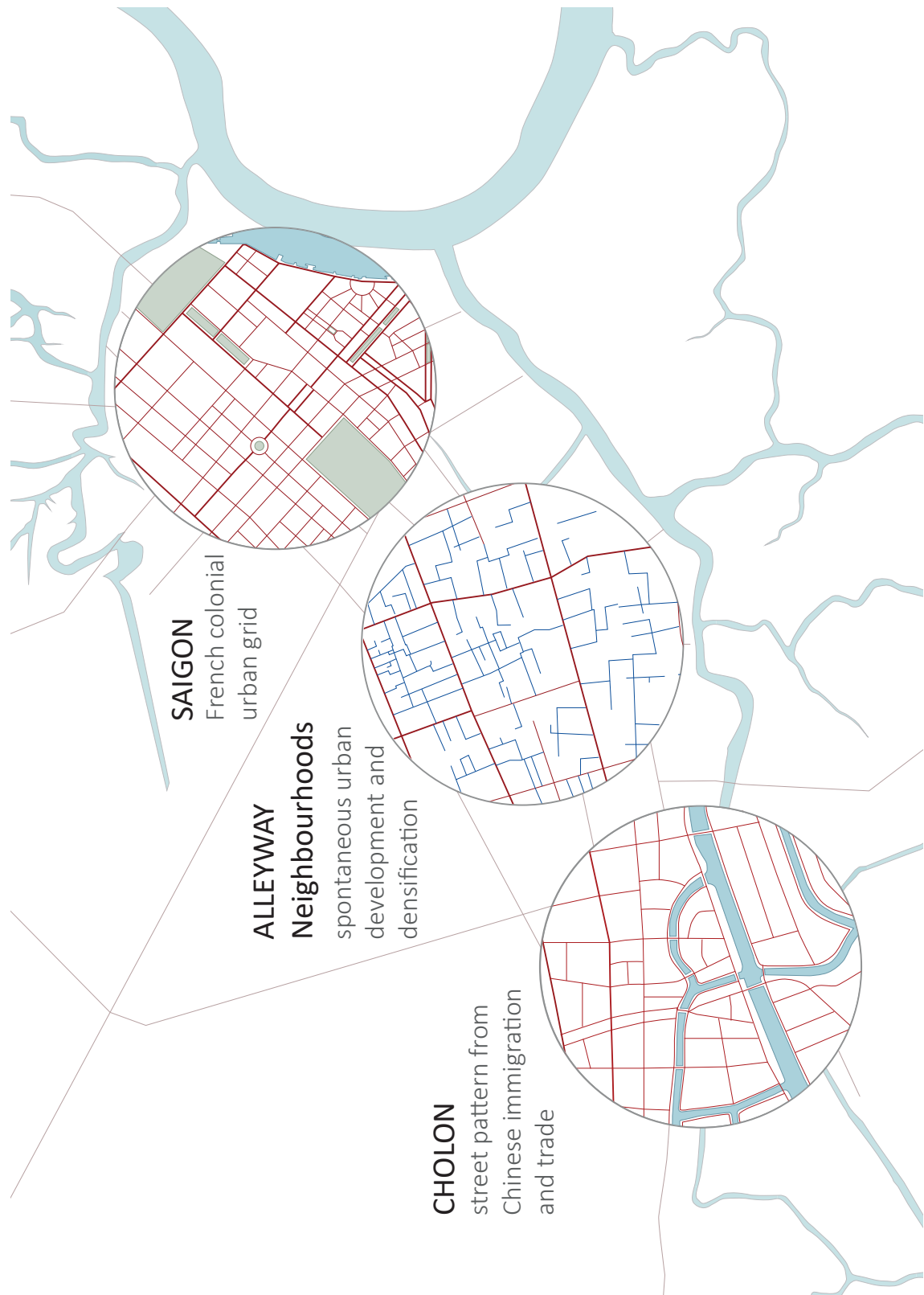
SAIGON
French colonial
urban grid

ALLEYWAY
Neighbourhoods
spontaneous urban
development and
densification

CHOLON
street pattern from
Chinese immigration
and trade

Figure 2.5. The distinctive urban fabric of Saigon, Cholon and Alleyway neighbourhoods.

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Hebrard's 1923 plan treated Saigon and Cholon as one metro region, thereby facilitating the growth of Cholon's exports to Europe. The two cities did officially merge into "Saigon-Cholon" in 1931. But despite this merging, the French urban planning also reinforced the five-kilometre separation between the two areas. While the French wanted to separate and protect themselves from "dirty" and "dangerous" indigenous people, Hebrard acknowledged that "every European district needs a native district in order to survive; it will provide indispensable domestic servants, small businesses, and labour. . . . [These districts] correspond, in essence, to the business districts and working-class residential neighbourhoods of our own modern cities which are, in truth, separated from the bourgeois neighbourhoods without a definite line being drawn on a map". (Wright, 1991) Following this constellation, Saigon was designated to be the administrative capital, whereas Cholon was the industrial/ commercial area.

Cholon's streets were lined with the particular type of merchant shop rowhouses that developed from the influence of the southern Chinese immigrants. But now, the architectural style also incorporated European design elements into the Chinese shophouses under the influence of the French colonialism. This building type promoted economic intensity, with the ground floor of the building opening directly onto the street to form commercial space with living quarters on the upper floors (Kohl, 1984; Yin, 2003). As protection from the tropical sun, awnings were erected to shade the shopfront. This created an effect of outlining an outdoor commercial space, spilling commercial activities and interactions into the public space on the sidewalks and the streets. Until the nineteenth century or even the early twentieth century, Chinese cities were very different from their Western counterparts: "The quintessential public space—the public square that constitutes the jewel and core of most European cities—was conspicuously absent in traditional Chinese cities, at least not in the form we know of in the West. . . . Instead, until late imperial times, the quintessential public space in Chinese cities was the street/street-market. . . . It was predominantly in and along these linear channels that public life was conducted" (Heng, 2008). While the sidewalks and streets were to most important part of public life in Cholon, the French introduced building codes and regulations to Cholon in order to promote public health.
However, later in the 1920s another observer notes that "the city has become modern due to the construction of large new roads; there remain hardly any vestiges of the old Cholon, with its narrow, chaotic streets, except maybe along the edge of *Bình Tây*" (Teston and Percheron, 1931).

The political urban strategy of the French colony of dividing Saigon and Cholon in an administrative and commercial zone and limiting construction in the 5km zone between them enhanced the division between the two distinct, but symbiotically connected towns. Space was racialized with policies restricting the mixing of ethnicities in these towns. Different types of ethnic Chinese, as well as Vietnamese and French, performed specialized economic roles and were spatially located in the city. More generally, history shows the development of distinct urban morphologies and architecture that expressed not only cultural heritages but the economic roles and politics between different populations (Kim, 2015). Still to this day, people refer to Saigon and Cholon when talking about these areas in the city and the division still exists in people's mind.

Figure 2.6. Trần Hưng Đạo Street, in District 1 in the 1960s.

Independence and War time

As decolonisation took place in Asia, the French decided to stay in Vietnam, but this ended with the Battle of *Điện Biên Phủ* in 1954 between the French troops and Vietnamese Nationalists led by *Hồ Chí Minh*. The heavy defeat of the French resulted in the withdrawal of French military in Vietnam and the Geneva Conference.

After the Geneva Agreements in 1954, the US came to replace the French military presence, trying to prevent the spreading of Communism in Asia. Vietnam was divided into two parts: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the North—influenced by socialist ideology from the former Soviet Union and China—with Hanoi as the capital; and the Republic of Vietnam in the South—influenced by the US and its capitalist ideology—with Saigon as the capital. During the war, Saigon served as the military headquarters for US forces in the area.

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, at least a million immigrants from the rural areas poured into the city to avoid the war (Goodman & Franks, 1975). The population increased rapidly and created serious housing problems and overcrowding. This led to the emergence of slums, especially along the river and an unplanned development and densification of the city. The government of South Vietnam tried to solve these problems with the design of a series of masterplans of Saigon (*Hoàng Hùng* plan in 1958, the *Ngô Viết Thụ* plan in 1960, and the Doxiadis plan in 1962), but the war prevented proper implementation of these plans.

The area between Saigon and Cholon became completely filled in, with primarily refugees migrating to the city settling in this area. Urban planning documents show that this movement and spontaneous urban development already started by 1955. At this time, Cholon had a much higher density (700-750 inhabitants per hectare) than most of the centre of Saigon (100-150 inhabitants per hectares) (Doxiadis Associes 1965). This led to the formation of HCMC's typical alleyway system, which has lasted until today.

1975-1985

With the end of the civil war in 1975, Vietnam was reunited into the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and Saigon lost its status as capital to Hanoi and was named Ho Chi Minh City in 1976 to honour the late President of the Vietnamese Revolution.

The new government adopted a strong centralised socialist system: it took responsibility for providing housing for those working for the state, nationalized unoccupied houses and private enterprises and abandoned private land ownership and established the collectivisation of agricultural land (Coit, 1998, Gainsborough, 2004).

During the difficult times after the war, hardly any spatial development took place in HCMC, with a few exceptions in the city centre. Despite the hard conditions of that time, people from rural areas still moved to the city which led to housing shortages and the densification of the alleyway system.

Figure 2.7. Saigonese women in 1995.

Figure 2.8. Givral Café in Đồng Khởi – Lê Lợi street in the 1990s.

The *Đổi Mới* and land law reforms in Vietnam

In 1986, the central government decided to introduce the *Đổi Mới* policy aiming to create a more market-oriented economy, in order to improve the country's economic power (Tsuboi, 2007). The period from 1980 to 2003 saw great changes in land law policies and set the base for the booming real estate market that can be seen in contemporary HCMC.

After the national unification in April 1975, the most remarkable land law decision was taken in 1980, when the Constitution, which contained the provision that "Land… belongs to the State – all under the ownership of the whole people" (Article 19), left a very deep imprint on the system of land law in Vietnam. This became the basic legal ground for establishing provisions on land use and management and no longer did any form of collective or private ownership in land exist in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2010).

The Land Law of 1987 was enacted in the early years of *Đổi Mới* and included the establishment of a legal ground for the State to unify its management of all land capital in the country. The main issue was that this law still retained ideas from the previous regime, while the market economy was just about to start and took no account of the notion that land could be priced.

The 1993 Land Law absorbed ideas relating more to the ideology of *Đổi Mới*. It recognised a price-frame on land (Article 12) and it permitted the State to transfer and lease out land to organisations, households and individuals for long-term stable use, and allowed land users to pass on the right to use land to another user within the duration of the lease (Article 1) (Nguyen, 2010). This new law represented very important transformations in the land law policies and enabled "land use right permits" and the exchange of those. Technically property is still owned by the state, but you have long-term land right use permits that people are now allowed to exchange. That sets up the possibility for the booming of the real estate market that you see in contemporary HCMC.

A revision of the land law in 1998 modified the right to use land (including leased land) as capital for joint ventures of domestic and foreign investors (AusAID, 2001).

The 2003 Land Law has been adopted primarily as a result of the process of *Đổi Mới* and integration. Its provision strongly reflects the ideas of *Đổi Mới* and helped to achieve first, more openness and transparency by provisions on the establishment review and proclamation of plans regarding land use. Second, the notion of administrative procedural reforms to simplify and ease the burdens of land users has been put into practice by including provisions regarding the establishment of public service organisations for land issues and private consultant firms for land pricing. Third, equal treatment has been emphasized by adopting a separate chapter on the rights and obligations of land users (without discrimination based on whether they belong to domestic organisations, households, individuals, or foreign organisations and individuals, or whether they are Vietnamese permanent residents overseas). Fourth, the law clearly distinguishes the role of the State in representing land ownership from that of the State in its capacity as the entity in charge of land management. Fifth, the law establishes the initial legal basis for the emergence of a market for land use rights in Vietnam, by setting out provisions on land use rights in the market for immovable property, land pricing and financial issues related to land, etc. (Nguyen, 2010).

The *Đổi Mới* reforms and this new land laws reflect the large scale political transformations in Vietnam during that time and the economical emergence of the country on an international level.

Figure 2.9. The dense urban fabric of Ho Chi Minh City today.

Figure 2.10. Aerial view of Ho Chi Minh City today.

Figure 2.11. The emerging skyline of Ho Chi Minh City.

First Steps toward Globalisation

In Hanoi and HCMC the early signs of metropolisation appeared with the arrival of the first Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) at the beginning of the 1990s. Though buildings of more than ten storeys were already built in HCMC during the 1960s and 1970s, Vietnamese cities generally remained quite "low", until the FDI triggered the construction of the first high-rise buildings. This paved the way to the verticalisation and "supersizing" of the city. The construction of the New World Hotel in HCMC in 1991, and the Hanoi Tower in 1996 (that combines service apartments, hotel, offices and retail functions), embodied the first international functions and vertical shapes. On the outskirts, FDI materialised through the construction of rescaled industrial zones and factories. (Gibert, Musil, Peyvel & Segard, 2016)

Since joining the WTO (World Trade Organization), Vietnam's economy has developed unprecedentedly. Exports have risen and foreign investments have been augmented.
The confidence in Vietnam of foreign investors has been increasing more and more. As Vietnam is already an official member of the WTO, it has become a more attractive location for investment. In 2007, the FDI in Vietnam was raised to USD 6.7 billion (World Bank, 2007) to help the country to integrate more deeply into the regional and the global economy. This integration is a considerable contribution to the economic development of Vietnam, generally speaking and to Ho Chi Minh City particularly.

In the 1990s, thanks to foreign investments, 25 office buildings of 25 to 33 storeys were built and scattered in the old Saigon centre. This is the phenomenon of post-planning, where the erection of high-rise buildings depended only on land availability, accessibility and profit. These buildings are modern, covered with glass, air-conditioned, and designed by foreign architects. But, regretfully, historical and architectural traditions were side-lined in these buildings, which often stray and break their surroundings (Tran, 2008).

HCMC today

Today, HCMC's morphology has changed into a capitalist urban model with the increase of density in the city centre. The separation of residential and commercial zones is mostly absent in HCMC, due to the fact that a zoning system with regard to land use in HCMC does not exist. Almost every house along a busy street supports some kind of shop on the ground floor. The most striking feature is probably the extreme density of the urban fabric in almost every part of the mega city. "Even within District 10, with its wide French colonial heritage boulevards, you will see densely packed buildings hidden behind the facades of street blocks. When you leave the city centre, you realize that the overwhelming majority of urban space is composed of this seemingly endless maze of low-rise buildings and a dense network of small alleys (*hẻm*)" (Waibel, 2017).

Another characteristic of HCMC's urban pattern is the so-called "socio-spatial fragmentation". This is understood as the immediate proximity of striking contrasts: high-rise and low-rise, high-dense and low-dense, planned and informal, modern and traditional, rich and poor, etc.

The biggest change in HCMC's urban landscape is the emergence of a skyline in District 1, dominated by the remarkable silhouette of the Bitexco Financial Tower and other nearby high-rise buildings like the Vincom Centre, Saigon Times Square, Vietcombank Tower or Saigon One Tower.

Figure 2.12. The new urban area around Landmark 81, Vietnam's tallest building in Bình Thạnh District.

Figure 2.13. Saigon South Masterplan by SOM.

Recently, the state introduced the newest 2013 Land Law, which took an effect on July 1st, 2014. This new law contains some improvements with respect to land transactions and land prices, by regulating the procedure to take decisions on land acquisitions and upgrading the rights of foreign investors. It enables foreign investors to get involved on their own in residential projects for lease or sale (before foreign investors had to establish a joint venture with a domestic investor). This new law also provides a legal basis for a more transparent process by which foreign enterprises can now obtain land use rights through auction and sublet land from domestic enterprises or overseas Vietnamese. The state, however, still holds full ownership, while individuals can only obtain prolonged lease rights over land (Nguyen, Samsura, Van der Krabben, Le, 2015).

During recent years, HCMC has witnessed many substantial transformations of its physical fabric. Three major changes can be identified. First, the dynamic development of a modern skyline with an impressive concentration of new high-rise buildings erected by national and international companies in the city centre. Despite these steps towards modernity, some people are resentful that the proliferation of high-rise buildings in the city centre is coinciding with the demolition of French colonial buildings thus causing HCMC to lose its architectural heritage in the course of modernisation.

Massive urban spatial expansion is the second striking feature, with recent urban development already expanding across administrative borders, particularly in the western and eastern parts of the city. The most prominent example of urban spatial expansion is Saigon South, a new urban area south of District 4 and District 8. Over 500,000 people are expected to live within this mixed-used urban quarter in the future. But remarkable developments have already taken place over the past decade, visible in *Phú Mỹ Hưng* new city centre in particular.

The third significant change in HCMC is the implementation of major infrastructure projects such as the erection of new highways, bridges, the development of a new central business district on *Thủ Thiêm* peninsula and the construction of the *Võ Văn Kiệt* Highway, supported by Japanese donor organisations, being another prominent example.

Infrastructure projects were accompanied by the demolition of marginal settlement areas along the canals therefore it cannot be denied that the local population suffered from eviction and got only meagre compensation in some cases.

Figure 2.14. The Phú Mỹ Bridge over the Saigon River completed in 2009.

Figure 3.1. The street food scene in Saigon permeates every district, neighbourhood and alleyway

Figure 3.2. Woman cooking in the streets of Saigon.

Figure 3.3. Children enjoying their meal.

Public Spaces in Ho Chi Minh City – The Soul of the City

HCMC's Sidewalks Life

When thinking of public space in a city, many instinctively envision big squares and plazas with elaborated designs and meanings they identify with. But in terms of square-meter area, a city's sidewalk system usually exceeds the city's parks and large open spaces. More significantly, because of the way that this network of concrete spread its tentacles to reach people in many parts of the city, drawing them into intimate configurations, sidewalks have the potential to be a remarkable democratising space. Sidewalks are also important economically as a transportation system and social safety net. After years of inattention, now more than ever, people around the globe are trying to unlock their potential by contesting the purpose of and rights to the sidewalk. Street vendors, property owners, local government, and the general public are engaging in innovative experiments in some places and bloody conflicts in others (Kim, 2015).

When walking through the streets of Ho Chi Minh City, one realises that the sidewalk space of the city is the city to most people (Kim, 2015). It is here that the public realm is happening. While one can observe activities in public spaces in many cities, many will agree that the sidewalk life of HCMC is a particular trait of the city, where all segments of the population eat, socialise, and trade on the sidewalk. Some going as far as calling what is visible in its public spaces "the soul of the city".

The sidewalks of HCMC are more than just a transportation corridor. People gather in this space for socialising and commerce, having a coffee break, buying food from street vendors or selling goods, using the sidewalk space as spill over of their shop. The sidewalk is full of colours, sounds, and smells that are an integral part of everyday life. People come together, talk to each other, and look to each other. There is not much separation between household activities and the public, between leisure and commerce, between people (Kim, 2015). The city's traditional sidewalk culture remains a vital part of daily life.

Figure 3.4. Sidewalk clearance campaign.
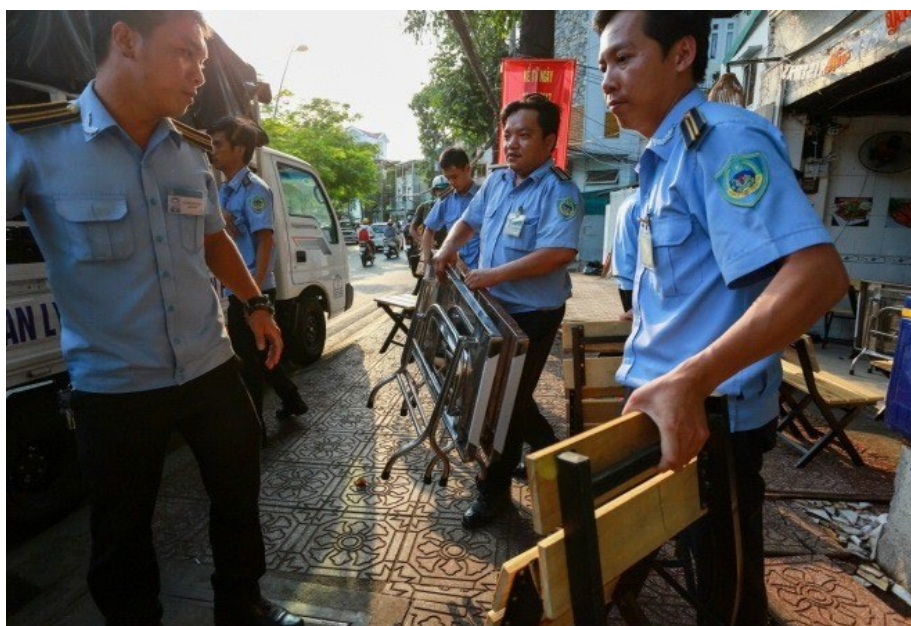
Figure 3.5. The local police patrolling the streets to penalise violators for illegal encroachment on pavements in Ho Chi Minh City.

Attempts by the government to clear HCMC's sidewalks and why they didn't succeed

In the early 2000s, the leaders of HCMC increased their efforts to achieve their vision of HCMC as a world-class city, aiming to be recognised on an international level as a modern city and being able to compete with other emerging global cities. Other arguments are public health and traffic congestion. First controversies arise, when picturing the image of the city they have in mind, seeing western cities and their way of life as urban role models, regardless of their differences with the local culture, way of life, history, climate and urban heritage of HCMC.

During this time, the Vietnamese government introduced a series of sidewalk clearance policies which started actually being enforced in the mid-2000s.Thus, customs and habits on the sidewalks started to change and people tried to adapt to the new regulations or bypass them. Police and traffic inspectors now regularly patrol sidewalk spaces. You can now witness scenes such as a pair of policemen on a motorbike awakening a man napping in the park during his lunch break. The new paradigm seems to be that people on the sidewalk need to keep moving. The biggest targets are street vendors, so thousands of vendors throughout the city keep roaming around carrying their wares on their shoulders, bikes, or wheeled carts instead of staying in one spot (Kim, 2015).

The Vietnamese national government's trajectory of introducing policies to clear and further regulate the sidewalk continued, and starting around 2007, they enforced clearance especially in front of the high-end commercial spaces within the historic downtown that are increasingly replacing the colonial, lower-density architecture (Decision 227, 2006; Decision 74, 2008; Decision 3305, 2009).

But opposing voices are getting louder, with street vendors claiming the sidewalk spaces their source of earning, and others arguing, that sidewalk practices are community recreating and should be viewed as "sites of authenticity" (Zukin, 2009). Recent studies of Vietnam's "informal economy" have countered that street vending is an important source of food and employment that will only grow with continued migration (Cahihon et al. 2006; Lincoln 2008).

While the official reasons cited for clearance policies and enforcement invoke discourses about modernity, efficient and safe transportation, improved public health and food safety, and attracting international tourism, street vendors have benefitted from great empathy of property owners and local police towards them. At the same time, the press has expressed sentiments about the cultural value and convenience of sidewalk vending and the vitality of HCMC's street life.

The clearance and regulations of the sidewalks in HCMC have become a public issue, and as there are divergent opinions about what is appropriate and desirable on the sidewalk, there has been some resistance manifested towards the state efforts to clear the sidewalk.
Recent city policy decisions have made it illegal to do anything but walk on sidewalks. However, if the sidewalk is at least three meters wide, districts can decide to choose specific sidewalks for which it is possible for citizens to apply for a temporary license to either vend on the sidewalk or use it for motorbike parking (Kim, 2015). But despite the production of lists of such sidewalks by the districts, there is a divergence between regulations and practice.

Figure 3.6. Men enjoying coffee on the sidewalk of District 1.

Figure 3.7. Men enjoying street food in an alley of Ho Chi Minh City.

Mixed-used public spaces and a laissez-faire mentality in HCMC

Public spaces in HCMC cannot be analysed like their western counterparts, as the local mentality and interpretation of regulations and customs differs a lot from the models we know. To understand the way of using public space in HCMC, it is important to analyse both, physical space and social space.

When observing everyday urbanism, it is important to uncover how the public space is actually used and the social processes and meaning of that use. The usual division between private and public space that is assumed in the West do not hold in Vietnam. What is commonly thought as public spaces in the West like streets and sidewalks are often used for private household activities. The application of methods like spatial ethnography can help us to investigate how city spaces are actually used. In this regard, it is essential to understand the diverse members in society and the roles and rules about those spaces. Contrarily to Western models, where public space activities adhere quite closely to local laws and regulations, in Vietnam it is important to research spatial practices in action because there is often a divergence between law and practice. In this case, property rights are not so much about ownership of a thing as much as about one's relationship with everyone else in society. That is, one's right only exists the extent to which other people agree to restrain themselves and respect it (Blackstone 1766; Rose 1994; Hohfeld 1923).

Therefore, institutionalised forms of communicating one's property rights is key in order to maintain widespread respect as well as to operationalise enforcement of those rights (Cole and Grossman, 2002). So, our spatial ethnography involves analysing not only who uses what space on the sidewalks of HCMC, but also the system of claims to the space, how people communicate these claims, common terms of allowable uses that have developed, who are the enforcers, and the institutions that legitimate the system (Kim, 2015). So the main focus should not be on legal laws, but more on social practices and processes in these spaces.

The arrangements of the uses of public space are often made through a rather indirect process of informal conversations, adjustments, and inaction by both neighbours and local police, with Saigon's characteristically fluid and laissez-faire style of communism and bureaucracy. But it also has to do with what this situation was contributing to the life of the city (Kim, 2015).

Figure 3.8. Spill-outs of shops into the public space in Cholon.

Figure 3.9. Shop houses in Cholon.

Figure 3.10. Street food scene in Saigon.

Figure 3.11. Sidewalk practices in Saigon.

Figure 4.1. The emergence of HCMC's alleyways in-between the linear grid. Map from 1986-1988.

HCMC's alleyways

They may be hard to find on most maps, but the alleyways (*hẻm*) of HCMC represent the core element of the city's urban identity. Until this day, they form 85% of the living environment of the citizen in a city with more than 8 million inhabitants. Much more than just an infrastructural element, the Vietnamese alleyway forms an integral component of the urban territory associated with multiple usages and strong ownership of its space by the residents. This calls into question the politics of contemporary projects led by the urban authorities and the steady-paced verticalisation process, now engaged in HCMC. Despite the rapid modernisation and boom the city has undergone in recent years, the everyday city production still takes place in the interior of their specific urban pattern, namely their alleyway neighbourhoods (Gibert & Phạm, 2016).

HCMC's alleyways are characterized by the "smallness" of their plot division, the absence of sidewalks and multiple lanes, the sinuosity of their irregular trail and by their very high density of population they foster (with more than 80.000 inhabitants/km^2 in some central areas of HCMC) and remain an important ingredient of the Vietnamese urban identity.

The emergence of HCMC's alleyways

In HCMC, the very dense network of alleyways was born mainly out of the city dwellers' pragmatism during uncertain times. During the American War, especially between 1950 and 1960, Ho Chi Minh City experienced a demographic explosion which was not supported by an urban development project of this magnitude. At the time, only the colonial grid-pattern covering district 1, a part of district 3, and the historical structure of the Chinese neighbourhood of *Chợ Lớn*, at the West of district 5, tracing back to the 19th century, were planned and calibrated.

At that period the street networks were considered to be the matrix of the urbanisation process. But beyond the production of these historical neighbourhoods, urban growth took place following a spontaneous and linear logic, first guided by the main trading axes, and later by a process of densification (Gibert, 2014). The further we get from these structuring main streets, the more random the alleyway grid becomes, revealing the historical interweaving between the planned and the spontaneous in HCMC's urban production. The different morphological patterns of the alleyways answered the variety of local situations. Their spatial organisation often reveals the ancient frame of rural paths, paddy fields or embankment systems that structured the territory many decades ago. As a result, HCMC's urban structure is notably based on the juxtaposition of different composite urban fabrics (Gibert, 2016).

The informal urban expansion first started in the vacant space between the two cities of Saigon and Cholon. The city expanded rapidly and the densification of the city reached new extremes. From 1954 on, the street was not anymore an urban element planned by the authorities, but becomes an in-between space, emerging spontaneously from the rapid densification and is not controlled by the urban frame, which gives the alleyways of HCMC their morphological characteristic of narrowness and a particular identity of the urban tissue. The width of some alleyways sometimes shrinks down to 60 centimetres, having the roofs of the buildings touching each other at the top.

Figure 4.2. Public realm in an alleyway neighbourhood.

Figure 4.3. Family activities in the public space of an alleyway.

Network and structure

The alleyways constitute the smallest link in HCMC's urban network. With less than 12 meters in width and no sidewalks, they are generally accessible only for pedestrians or motorbikes, in some instances for the passage of a car in the largest ones.
Furthermore, within this urban texture, the different blocks and neighbourhoods are not structured around any central plaza. The idea of centrality is linearly embodied by the main alleyway, which constitutes the backbone of the local structure and which is the most socially and commercially dynamic place in the neighbourhood. Both in Hanoi and HCMC, low-rise urban fabric allows for direct street access to a maximum of residents. Indeed, trading functions have historically driven the format of urban housing in Vietnam. Therefore, alleyways directly connected to commercial streets are the most valued (Gibert, 2016).

In contrast to the colonial street that opens deep perspectives, the alley feeds a sense of enclosure amplified by the extreme density of the buildings that border it.

Architectural typologies and spatial practices

Each alleyway benefits from strong interactions with its adjacent plots of lands. This spatial apparatus constitutes the basic unit of the urban matrix. The heart of this apparatus comprises the 'shop house', today often reinterpreted as the 'tube-house' (*nhà ống*). Its shape is rectangular, very narrow and deep (around 3-4m wide and 15-25m deep), perpendicular to the street, onto which it opens directly (on one side only), and it occupies the entire plot of land. The high prevalence of this urban form helps to explain the high density that HCMC fosters, despite its low morphological profile.

In Vietnamese spatial practices, the built environment itself is structured by and according to the street: it is the distance to the street that orders the layout and the functions associated with each room in the house, through a succession of ranked thresholds. The entrance room, which opens directly onto the street, constitutes the pivot of this spatial apparatus: it allows an efficient interface between public and private, commercial and domestic. Thus, Vietnamese alleyways offer a relevant example of an integrated urban apparatus, where interrelations between the form of places and their practices are obvious (Gibert, 2016).

Alleyway households as self-organised communities

Alleyway neighbourhoods are divided into several resident groups (*tổ dân phố*) of 50-100 persons. Each group is led by a head person, who represents the neighbourhood at the ward level. The groups organise monthly meetings, in which they inform residents of administrative news, discuss local policies, and mediate household conflicts. Thus, alleyway households proactively participate in the management of their daily lives and the development of their surrounding space and landscape.

The urban residents are not passive actors in the city production, but active participants in urban morphology, the evolution of technical services and the creation of everyday public space. Daily life in the alleyways illustrates very well the traditional Vietnamese saying "*bán anh em xa mua láng giềng gần*" [selling far brothers and buying near neighbours]. The intimate interactions among alley residents create a strong sense of community and a shared memory (Gibert, 2016).

Figure 4.4. Street food stall.

Figure 4.5. Lunch time in an alleyway neighbourhood.

Figure 4.6. Typical alleyway scene.

Figure 4.7. Family activities in a narrow alleyway.

Figure 4.8. calm early morning in an alleyway.

Figure 4.9. Gathering space in front of a school.

Figure 4.10. Everyday life in an alleyway.

Figure 4.11. Food stall before lunchtime in an alleyway.

Alleyways as vibrant public spaces

The streets are considered to be resources intuitively used to meet various needs. Not only is the alleyway a place of business, but residents also treat their doorstep and street as a natural extension of their own home (Drummond, 2000). As a result, various domestic activities take place in the alleyways of HCMC. It is not uncommon to observe someone, cooking, installing ornamental plants, eating, sleeping or drinking coffee in the open space of the alleyway. Trading on the street or on one's doorstep has also been one of the most shared ways to earn a living in post reform Vietnam, a time at which many people lost their state sector positions. The renewal of the private sector in the Vietnamese economy is thus strongly characterised by small businesses. The capacity alleyways have to welcome such a diversity of activities can be explained through a temporal analysis: the rotation of each type of activity during the day allows for increased access to the street for a larger number of urban dwellers (Gibert, 2016). These spatial practices give the street not only the function of a circulation space as part of a greater network, but also the function of a vital public space on a local scale.

A succession of thresholds

Beyond the antagonism of the public/private duo inherited from the Western conception of urban spaces, Vietnamese alleyways offer the richness of the buffer zone of its intermediate semi-public spaces, at the interface of the tube-house and the street. In Vietnam, the level of publicness of a space varies depending on the time of day, and day of year. This remark invites us to re-think the notion of public space from the perspective of HCMC's alleyways, in order to fully integrate the urban practices and conceptualisations of the global South in the field of urban theory (Goh & Bunnell, 2013). The anthropological exploration of the daily functioning of ordinary alleyways also provides an invitation to acknowledge the social value of ephemeral public spaces, which are constantly renewed by residents' uses and interchanges. These fluid and shifting spaces allow for a great reversibility in urban functions and illustrate the idea of the street as a 'capital for experimentation' and the fruit of a social agreement continuously renewed over time, which allows both for the permanence of a spatial form and the modification of its parallel uses (Gourdon, 2001).

Alleyways in the course of the metropolisation process: current challenges and ongoing mutations

In the course of metropolisation, the alleyways of Hanoi and HCMC tend to more and more be considered as necessary connectors within larger road systems (Goldblum, 2015). This trend leads to a progressive disconnect between circulatory and residential functions, which used to be the dominant frame of the Vietnamese urban fabric (Gibert, 2016).

In recent years, HCMC has faced a great challenge dealing with daily congestion and overloaded traffic infrastructures. Thus, the metropolitan authorities have made traffic fluidity and the development of the city's street network and infrastructure their new priority.

Beyond this concern, the inherited organic system of the alleyways is accused of challenging urban safety, fire risk for instance. These are the two main official arguments to justify the necessity of a vast alleyway enlargement programme. But it is easy to decipher other unofficial – but at least as powerful – reasons for challenging the low-rise urban pattern of alleyway neighbourhoods; think for example of the hygienist's vision of a modern city (Gibert, 2016).

Figure 4.12. Residents using the public space to add greenery in an alleyway in District 5.

Figure 4.13. Morning bustle in an alleyway in District 5.

The metropolisation process comes hand-in-hand with a tremendous increase in demand for land and land prices during the last decade. Within urban contexts, where the price of land is, among other variables, linked to the accessibility of the street, enlarging an alleyway both maximises the value of the plot and allows residents to build higher. Thus, increasing the land's profitability is undeniably one of the most powerful engines of urban renewal of the vernacular neighbourhoods. And so is the urban authorities' will to control and regulate the daily practices of the urban population. The figure of the street seller is among the most threatened. Despite his central place in the everyday nature of the urban fabric, his presence is more and more perceived as contrary to the 'worlding' ambitions of HCMC. At the interface of network and territory, both fixed and on the move, the street seller is an interesting pivot of the street socio-spatial apparatus in Vietnam. Yet the street seller tends to be evicted in favour of traffic. In this context, there is a growing convergence of views between the urban authorities and the urban middle class owners.

This convergence can be explained by the growing worry of middleclass members to protect and mark out the boundaries of their newly acquired properties by promoting a clearer distinction between public and private urban spaces. The urban authorities officially support this growing distinction, by promoting the intended edification of what is called a 'civilised and modern' city (đô thị văn minh, hiện đại). Official poster campaigns urge urban dwellers to follow new urban rules of civilisation, such as no trade on the sidewalk, in order to build 'cultural neighbourhoods' (khu phố văn hóa). Furthermore, the current evolution of each neighbourhood depends greatly on its relationship with the emerging and renewed 'metropolitan centralities'. In HCMC, wards 22 of Bình Thạnh district and 13 of Phú Nhuận district are among the most integrated in the official renewal projects. Interestingly, despite their advanced level of metropolisation, these two wards show different trends as far as alleyways are concerned. Most alleyways of ward 13 in Phú Nhuận have been enlarged and renewed over the past five years, whilst those in ward 22 in Bình Thạnh district will soon be replaced by new vertical urban forms, along rescaled transport infrastructures. These infrastructures are already abruptly cutting up the ancient urban fabric, reflecting perfectly a common effect of 'project-based urbanism' (Gibert, 2016).

The alleyway, a matter of function

Hanoi and HCMC's street patterns are characterised by an endless network of alleyways. These alleyway neighbourhoods have already shown a great capacity for transformation over the past decades, especially through the various creative interventions by residents, who make full use of the alleyways on an everyday basis. Alleyways remain core elements of the urban identity and are still the most common form of public space, even though current infrastructure developments are leading to new, very distinct, articulations between public and private spaces, which were once very blurred categories in the Vietnamese urban context.

The organic growth of the urban and social network appears to be challenged today. Despite its modest local ambitions, the current project of alleyway enlargement operates within a broader development of infrastructure by the metropolitan authorities. In the current metropolisation process, movement is privileged above the production of local territories. In this perspective, the street is envisioned as a single-function urban object, entirely dedicated to transit traffic, while it used to be highly multifunctional (Gibert, 2016).

Facing fast-paced modernisation, the challenge of HCMC's alleyways today is not to transform into a part of a transit network and in this case losing its status as public space, but to prevail as a key space of HCMC's modernisation process offering a flexible, efficient and diverse space for every social range of local communities.

Figure 5.1. Traditional house in the ancient village of Đường Lâm.

Figure 5.2. Traditional wooden house in Đường Lâm.

Traditional Vietnamese architecture

The influence of foreign civilisations on the characteristics of Vietnamese architecture

The Vietnamese traditional architecture has been influenced by different foreign civilisations in the past, which had an impact on the characteristics of Vietnamese architecture. The most important influence comes without a doubt from the Chinese civilisation. During the period of Warring Kingdoms (8th-3rd century BC) many Chinese people migrated to Vietnam and the Chin Emperor transported 50,000 poor Chinese inhabitants to Vietnam. These exiles brought into the country their lifestyle and culture; and their architecture was gradually adapted to the local conditions. This influence was further enhanced from 207 BC on, when Vietnam was invaded and ruled by China for 1,000 years, during which the Vietnamese people actually absorbed Chinese culture in all fields (political, spiritual, cultural, and social).

From an architectural point of view, this cultural crossover led to the emergence of Chinese-type pagodas, palaces, farms and dwelling houses in Vietnam and Chinese architectural patterns were changed by Vietnamese to better suit their aesthetic tastes, the topography, and the landscape of the country. This means that ancient Vietnamese men creatively used Chinese models and patterns by taking due account of the specific local conditions. In the meantime, local architecture also saw advancements in terms of general composition, model, structure, or decorative motifs (Nguyen, Nguyen and Ta).

Another influence has been the Indian civilisation, mainly through Buddhism, with the arrival of Indian monks in Central Vietnam during the 3rd, 6th and 9th century. Later on, in the 18th and 19th century Vietnamese Buddhist monks went to India to conduct research on Buddhism. Furthermore, Vietnam was indirectly exposed to Indian civilisation and culture through contacts with the Champa and Cambodian kingdoms over the centuries (Nguyen, Nguyen and Ta).

After first contacts with European traders and missionaries preaching Christian doctrines in the 17th century, Western civilisation made the greatest impact on local architecture in the end of the 19th century when the French rule was established and French civilisation assumed a dominant place in Vietnam. During the French colonial time, Western architecture played a key role in Vietnamese towns and cities and catholic churches became even part of the rural scenery in many places.

The influence of religion on traditional Vietnamese architecture

Located in South-East Asia, Vietnam has heavily experiences the influence of Confucianism and Taoism from the borders with China in the North and the influence of Buddhism from both China and India. Under successive dynasties, these religions were gradually vietnamised.

In general, in the long process of history, all three religions have coexisted and interacted with one another. As they deeply pervaded the life of the Vietnamese people, they led to the development of religious architectural works in various parts of the country, from rural areas to cities and towns (pagodas, temples, temples of literature, shrines, stupas, etc.) and also exerted a certain influence on the architecture of dwelling houses. The 15th and 16th centuries saw the arrival of Christianity and subsequent emergence of Catholic churches in some areas (Nguyen, Nguyen and Ta).

Figure 5.3. The Bái Đính Temple in Ninh Bình Province has, according to *phong thủy* theory, with its back leaning on Bái Đính Mountain and its front looking down the Hoàng Long River, has a very good location.

Figure 5.4. Traditional garden house in Huế with a pond.

Moved by religious fervour, the devotees and the population pooled material resources, human power and skills in constructing these worship centres, many of which (like *Keo, Thầy,* and *Tây Phương* pagodas), constitute valuable assets of Vietnam's traditional architecture.

Religious beliefs also affected the space composition, internal and external, of the dwelling houses of the population, their component parts and decorative elements.

The architecture of Catholic churches in Vietnam was heavily influenced by the Gothic and Roman styles from the West, as they were the replicas of European churches from where the missionaries came. In constructing these churches, Vietnamese builders were exposed to the technique and experience relating to architectural projects involving large spaces.

Traditional customary construction in Vietnam

In their cultural and spiritual life the Vietnamese people are deep influenced by Oriental philosophies concerning the interactions between Heaven (*thiên*), Earth (*địa*), and the Human beings (*nhân*), between the positive and the negative, male and female principles (Yin-Yang), and the five basic elements (*ngũ hành*) of the Universe: Water (*thủy*), Fire (*hỏa*), Wood (*mộc*), Metal (*kim*) and Earth (*thổ*). These interactions which are very close and complex pervade everything and govern the relationship among all physical bodies and creatures in the Universe from grains of sand to human beings and heavenly bodies.

In the field of architecture, these philosophies find expression in a rather abstract theory called "*phong thủy*" (also known as feng shui; translated "wind and water").

It is believed that if the selected site of a house or any other construction project is in proper relation with the outlying watercourse, pond and lake, mountains and hills, trees, as well as the horoscope of the owner, it would bring good fortune and luck to him or his offspring in the future.

Formerly, importance was attached to the orientation of the exit and entry doors, the floor space, the measurements, and proportions of various components of the structure. The sites of tombs were considered to be very important, as they were believed to exert a great impact on the fate of the offspring of the dead. Therefore, geomancers were hired by Kings and important dignitaries to select the appropriate sites for their tombs, which were usually built while they were still alive. With respect to major projects, artificial mounts and ponds were built, and underground water courses were found if such natural elements did not exist in the immediately outlying areas. Most of the old Vietnamese pagodas and temples are located near a river or a lake and are surrounded by trees. Royal tombs in *Huế* are surrounded by lotus flower ponds, artificial mountains and forests, flower gardens, tree gardens, pine slopes and bridges (Nguyen, Nguyen and Ta).

The Vietnamese traditional house

Traditional Vietnamese architecture took shape in the period of the *Đông Sơn* culture in the 3rd century BC. At that time, dwelling houses were built on stilts and had steep curved roofs. The space was organised in three rooms with no interior walls and a cooking place was located in the middle of the house. During this period, houses on stilts were probably made of bamboo and the roofs, of leaves.

Figure 5.5. Traditional house in Đường Lâm.

Figure 5.6. Screen or ghost wall placed in front of a garden house in Huế.

Figure 5.7. Ornaments on wooden components.

Figure 5.8. Linkage of wooden components.

Under the domination of Chinese feudal dynasties from the 2nd century BC to the 10th century AD, Vietnamese architecture underwent deep changes and Chinese rulers built many Chinese-style citadels and palaces to meet their political and living requirements. Chinese migrants built houses which were mixed up with Vietnamese styles. The national independence in 938 AD brought an end to Chinese palaces, while the houses of individual labourers and Chinese migrants, who were gradually Vietnamised became part of the local architecture.

During the *Lý* and *Trần* dynasties (11th – 14th century), Vietnamese culture, referred to as *Đại Việt* culture, was in full bloom. During this time, the traditional Vietnamese house evolved to a wooden frame structure, with some houses still built on stilts and others with ground floors. Each house had several rooms, usually an odd number, with superposed ties and a system of load-bearing columns, beams and ties. During the *Lê* dynasty (15th – 18th century), the tie beams were lighter and more elegant than in previous structures, thanks to new cross-struts that helped to support the veranda.

In the late period of the *Nguyễn* dynasty, Vietnam fell under French domination and a hybrid architectural style mixing Vietnamese and Western elements evolved. The designers of Western-style buildings tried to adapt to the local hot and humid climate and adopted the traditional steep and curving roof covered with tube tiles and decorations. While the traditional Vietnamese architecture uses wood as main building material and bricks walls only play a subsidiary role, Western architecture uses mainly bricks and tiles with steel and concrete. During the colonial period, modern architecture also involved box-like buildings with flat roofs and systems of reinforced concrete columns.

Traditional Vietnamese architecture based on wood, bricks and tiles played a dominant role in Vietnamese cities and towns prior to 1884. It had to give way to Western architecture during the 1884-1945 period, evolving to brick, tiles, steel and concrete constructions (Nguyen, Nguyen and Ta).

Vietnam's traditional architecture is made up of three main components: the roof, curved at its ends and stretching beyond the wall and the veranda of the house, the wall, arranged as a set of columns with decorated doors in between, and the floor foundation adapted to the terrain and on which the house is based. Not the number of columns (*cột*), but that of the intermediate spaces (*gian*) is used to specify the size of a house. The nature of a home can be determined by the owner's social position, but also by the climate, geographical location, local materials and tradition.

On the wall opposite to the entrance, at the preferred place of the house, is placed the ancestral altar; sometimes it stands on a table or a commode. The house becomes at the same time, a place of worship for the ancestors, so that they are involved in the everyday life of the family. A low wooden platform in front of the ancestral altar serves as a place to sit and sleep and for the reception of guests as well as for ceremonial purposes. More and more frequently it is replaced by a table and chairs. The lateral *gian* are partitioned off by light walls or mat curtains, as bedrooms for women and children. Supplies and possessions of the family are also stored in these side rooms. In the case of larger houses a circumferential or frontal veranda leads from the inside of the house into the courtyard. The roofs are often pulled down low over the porch as a sunscreen. The rural property is surrounded by a wall or by a hedge. The entrance can consist of a triple door or a magnificent gate, guarded by two guardian animals. It should lie at the side of the house, so that the front of the gate is not visible. Otherwise, a ghost wall (*bức bình phong*) has to be built on the inside and the path to the house has to be laid out in zigzag so the evil spirits cannot enter the house.

Figure 5.9. Courtyard in front of a traditional house in Đường Lâm.

Figure 5.10. Elevated veranda as threshold space.

Figure 5.11. Traditional wooden frame.

Figure 5.12. Ancestral altar in a traditional house in Đường Lâm.

Figure 5.13. Family activities in Đường Lâm.

The organisation of space in Vietnamese housing architecture

Historical context

With its tropical climate influenced by monsoon precipitation, Vietnam has developed an architecture that has structural characteristics adapted to this climate. Many residential buildings are built from locally available materials and a strong roof pitch for a quick drainage of rainwater is necessary. Semi-open to open spaces such as courtyards, verandas and balconies not only provide natural ventilation and cooling, but also create a connection between the residents and nature.

In addition to climatic factors, Vietnamese architecture has always been subject to political and socio-economic changes. The formerly feudalist-ruled country was divided under French colonial rule in the three regions of North, Central, and South Vietnam with the main cities of Hanoi, Da Nang and Saigon – today Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). This classification was based on the different climatic and topographical conditions. After the end of the French rule in 1954, numerous influences of the former colonial rulers on architecture and urban planning continued. In the divided country, the North was under the technical and stylistic influence of the socialist blocs, while the South had America as a model.
The end of the civil war in 1975 led to the reunification of the country, which brought a socialist-oriented planning with it. However, the most significant changes of the post-war period are the extensive economic reforms of 1986 (*Đổi Mới*), with which Vietnam entered the market economy and with it the global trade, which also changed the possibilities in the construction field.

Three housing typologies have emerged in Hanoi, Danang and HCMC and are now defining the urban landscape in many places: the so-called tube house, the detached house and the apartment block. This development was favoured by the formation of middle and higher income groups. The tube house, also known as street- or shop house is a multi-storey building with commercial use on the ground floor, whose width is much shorter than the depth of the building due to the delineation of the plot. On newly developed building land on the outskirts of the city, the detached house is the most used building type, usually in «European style». The real estate boom triggered by the reforms and the growing demand for new housing in major cities eventually entailed the apartment multi-storey building as new building type.

Domestic living spaces before the reform

In houses built before the reform, the interaction between family members took place in each room- there were private sleeping quarters, but they were less important than the rooms for the reception of guests or religious worship. The latter were used for everyday family activities if there were no guests to entertain and no festivities to celebrate. The furniture - usually a hammock, chairs and a low wooden platform, which can serve both for ceremonial purposes as well as for sitting and sleeping- could be flexibly arranged and adapted to the respective situation.

The interaction between family and guests took place in different spaces, from open to semi-open to closed- depending on the relationship with the guests. Interior and exterior spaces, veranda and courtyard were interconnected by wide doors: the more open the room, the more informal the guest in the family was welcomed. The large courtyards of the country houses were used for solemn occasions such as the memory of the ancestors on their death, at weddings or the birth of a child. In the townhouses, on the other hand, due to the limited size of the grounds, the courtyards became interiors that provide light and fresh air, and guests were received ceremonially in the living areas.

Figure 5.14. Worship of the ancestors.

Figure 5.15. Wooden doors along the front facade.

Figure 5.16. Courtyard for natural cross-ventilation.

Figure 5.17. Openings towards to courtyard.

Figure 5.18. Ancestral altar in traditional house.

Figure 5.19. Courtyard as gathering space.

The high value of the interaction between the family and their ancestors can be seen very clearly in the houses built before the reform, where the ancestral altar is positioned in the centre of the house: It was believed that the souls of the ancestors would occupy this place in the house. In addition to the ancestral altar was also an altar for a Buddha or a deity. This room, with the reception room, formed a large central location for family rituals to which guests were invited.

The social interaction within the community is manifested through spatial connections to the outside. In the case of the country houses, the courtyard served not only for lighting and ventilation, but also as an open space for meeting neighbours and friends. It marked a kind of social threshold: informal conversations between guests and residents took place here or the invitation to a formal meeting inside the house was pronounced. Townhouses also had two or more courtyards that served as mediation spaces between the house and the outside world.

Differences before and after the reform

The lived space, together with the experienced space and the conceived space, forms Lefebvre's triad of spatial awareness. Lived space is generated through resident's actions, especially through social interactions. For this reason, the space is inscribed with meanings and rules that the inhabitants intrinsically follow.

According to Lefebvre, the lived space has to be distinguished from the conceived space. Traditionally, that is before the reform, the owners produced the lived space for them and their families themselves. Lived and conceived spaces were congruent here, as the space was designed and used by its occupants. Bryan Lawson argues that architects make use of conceived space as a design principle to provide both aesthetic appearance and appropriate internal function assignments, with particular knowledge of the spatial organisation on behalf of their clients. Where houses are built by their owners, the premises fulfil certain socio-cultural requirements. Where houses are built by architects, however, it is necessary to apply general rules to a specific case.

Studies show that the provision of rooms for the reception of guests and worship were the two most important requirements of the living space. The reception room to welcome guests was directly connected to the outdoor spaces, and in the townhouses this activity was then combined with commercial purposes. Traditionally, a gradation of completely public to completely private areas determines the spatial arrangement: A veranda leads to the reception room, which is connected to the prayer room, followed by bedroom, kitchen and adjoining rooms. This space organisation marks the lived space in Vietnam's housing architecture before the reform, and is a contrast to the functional floor plans of western housing.

While houses before the reform have open or semi-open spaces especially for the reception of guests, the inhabitants of recent houses use living or family rooms for this purpose. The social change can be clearly seen in the changed spatial demands: the reception rooms have given way to additional private rooms with adjoining functional areas; prayer rooms have now moved to the top floor of the houses and no longer have any connection to the reception rooms. From the shift of the spatial organisation in post-reform housing architecture, it has become clear that prior to the reform, the context of mediation, guest reception and worship formed the core of the house, while after the reform the relationship between housing, privacy and functionality has become more significant.

HCMC's alleyways as the key space for metropolisation

Rethinking the spatial layout of Ho Chi Minh City's

core element of urban identity

Architectural Project – *hẻm* 80, *Nguyễn Trãi*, District 5, Ho Chi Minh City

Figure 6.1. Traditional alleyway in Ho Chi Minh City.

Figure 6.2. Phú Mỹ Hưng New Urban Area located in District 7 of HCMC.

Theoretical concept

Beyond the documentation of Vietnamese urban mutations in their various forms, this research also wants to offer a renewed perspective on urban studies' tools, from the specific context of Vietnam today. The aim to strive for is to tackle the inadequacy of the Western conceptual framework in urban studies. Applied out of its context, this hegemonical toolbox of globalized urbanism has become a 'black box' (Latour, 1999), invisibilising the specificities of Vietnamese cities. Therefore, it is essential to explore the possibility of transcending 'the West and the Rest' categorisation, inherited from colonial times. Indeed, Vietnamese cities undergo combined forms of rigid categorisation: economically speaking, they are 'emerging cities', that is to say threatening for European and North American countries (Piveteau & Rougier, 2010); from a socio-spatial perspective, they are 'Southern' and 'developing' cities (Parnell & Oldfield, 2014); and politically they are considered to be 'opening-up', designated with the prefix 'post', to indicate both the end of colonialism and socialism. For all these reasons, the recurring discourse of 'transition' is dominant in the analyses of the production of contemporary Vietnamese cities (Gubry, Castiglioni, & Cusset, 2010).

Urbanisation is presented as an unavoidable step for the modernisation and the industrialisation of the country. The urban forms produced reflect urban utopia mainstreamed in many official discourses: cities have to be modern [*hiện đại*] and have to symbolise the power of the Nation. Unplanned and endogenous urbanisation doesn't fit these categories whereas international 'products', from shopping malls to condominiums, are desirable emblems of Vietnam's worldwide integration (Segard, 2016).

Planning took a step forward when the "Euclidean" land use zoning paradigm, which designated static uses to parcels, was seen as too inflexible. Now, mixed-use land parcel zoning has become standard urban planning practice (Kim, 2015).

My research calls for extending this evolution to public spaces like the alleyway and reinterpret its mixed-used open space and spatial organisation. Allowing for different kinds of activities and users at different times of the day could be an important strategy for revitalizing cities or for ordering rapidly growing ones. Given the current competition for sidewalks and public spaces, this would be an alternative worth taking into account instead of a zero-sum gain legislative decision, trying to clear these vibrant spaces to fulfil their vision of a global city.

The project focuses on an alleyway in Ho Chi Minh City, trying to reinterpret the definition of public and private space and to merge it with the traditional lifestyle and modern needs in Vietnam today. It is at the same time a critique on the direction the government is taking in the last years and its urban planning methods. Recent big scale projects showcasing their vision of Ho Chi Minh City as a modern and global city, which has been done through the implementation of western models and strict regulations of the public space with the attempt of achieving a «clean city» do not adhere with the local way of life and ignore the historical urban fabric of the city. The aim of my project, located in a typical alleyway of today's district 5, is to showcase an alternative model of modernisation, which respects the local identity and way of life at the same time.

As the blind implementation of international models is destructive towards HCMC's urban heritage, its local architecture and social structures, this proposition aims to offer more diversity, flexibility and performance within the low urban structure with an extreme high density. The proposed model is able to adapt to every group in society with a soft intervention conserving the structure of the alleyways, the main characteristic of the urban fabric of the city.

Figure 6.3. Site location on a map of Saigon and Cholon in 1950.
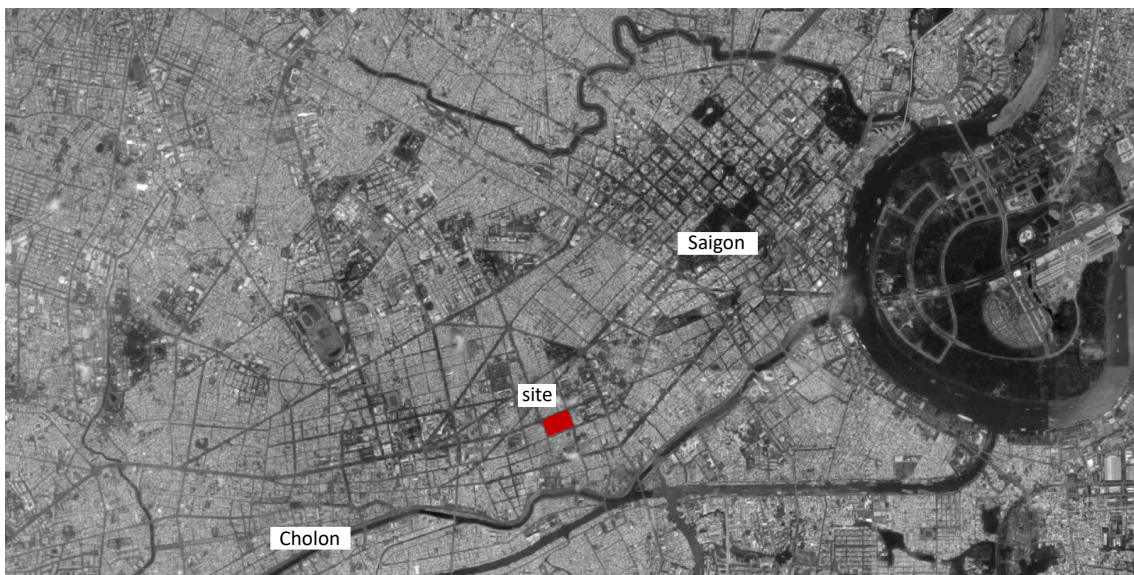
Figure 6.4. Site location on a map of HCMC today.

Figure 6.5. Location of the alleyway 80 Nguyễn Trãi within the «block»

Introduction of the site

The project is located in the alleyway 80 of *Nguyễn Trãi* Street, in District 5 of Ho Chi Minh City. This area is situated in what was known as the in-between space between Saigon and Cholon in the 19th and 20th century and was developed through a rapid densification of the city triggered by a major migration movement to the city in the 1950s.

The "block" this project is focusing on lies inside the grid between the main street axes of *Nguyễn Trãi, Lê Hồng Phong, An Dương Vương* and *Trần Bình Trọng*, which was formed as the French colonial grid of Saigon and the existing grid of Cholon got connected with linear axes.

This area is also known as *Chợ Bàu Sen* (*Chợ*= market, *Bàu*= pond, pool, marshy area and *Sen*= Lotus flower) and indicates that in the past, this area was a marshy area with lotus plants which got dried up to gain building land in the process of expanding the city.

The selection of this site has been influenced by my Vietnamese origins and family background as this alleyway is the place where my father grew up until leaving Vietnam with his family at the age of 23 in 1981. Until this day, my relatives live in this alleyway and it is the place I spent the most time when visiting Vietnam. This inside view has allowed me to get familiar with the local customs and activities in the alleyway and to understand its development from its formation in the 1950s until today.

Historical background and architecture of the alleyway

The alleyway 80 *Nguyễn Trãi* is accessible directly from the main commercial *Nguyễn Trãi* Street which gives it a prominent function connecting the smaller alleyways in the core of the block with the main transit and commercial streets.

With one of its resident working as lieutenant-colonel for the engineer section of the army, alleyway 80 was one of the only alleyways asphalted at the time.
From the 1950s until today, the alleyway got elevated twice with a total of 80 centimetres to withstand the water flows running towards the alleyway from the main street during the heavy rainfalls of the monsoon season.

The typical architectural typology in the alleyway consists of a single-family house shaped by the narrow and long dimensions of the plots. The ground floor housed the common rooms, such as the living room, dining room and kitchen and a separate room for the parents and the first floor consisted of a big space, the sleeping quarters, shared by the children of the family. The living room was opening towards a covered outdoor space, often used for daily activities. The outdoor area was just big enough to park a car and for a fruit tree, providing shadow in Saigon's humid tropical climate. The delimitation of the plot to the street was secured by a 1 metre high fence allowing wide visibility and contact with the public realm of the street.
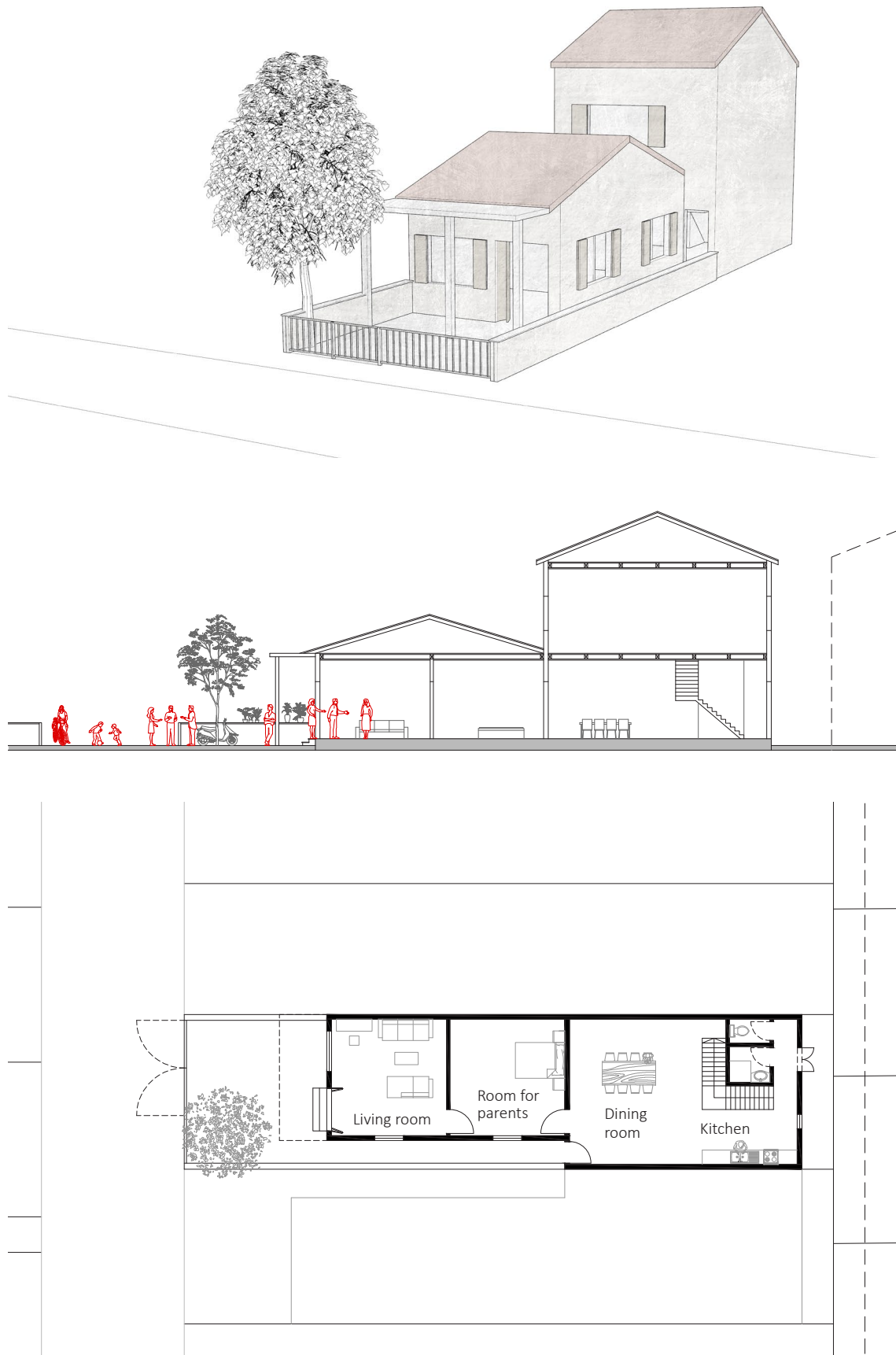
Figure 6.6. Location of the alleyway 80 Nguyễn Trãi within the «block» Typical house typology in the alleyway 80 Nguyễn Trãi developed in the 1950s &1960s.

Changes over time

From its formation in the 1950s until now, the alleyway 80 has witnessed many changes over the course of HCMC's history. Observing the evolution of the alleyway from afar, my uncle describes: "Under the US embargo during the first two decades after the end of the war in 1975, there have not been significant renovations in Ho Chi Minh City as well as for the houses in passage 80. In addition, the national economy in Vietnam was still under a planned communist economy, in which the government control all economic sectors. This is what I witnessed when I came back to Vietnam in 1989." He continues "With the newly open economic policy in Vietnam in the 1990s, Ho Chi Minh City became an economic centre of the country and contributed for about 30% of the GDP in Vietnam. Millions of people moved from the Central and Northern parts of the country to Ho Chi Minh City to look for jobs or opportunities for doing business. It's not surprising that several constructions and renovations have rapidly taken place to support the needs of shelter for incoming people to the city. Booming economy also made the value of land and houses raise sharply over time. In passage 80, many houses have been renovated or remodelled from a one-story house to a three or four-story ones. Sadly, however, the front yard of these houses are no longer an open space. Instead, the owners built a solid metal gate for their houses right at the passage limit for security and privacy purposes."

The urban authorities' will to control and regulate the daily practices of the urban population in recent years has resulted in a growing worry of middleclass members to protect and mark out the boundaries of their newly acquired properties by promoting a clearer difference between private and public urban spaces. The urban authorities officially support this growing distinction, by promoting the intended edification of what is called a 'civilised and modern' city (đô thị văn minh, hiện đại). Official poster campaigns urge urban dwellers to follow new urban rules of civilisation, such as no trade on the sidewalk, in order to build 'cultural neighbourhoods' (khu phố văn hóa).

Unfortunately, this trend has also spread in the alleyway of 80 *Nguyễn Trãi*. The multiplication of heavy iron gates, often copiously ornamented, reflects the desire to cut themselves off from the social space of the street and to retreat in their private space. Furthermore, the typical alley typology has evolved in what is known today as the "tube house", a 3 to 5 storey high family house, with balconies on the front façade and adapting the long and narrow geometry of the plots shaped like a "tube".

Figure 6.7. High fences separating the private and public space.
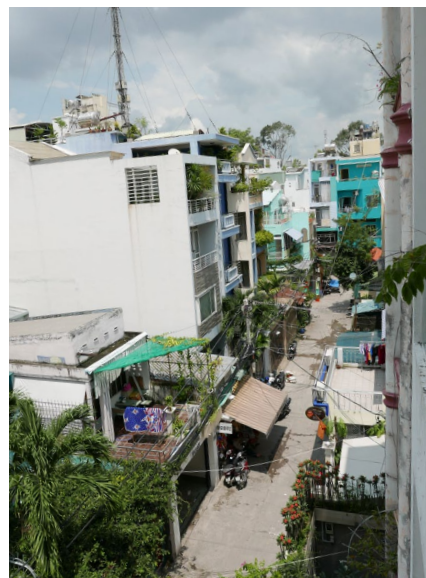
Figure 6.8. View over hẻm 80, Nguyễn Trãi.

Figure 6.9. Daily shop in hẻm 80, Nguyễn Trãi.

Figure 6.10. Early morning in hẻm 80, Nguyễn Trãi.

Figure 6.11. Daily activities in hẻm 80, Nguyễn Trãi.

Community and social relations in the alleyway 80

When asking him about his memories of his life in the passage, my uncle recalls: "Before I was born, my parents had bought a house in passage of 80, *Nguyễn Trãi* Street to move in from their previous rental house that was located in *Nguyễn Tấn Nghiệm* Street (currently named *Nguyễn Cư Trinh*). Until now, I still have fond memories of 27 years when I lived in passage 80. Originally, my house was a one-story house like others in the passage. However, when my family became larger in size, my parents decided to renovate the house and added a story above the kitchen and dining room. I recalled during the construction time, my oldest sister, my older brother, and me were sent to my uncle's house in the *Tân Sơn Nhất* Military Airport for three months in summer of 1960... In general, the houses in passage 80 had a front yard, an open area about 4 m between the passage limit to the doorstep. In the front yard of each house, there was usually a tropical fruit tree to provide some shading for the yard. Since the front yard was an open space, neighbours could easily socialise to each other every day. Children in the passage played together after school. Although most families in the passage had 6 or more children, almost everyone knew each other. As Saigon was under the warfare until April 30th 1975, many areas in the city became tough battle fields, especially during the *Mậu Thân* Attacks in 1968. Power outages took place frequently during this period and as the temperature inside the house rose, people in passage 80 used to gather together outside their houses to exchange information on the war status."

When asking my relatives about the course of life in the alleyway back in the day, their narratives often have a nostalgic aspect, emphasizing on the close relations within the community. Today, when visiting Vietnam, we still stay at the same house and my father resumes to his old habits, having his daily morning coffee "*cà phê sữa đá*" across the street, sitting on plastic stools and talking to the lady who is running a small daily shop, about the changes in the passage and the families who stayed or moved away.

Still today, the sense of community is prevalent in the alleyway, but not as strong as before as modern life has gradually changed people's living style. For example, as both parents are working, the lady from the daily shop prepares lunch for the neighbour's children when they come back from school, or one of the kid's teacher, also living in the passage gives him extra lessons when needed.

The community of the alleyway is led by a head person, who represents the neighbourhood at the ward level and organises monthly meetings to discuss ongoing changes in the neighbourhood. The current head person of alleyway 80 has been voted by the residents and has taken over the task from his father. Their family has been living in the alleyway for many years and has great relations to the residents.

Figure 6.12. Public realm in front of the school.

Figure 6.13. Plant pots added by residents.
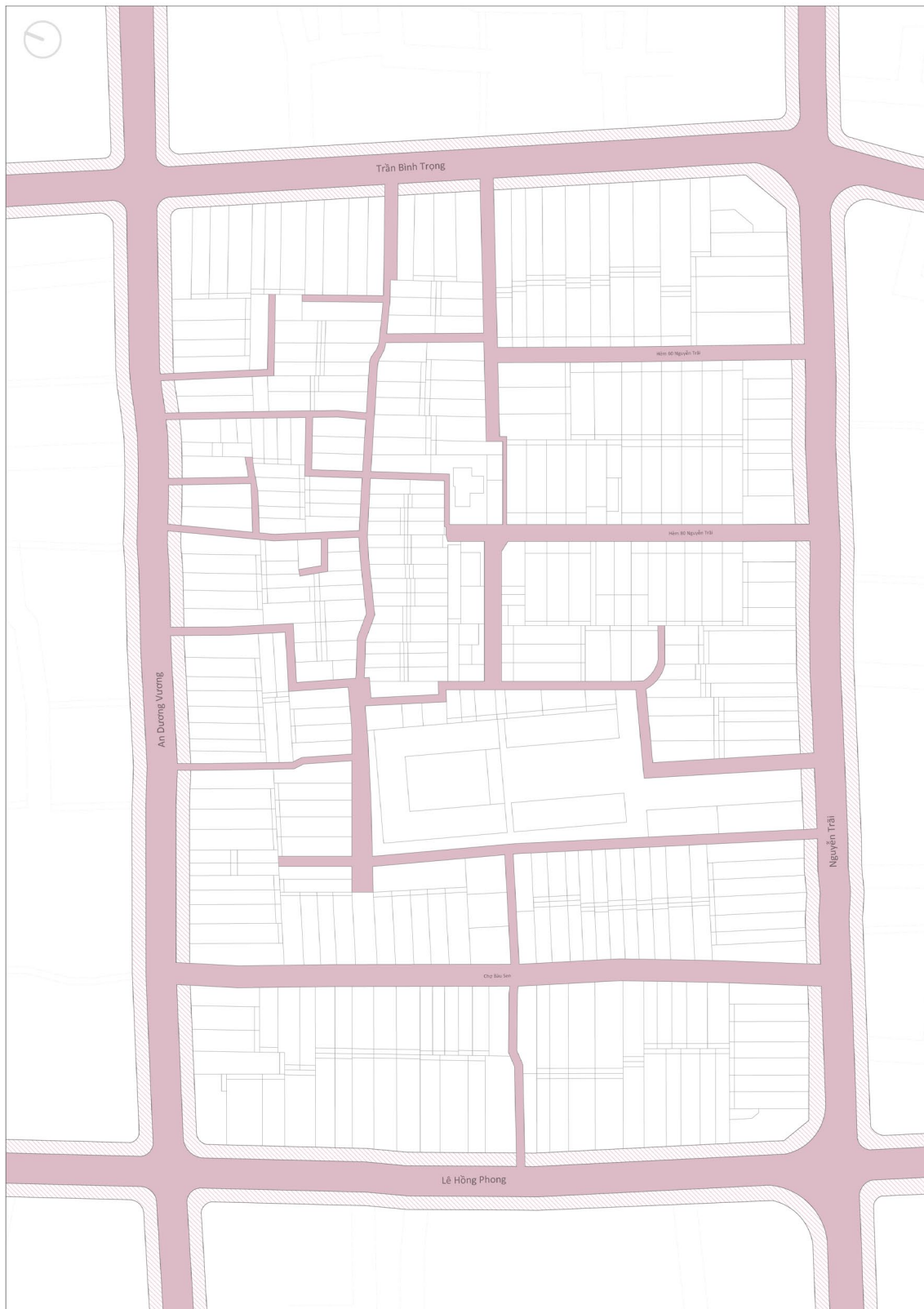
Figure 6.14. The network of alleyways in the «block».

Street network, density and activities inside "the block"

The street network inside the block facilitates the access to every dwelling and emerged form spontaneous urbanisation and densification in the 1950s and 1960s. Its shape and sometimes very narrow corridors reminds of a labyrinth and can be classified in three categories: the alleyways accessible for cars, motorbikes and pedestrians (4-7 meters wide), the alleyways accessible for pedestrians and motorbikes and the alleyways accessible only for pedestrians (sharp corners being the main barrier for motorbikes in this case). This unplanned hierarchy of the network elements creates a smooth connection for pedestrians, but also dead-end streets for motor vehicles. The accessibility of the different alleyways also influences the grade of transit, commercial strategic locations and the degree of privacy and intimacy in other parts. For example, the alleyway in front of the school is in size big enough for a car, but not accessible by car. Thus, as many parents gather here daily to pick up their children form school, the public space is filled with street food vendors, plastic stools and even a small barber or hairdresser in a corner under a tree.

The narrowness of the alleyway system leads to a very high density of the area, with most buildings being 3 to 5 storeys high.
Many daily facilities can be found inside the block, with a main market street (*Chợ Bàu Sen*) as well as many small shops, restaurants and schools located within the alleyway network.
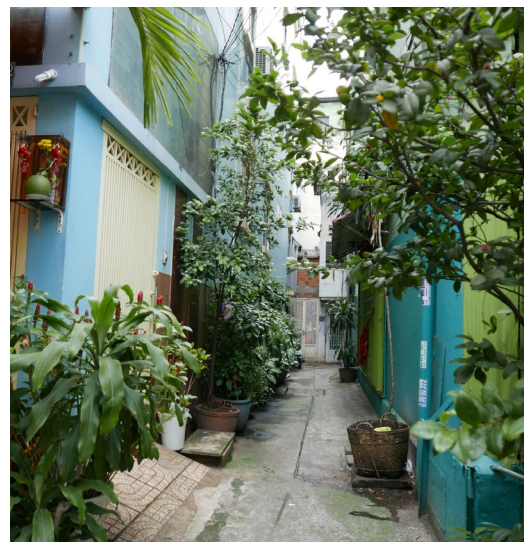
Figure 6.15. Alleyways with different widths in the «block».

total area: 51.522,01 m2
footprint: 40.226,84 m2 (78,08%)
floor area ratio (FAR): 2.73

Figure 6.16. The density inside the «block».

Figure 6.17. Activities inside the «block».

Figure 6.18. The immediate contrast when «re-opening» the public space of the alleyway.

The concept

Public space concept

The first step consists of "reopening" the social space of the alleyway and eliminating the strong and high delimitation of the plot limits. In doing so, the impression of the space changes immediately and already achieves a great improvement with only a soft intervention.

In the next step, the gathering space of public functions like cafés, daily shops, clothing stores, etc., is reorganised and new public functions are added to support social processes in the alleyway. Spaces for public functions are highlighted with different floor materials, for example the traditional colourful Vietnamese ceramic tiles, and urban furniture.

Semi-public spaces in front of residential units act as recreational spaces, bringing greenery back to the city. Amid rapid urbanisation, HCMC is desperately seeking for more green spaces on one side to face the Urban Heat Island Effect and, on the other side, as absorption surface during the heavy rainfalls of the monsoon season, often leading to flooding in the city. Furthermore, HCMC's residents often complain about a lack of open space to exercise and for their children to play outside.

A specific area at the entrance of the alleyway is designated for the street vendors, rotating during different times of the day, depending on the goods they are selling. They are definitely a core element of the vibrancy of Vietnamese public spaces and encourage social interactions in the alleyway.

The asphalted surface of the street has been narrowed down in different intervals and reduced to the necessary minimum width for a fluid, but slowed-down traffic. As the main transportation method is motorbikes, the passing of cars is very rare in the alleyway. It is still accessible for cars, but not the main priority of the street layout with the adaptation of an opposite one-way system, where cars can cross each other at specific segments.

Other features of the public space in the street are the implementation of a sport field in front of the kindergarten, a dead-end space for motor vehicles, and, the zoning of a shared space adjacent to it, creating a meeting point and connection to the community centre. These interventions should enhance the community coherence and are able to adapt to different situations with minimal expenditure.
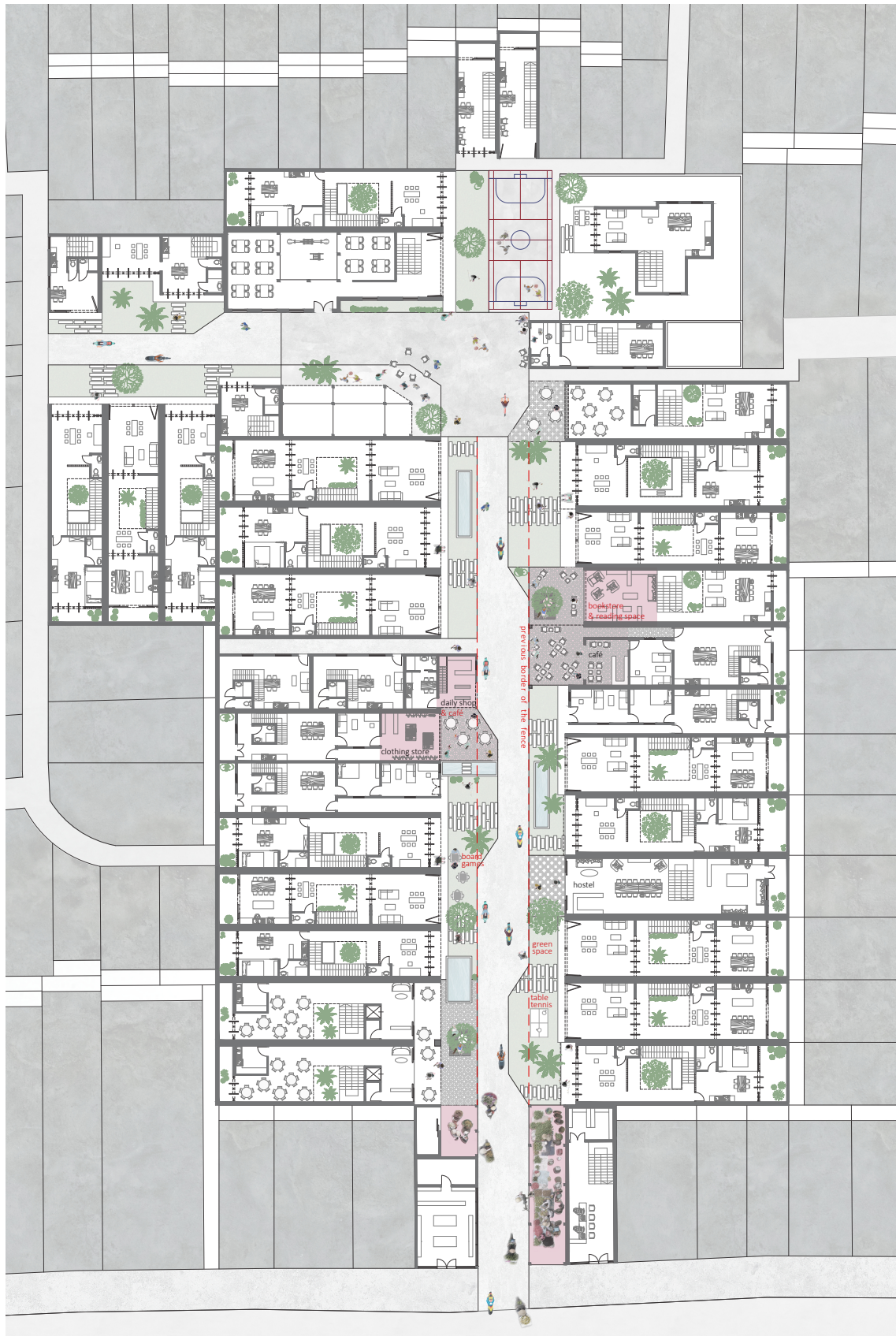
Figure 6.19. Masterplan of hẻm 80, Nguyễn Trãi.
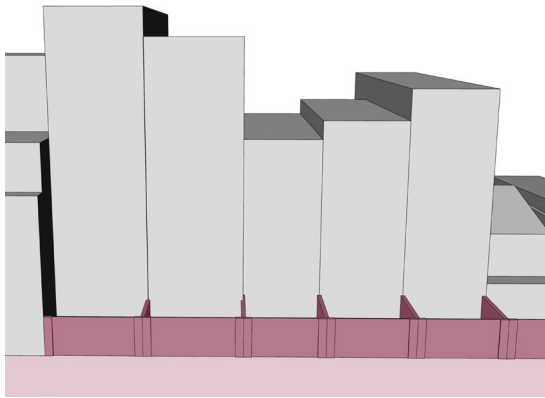
Figure 6.20. Strong boundery between the plot and the street space
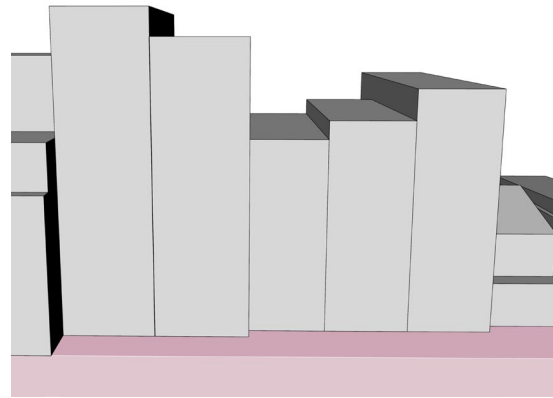
Figure 6.21. New acquired open public space.

bookstore & reading space

café

previous border of the fence

daily shop & café

clothing store
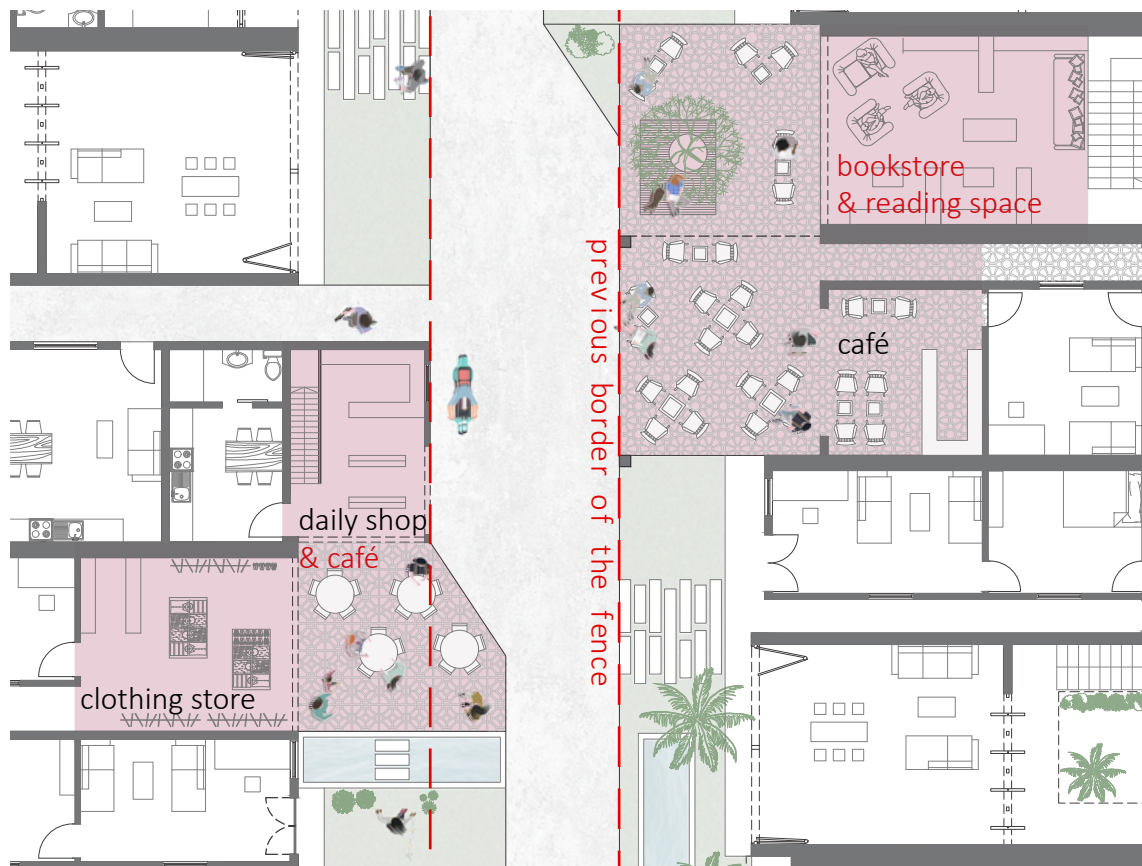
Figure 6.22. The reorganisation of spaces with public functions, scale 1:200.
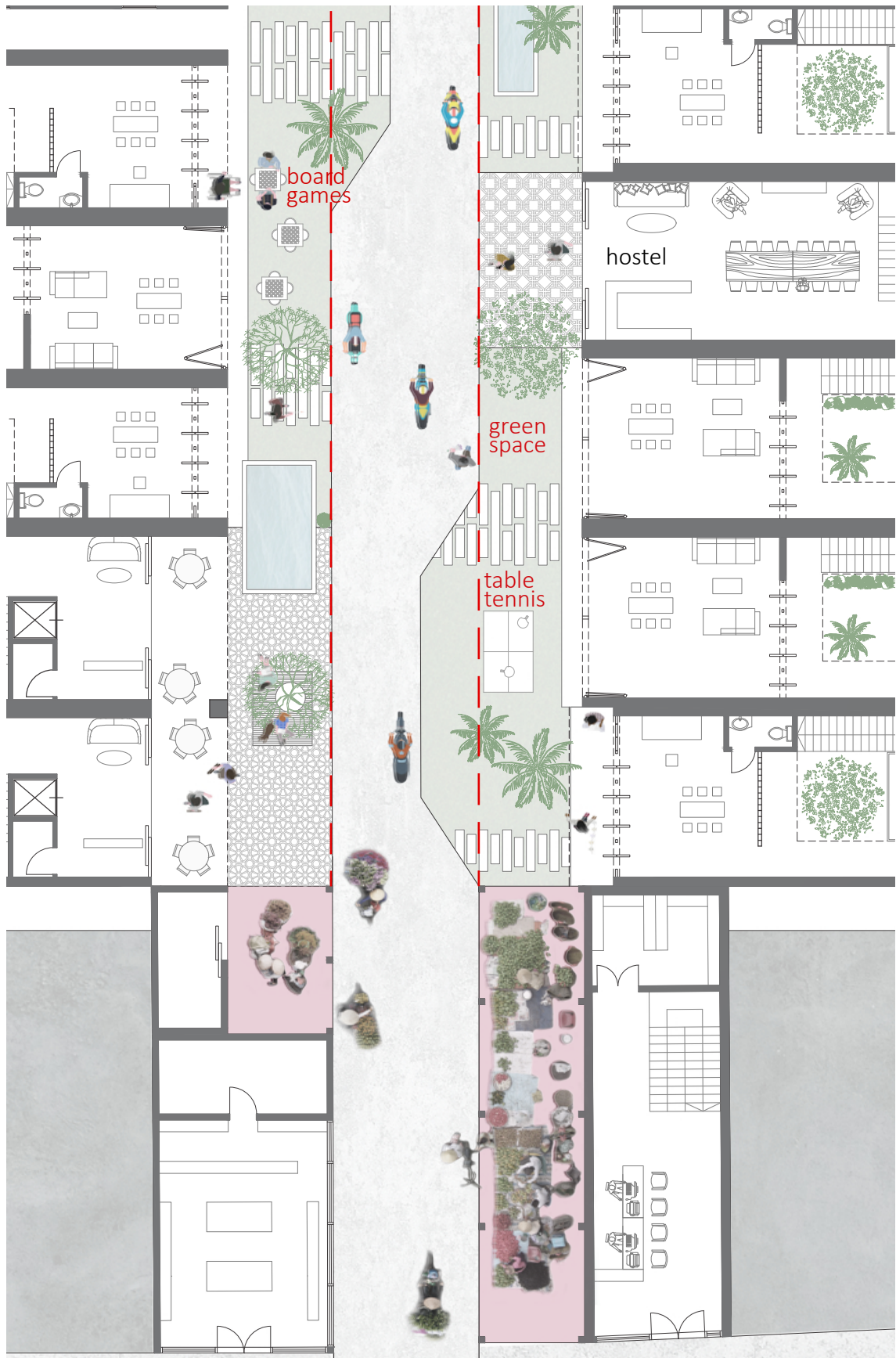
Figure 6.23. Semi-public green spaces in front of residential units and space for the street vendors, scale 1:200.

board
games

hostel

green
space

table
tennis

Figure 6.24. Shared space between the sport field, Kindergarten and community centre, scale 1:200.
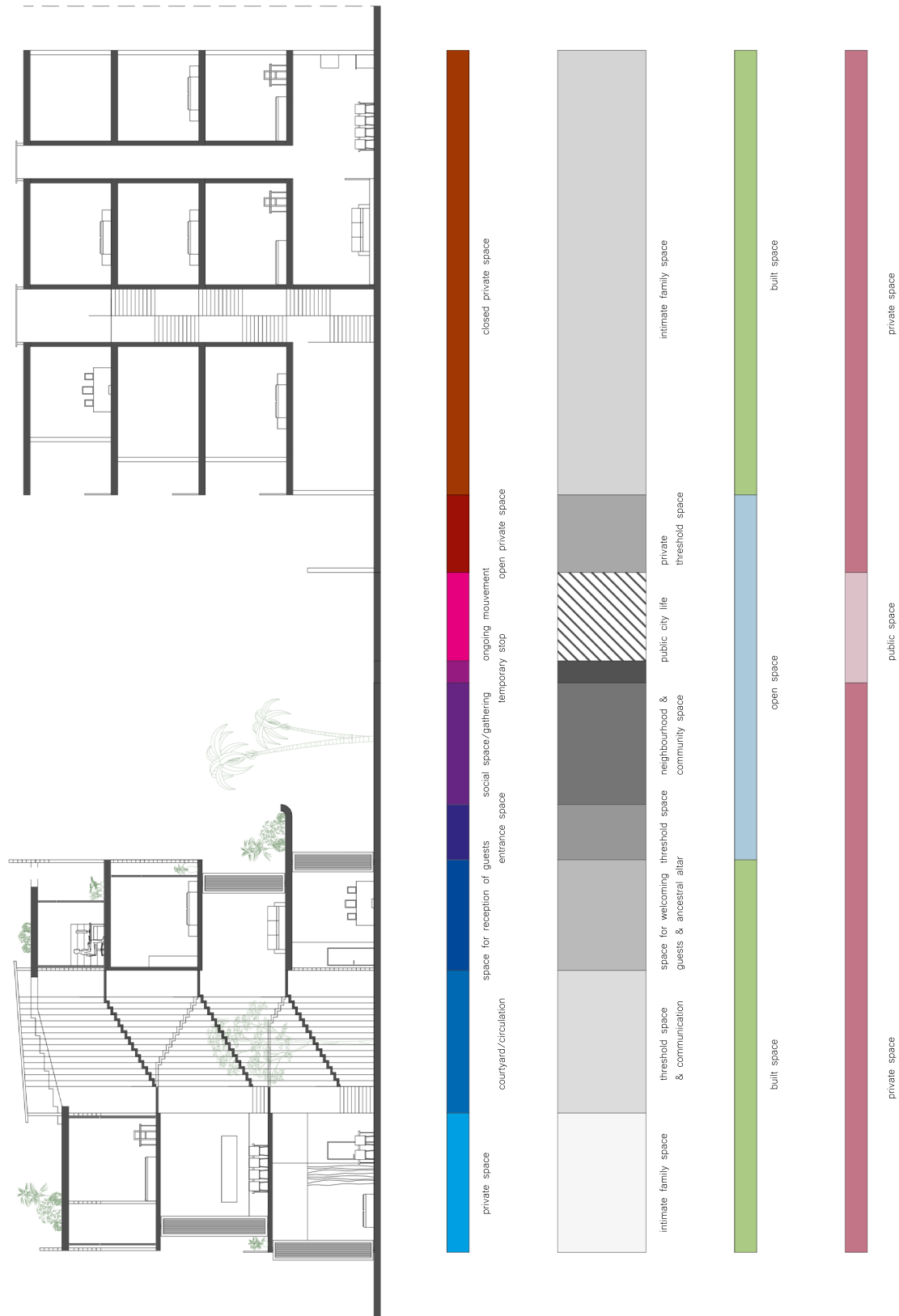
Figure 6.25. Diagram showcasing the different gradients between public and private space with the new layout on the left and the existing model on the right.

The succession of thresholds

The zoning and delimitations of all the functions in the open space of the alleyway are carried out by different levels of hardness and design of the ground, for example the asphalted ground of the street, the green lawn of the recreational spaces or the colourful tiles of the public spaces. In addition, these light limits are supported by the precise and strategic position of design elements such as trees, plants and water ponds.

The succession of these thresholds continues in the plan layouts of the residential buildings. The organisation of the space and functions is designed according to social practices, supporting interactions and openness, but also enabling spaces of retreat within the family intimacy.

These floor plans aim to adhere with the traditional Vietnamese lifestyle, shaped by local customs and the tropical climate, but also adapting to new demands of the evolving modern lifestyle. Therefore, the rooms with the purpose of welcoming guests and traditionally also including the ancestral altar, are placed with immediate access to the outdoor public space. These spaces have the functions similar to our living rooms, and represent the first layer of welcoming someone into your house. For more intimate or private conversations, one can invite someone to enter deeper into the house layout, sitting down in the courtyard, the dining room or the kitchen, located either at the back of the tube house or, in some cases, on the first floor.
The upper floors of the house contain the more private spaces for the family or apartment units, depending on the structure of its residents. In Vietnam, three major typologies can be distinguished: the single-family house, the multi-generation house and individual apartment units, in some cases with common areas. These models showcase the change in mentality and habits, as the multi-generation model is deeply impregnated in local customs and traditions, many young people, envisioning a more "modern" lifestyle, decide to move out and live on their own or create a family on their own.
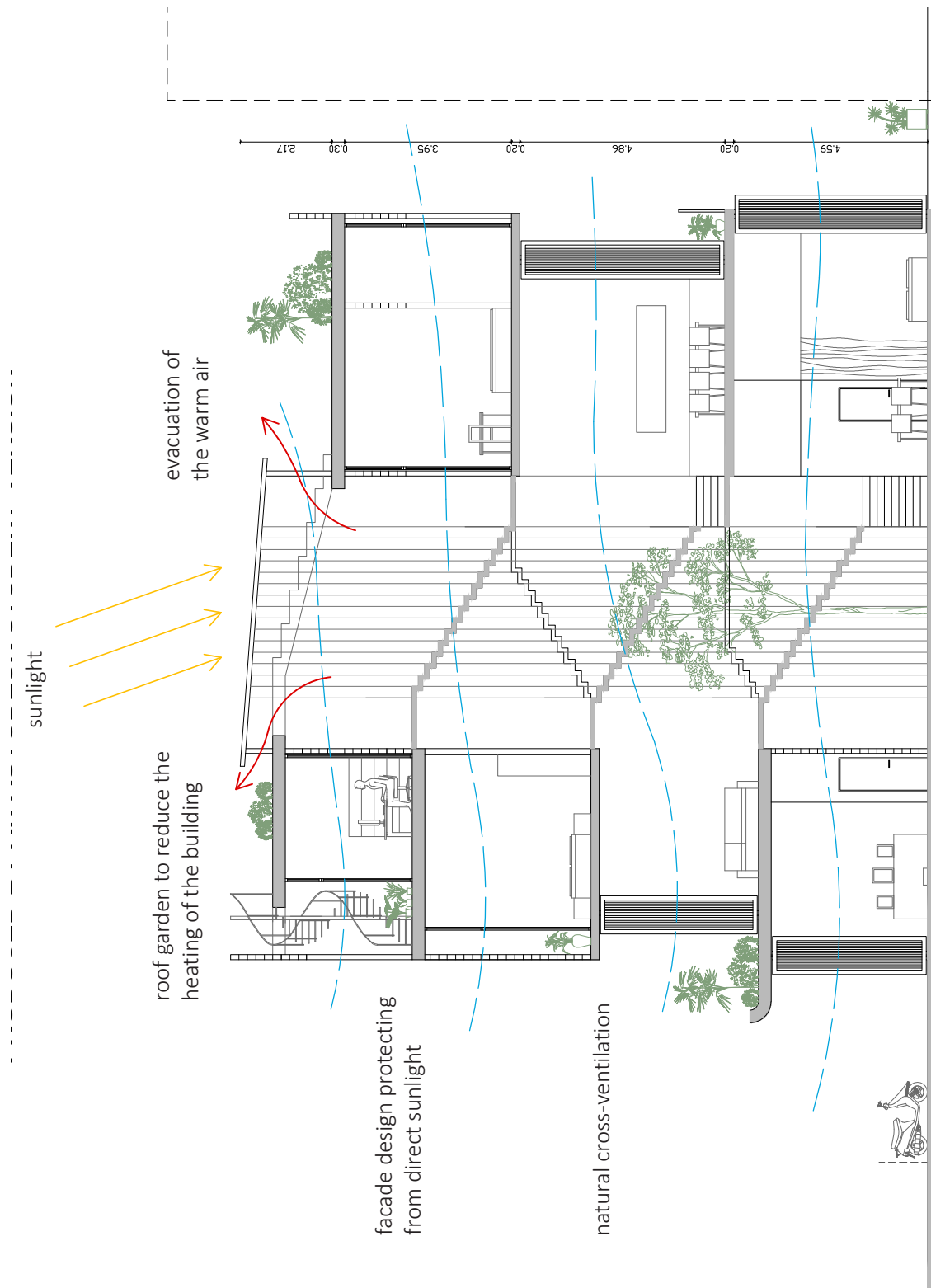
Figure 6.26. Architecture adapted to the tropical climate of Ho Chi Minh City.

evacuation of
the warm air

sunlight

roof garden to reduce the
heating of the building

facade design protecting
from direct sunlight

natural cross-ventilation

2.17 0.30 3.95 0.20 4.86 0.20 4.59

Designing architecture adapted to the local tropical climate

In a time where everybody aims to enjoy a modern lifestyle and a high quality of comfort, it is important to reflect on how to define this new emerging lifestyle, distancing itself from local customs and traditions from the past. Many Vietnamese people tend to equal fresh and cool air-conditioned spaces with a high quality of life and a step towards modernisation, aiming to level up to Western models. But with HCMC's tropical and humid climate, that means that all spaces have to be completely separated from the outside. This is everything but a sustainable approach.

As this project is focusing on social interactions, a fluid gradation of openness between public and private spaces, sensitive thresholds and the sense of community in HCMC's alleyways, another approach is necessary. While some spaces in the house of a modern household require the comfort of air-conditioning, like the bedroom or home office, other functions, especially those who have a close relation to the outside space, do not require the use of mechanical systems. Therefore, only specific spaces of the house are enclosed spaces, with the possibility of air-conditioning. As for the other spaces, elements from the Vietnamese traditional architecture help the building to achieve a thermal comfort through the use of passive design elements. For example the frontal veranda, a typical element of traditional Vietnamese architecture, protects the ground floor from direct sunlight with its low pulled down roof. Another core element is the courtyard situated in the middle of the house. Beside being the main source of natural light inside the house, it is also an important element for the cross ventilation through the house. Supporting constant airflow as well are the rotating elements opening or closing the inside space from the outside. Different levels of porosity in the design of the façade is key to, on the one hand, enabling cross-ventilation, but on the other hand allowing different levels of privacy in different parts of the house. Another method used are green facades, which contribute to the thermal insulation of buildings, the biodiversity in the city, the quality of public spaces and the reduction of air pollution, fine dust and carbon dioxide.

Developed typologies in the alleyway 80

multi-generation house typology

evolution of the typology of the traditional house

apartment units typology

multi-generation house typology
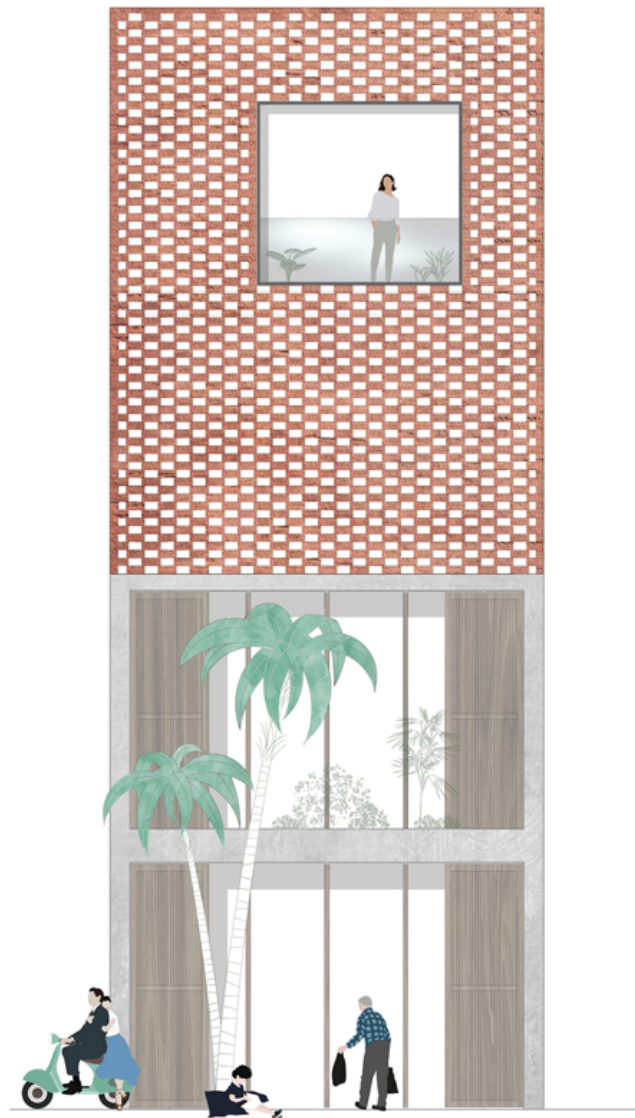
Elevation scale 1:100
multi-generation house typology

ancestral altar
reception of guests

courtyard

studio for
the grand-parents

living room

kitchen
dining area

master bedroom

bedroom

bedroom

guest room
office

roof
garden

scale 1:100

section, scale 1:100

94
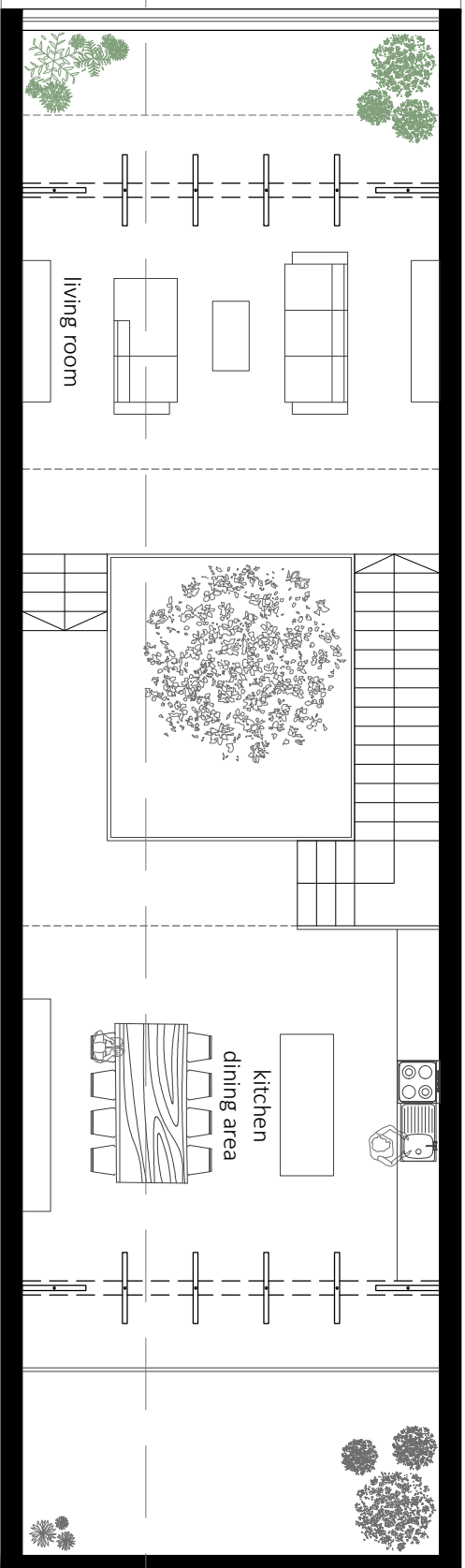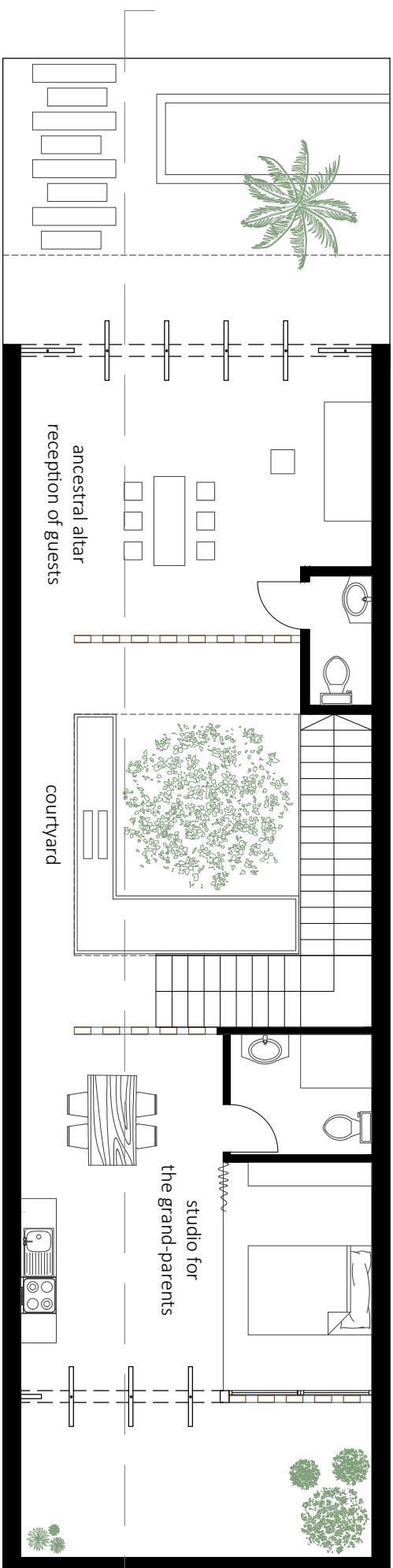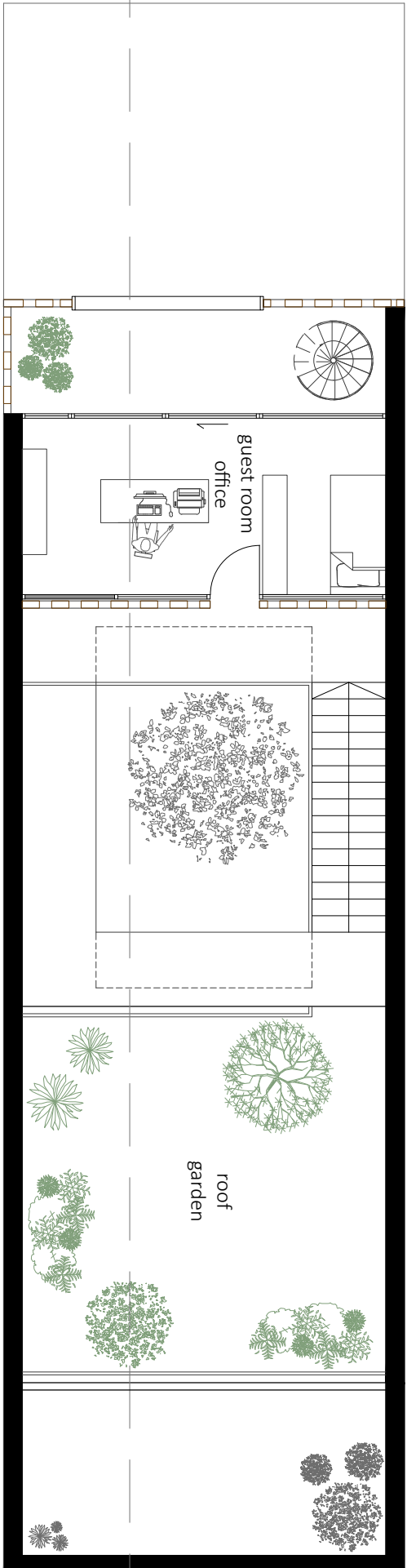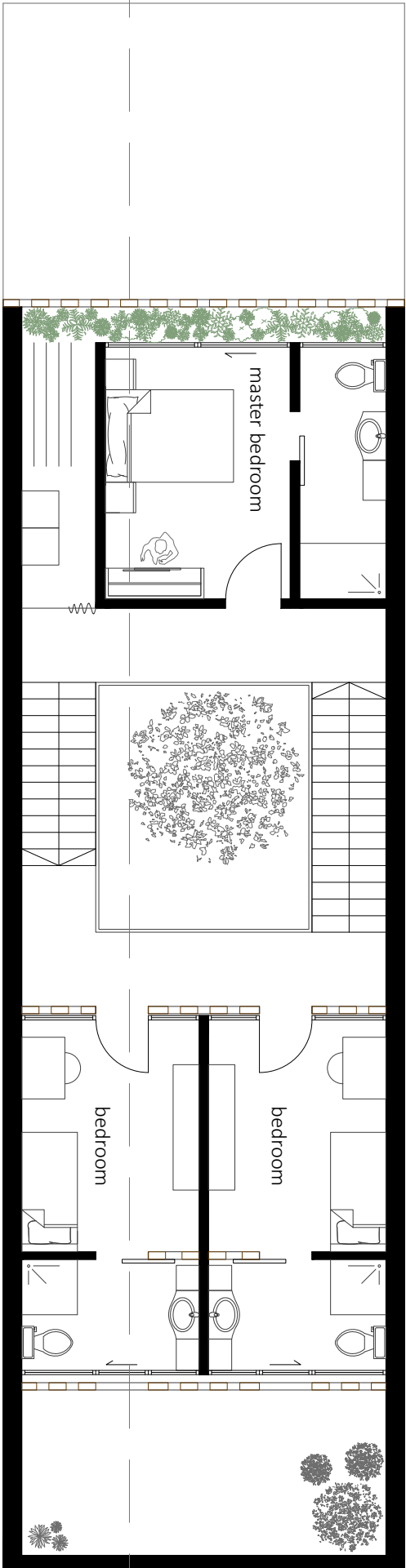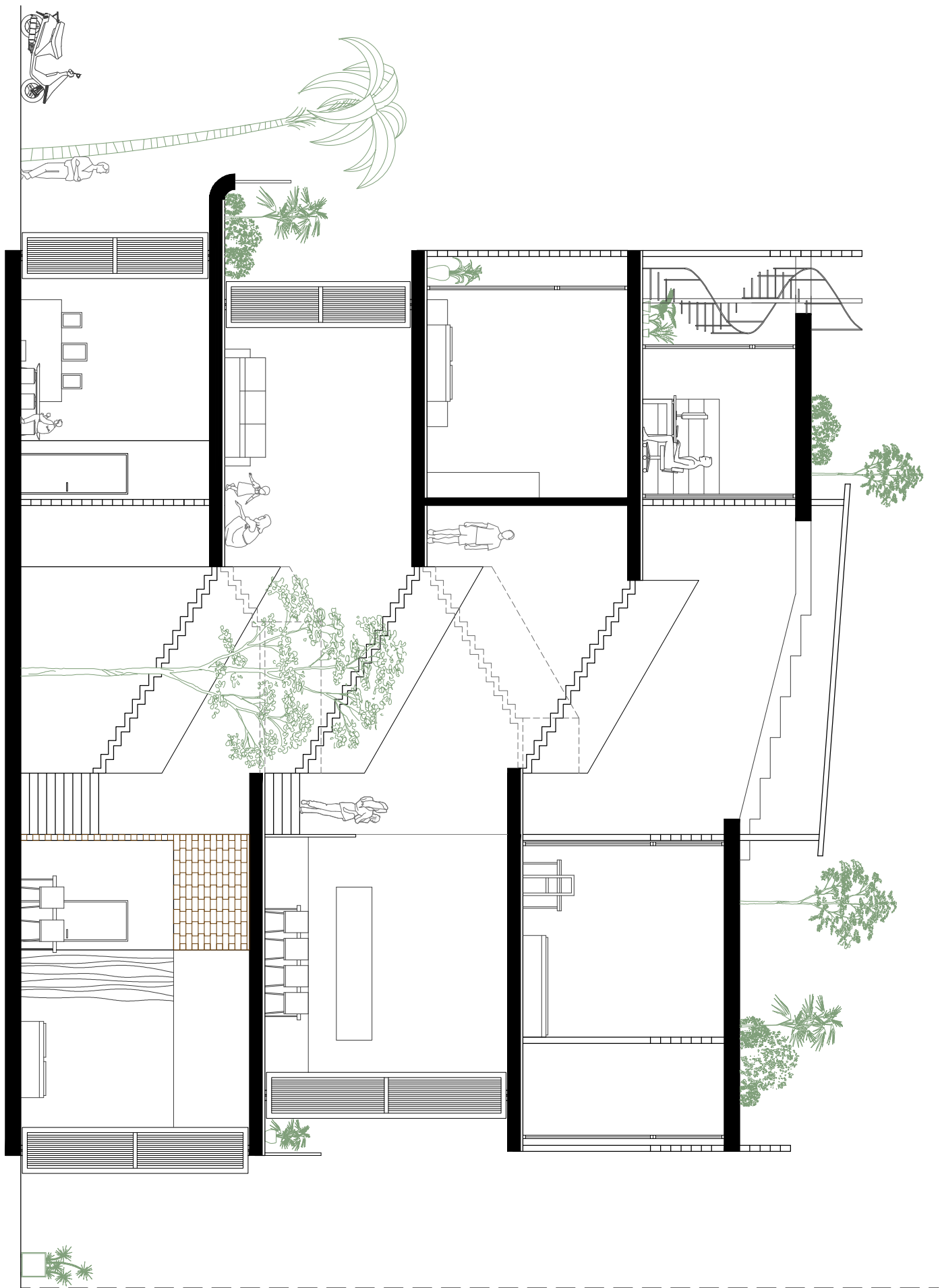
The multi-generation house has a spatial layout following the concept of a succession of thresholds with a different gradient of intimacy leading from the public space of the alleyway to the private spaces inside the house.

On the groundfloor, the adjacent room to the outside can be completely open to the public space of the alleyway and the semi-public recreation space in front of the house. The purpose of the first room you enter is the reception of guests and worship, as the ancestral altar takes back this core position in the house, like in the space models of tradional Vietnamese houses. While communication and meetings with neighbours usually starts in the open space of the alleyway, this room gives the possibility to invite guests inside your house without having them invade your personal space and privacy.

The next threshold space is the main courtyard which connects alle the rooms and floor inside the house. Besides bringing natural light inside the tube house, it also stimulates the natural cross-ventilation through the house and evacuates to warm air to the outside at the top.
The inner courtyard represents an intermediate space for circulation and communication between spaces with different levels of privacy inside the house. The water pond, plants and tree create a calm and pleasant atmosphere inside the house.

In the back of the house is located the studio for the grandparents. Still placed on the groundfloor, it facilitates access for elderly people. This space has all primary functions needed and is given enough privacy through the separation form the reception room trhough in-between space of the courtyard. Places between the main courtyard and a smaller courtyard in the back, the studio for the grandparents benefits from an optimal natural cross-ventilation and is protected form direct sunlight to achieve a comfortable room atmosphere with no mechanical air-conditioning, based on the traditional lifestyle in Vietnam.

On the first floor are located the rooms designated for privacy enjoyed within the family and shared activities. These functions include the kitchen, dining area and living room. As on the groundfloor, these spaces are aerated and cooled through a natural cross-ventilation, that can be controlled by the rotation of wooden panels on both sides of the facades. This floor also acts as a separation and meeting point at the same time between the different generations living inside the house.

On the second floor one can access the rooms with the purpose of a further step towards intimacy. These spaces are designated for the privacy of an individual person, and gives every member of the family a place of retreat. These represents the bedrooms for the children and the master bedroom for the parents. To adapt to the demands of a modern lifestyle, these space are equipped with mechanical air-conditioning, bringing more comfort to the inhabitants where needed.

On this floor, the design of the facade also adapts to the more intimate level of privacy of the inner functions of the house. The brick motive, on one hand, protects the building from overheating from direct sunlight, and, on the other hand, brings natural light inside the room while at the same time preventing outsiders from seeing in. An additional layer of plants between the brick facade and the glass separation enhances the feeling of privacy and comfortable atmosphere.

The top floor consists of a working space and extra sleeping quarter to accommodate guests. It also has an exterior balcony with an access to the rooftop garden.

evolution of the typology of the traditional house

Elevation scale 1:100
evolution of the typology of the traditional house

café

reception
of guests

courtyard

dining area
kitchen

courtyard

outdoor
space

living room

bedroom
for children

study space
for children

ancestral altar

outdoor
space

master
bedroom

reading space
office

laundry
space
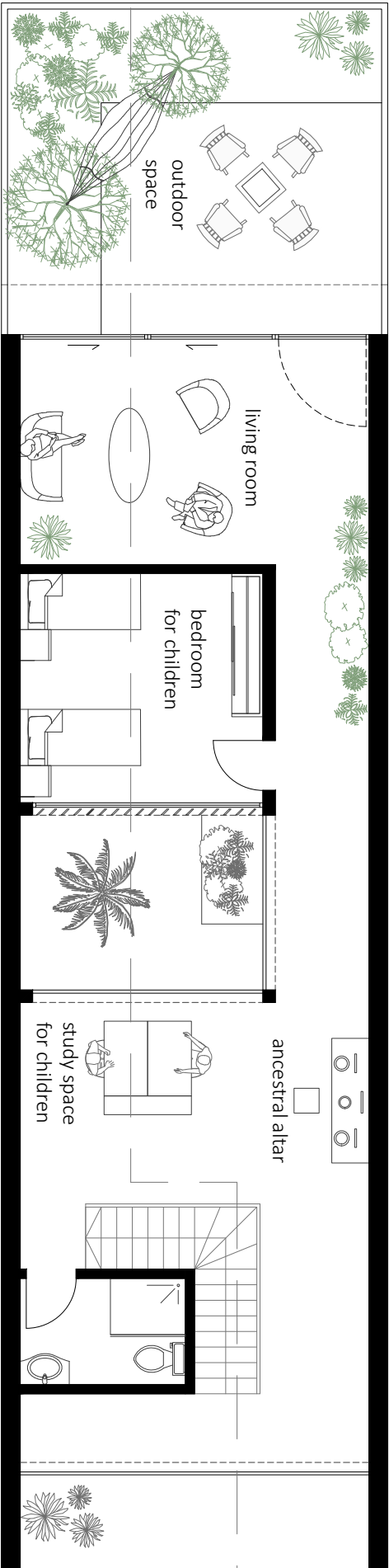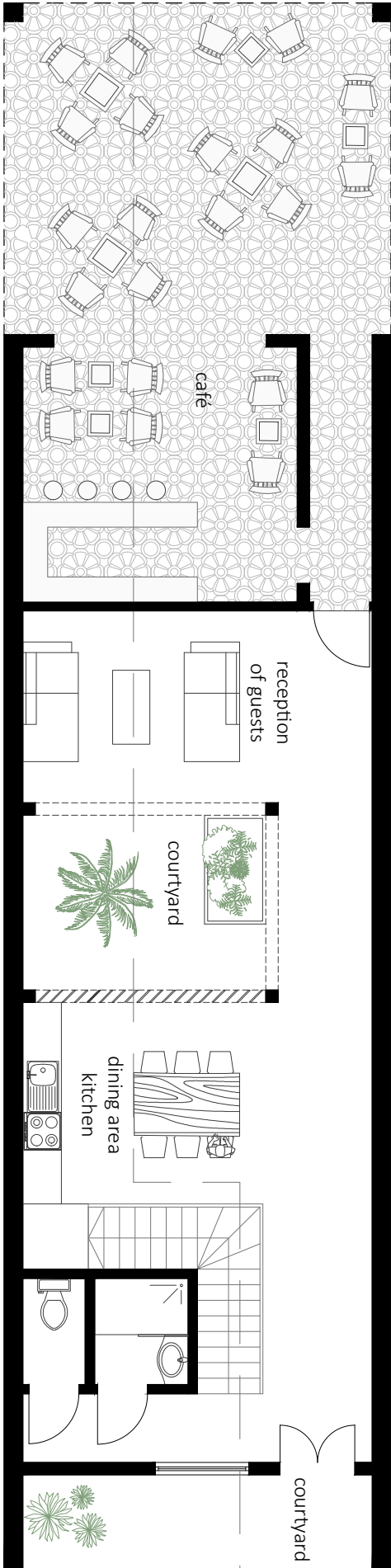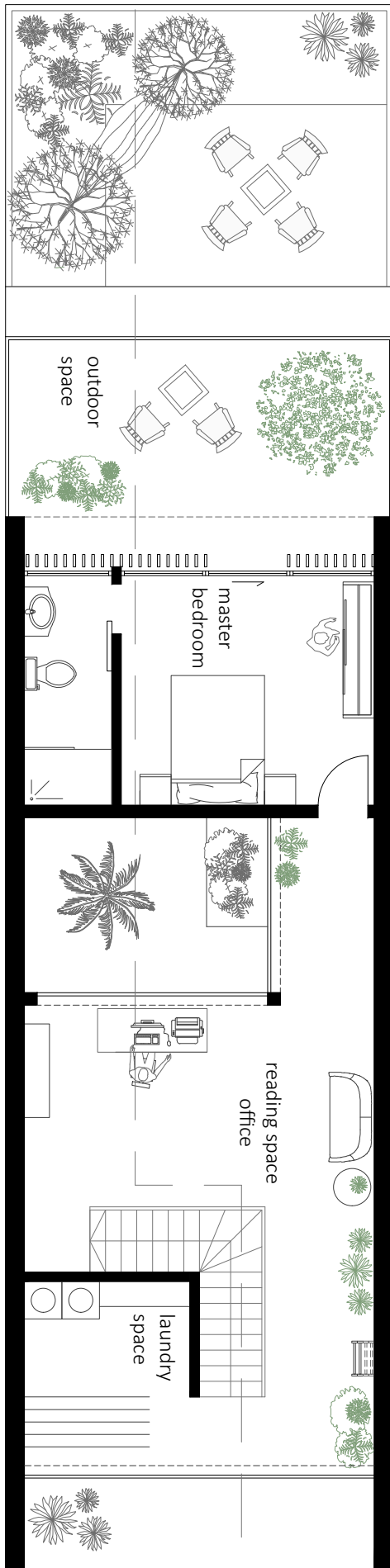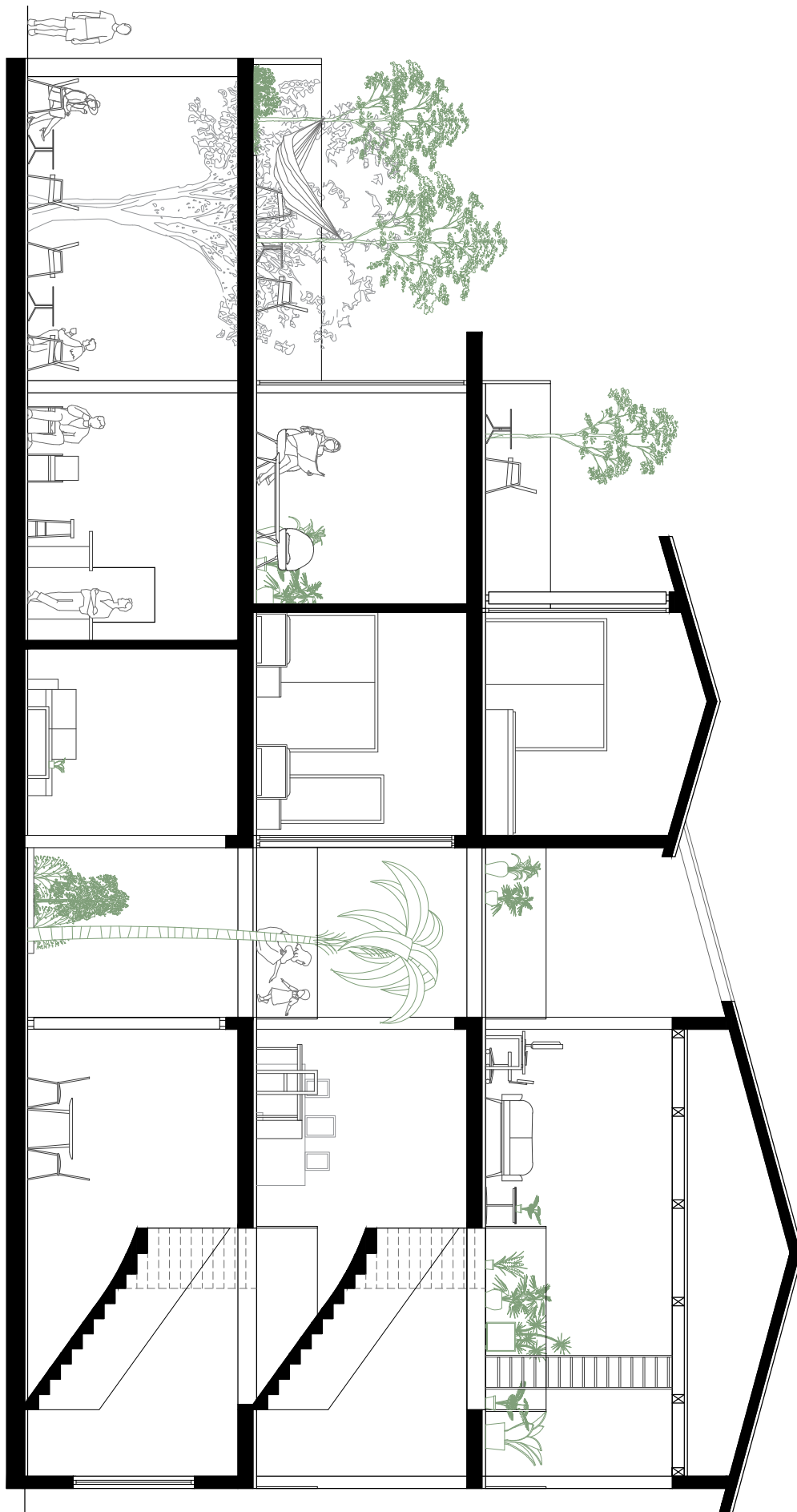
scale 1:100

section, scale 1:100

100

The evolution of the typology of the traditional house is based on the architecture ans space layout which emerged in the 1950s and 1960s in the alleyways of Saigon and Cholon. Over the years, the inhabitants have built additional floors or changed the shape of the volume of the house to gain additional space, but the spatial organisation and floorplan layout as remained the same. In this case, the inhabitants built an additonal volume on the groundfloor in front of the existing structure, to add a commercial space to their dwelling, like in the traditional shophouses popular in Asian cities. In this case, a café is located in the space adjacent to the street and is a vibrant place in the alleyway for meeting and socialising. The front part consists of a covered terrace to protect the cutomers from the tropical sun and leads to the inside part of the café where the counter and more seating spaces are located by a seamless transition.

A narrow corridor, remaining from the old space layout leads to the family area of the house. First you one enters the space for the reception of guests, located next to the inner courtyard, which brings greenery and natural light inside the house. The kitchen and dining area is located acress the courtyard and is protected visually from the space welcoming guests with rotated wooden pannels. A small courtyard at the back of the house allows a natural cross-ventilation.

On the first floor are located the living room and private garden for family activities. Spaces for the children as the bedroom and a study space are organised around the courtyard for a calm atmosphere and natural light. Here is also located the ancestral altar as it is within the common space of the family.

The top floor accommodates the parents, giving them additional privacy and tranquility. The master bedroom as a direct access to another private terrace and is protected from outside views with vertical louvers, which also filters to direct sunlight inside the room. An open area next to the courtyard and staircase includes an office space and reading space and allows direct communication with the open spaces on the other floors. In the back of the house is located a laundry space, open to the outside.

The shape of the roofs is a reinterpretation of the shape of the traditional house from the 1950s and 1960s, bringing more natural light inside the house with the addition of the courtyard. The mix of commercial space on the groundfloor with direct street access, with residential space is a widespread spatial model in the alleyways of Ho Chi Minh City and stimulates the vibrancy of the streets and the neighbourhoods.

apartment units typology

Elevation scale 1:100
apartment units typology

common space
reception of guests

courtyard

kitchen
dining area

apartment
unit

student
room

scale 1:100

apartment unit

student room

apartment unit

student room
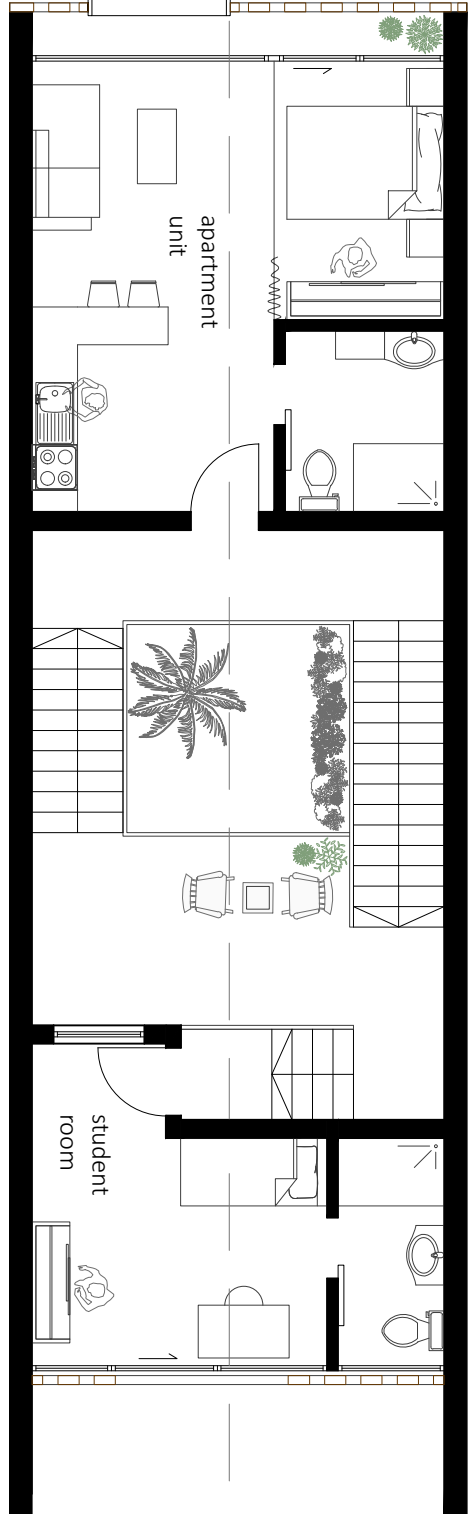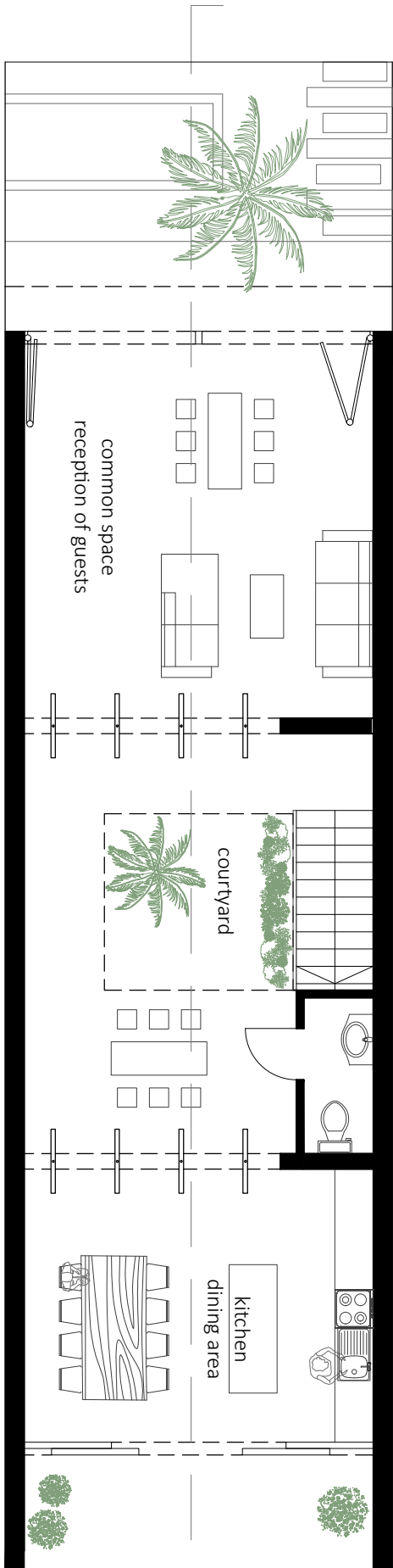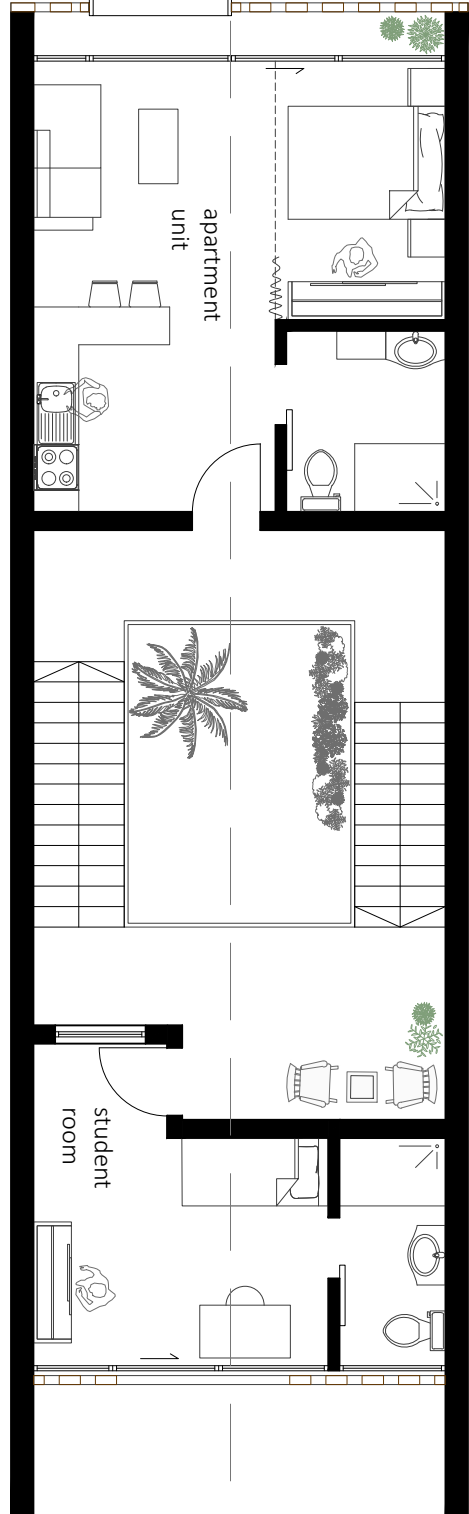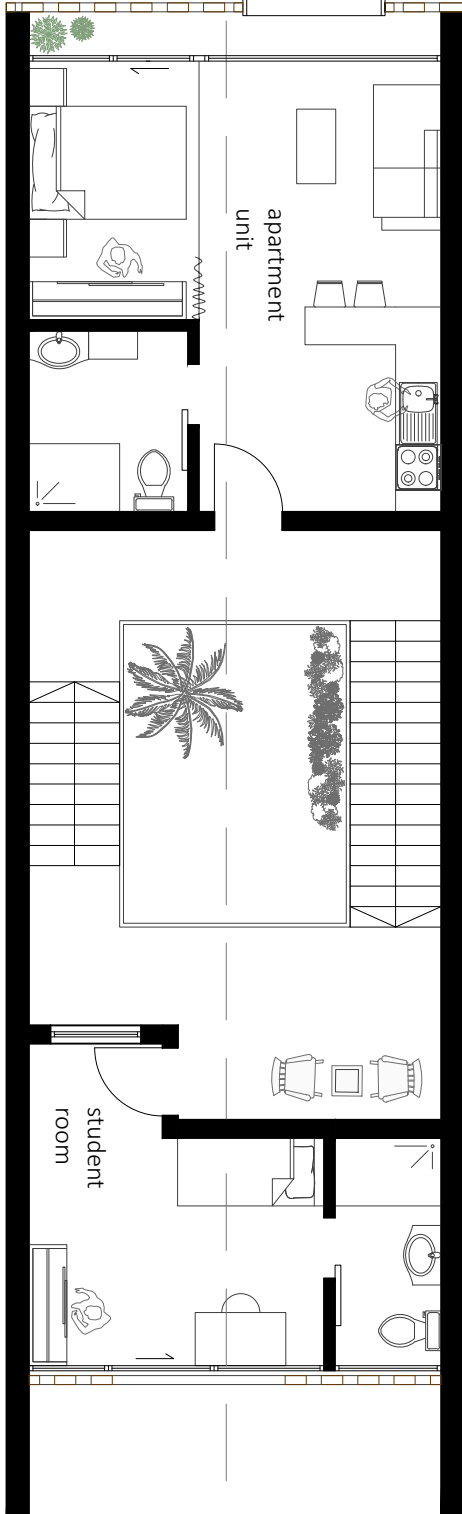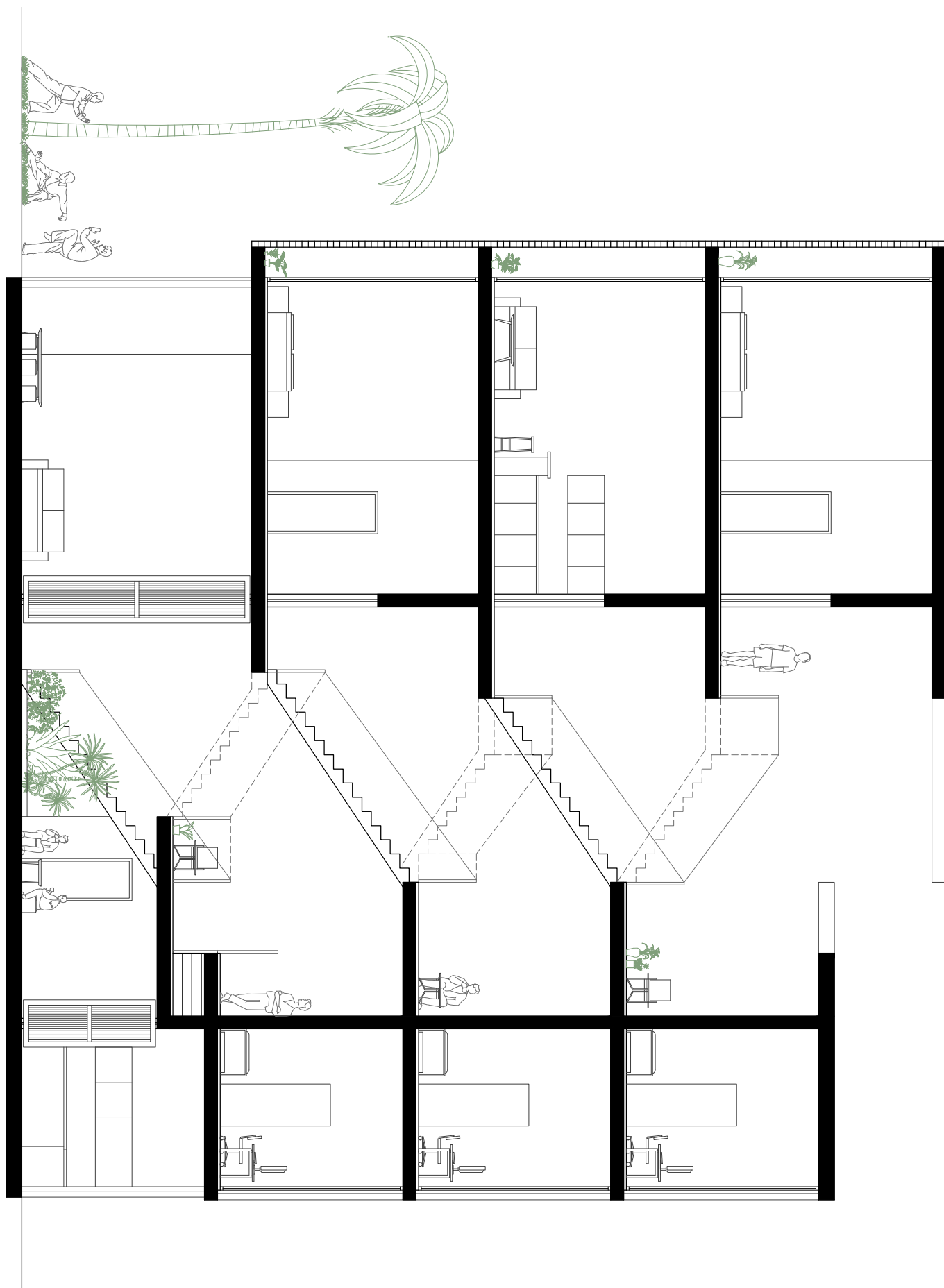
section, scale 1:100

The apartment units typology accomodates common functions on the groundfloor and apartment units and small studios for students in the upper floors. The space adjacent to the public and semi-public spaces of the alleyway, invites for informal gatherings and socializing int he room for the reception of guests and a living room area.

The courtyard located right behind functions as a threshold space, representing a soft division from the first room to the back of the house, designated for common activities between the residents of the house. An outdoor roof sitting area encourgaes communication and strengthen the relations between the inhabitants. In the back of the house is located the kitchen and dining area, especially for the students who have no kitchen in their apartment unit.

On the upper floors, each floor accomodates an apartment unit and a student room, with a generous circulation space around to courtyard for more calm and retreated common areas.
Through this spatial layout including different intensities of separations, alternances between open common spaces and calm open spaces, and, intimate spaces for individual privacy, the inhabitants can chose which space to use, according to the activity and degree of privacy they desire. The open courtyard and spontanous encounters in the open and common spaces stimulates the sense of community between the residents of the house and creates a comfortable and safe living environment.

synopsis

High-rise buidling
Verticalisation process

- no direct street access
- segregation

direct street access

Traditional tube house
Alleyway neighbourhoods

- community space
- business space
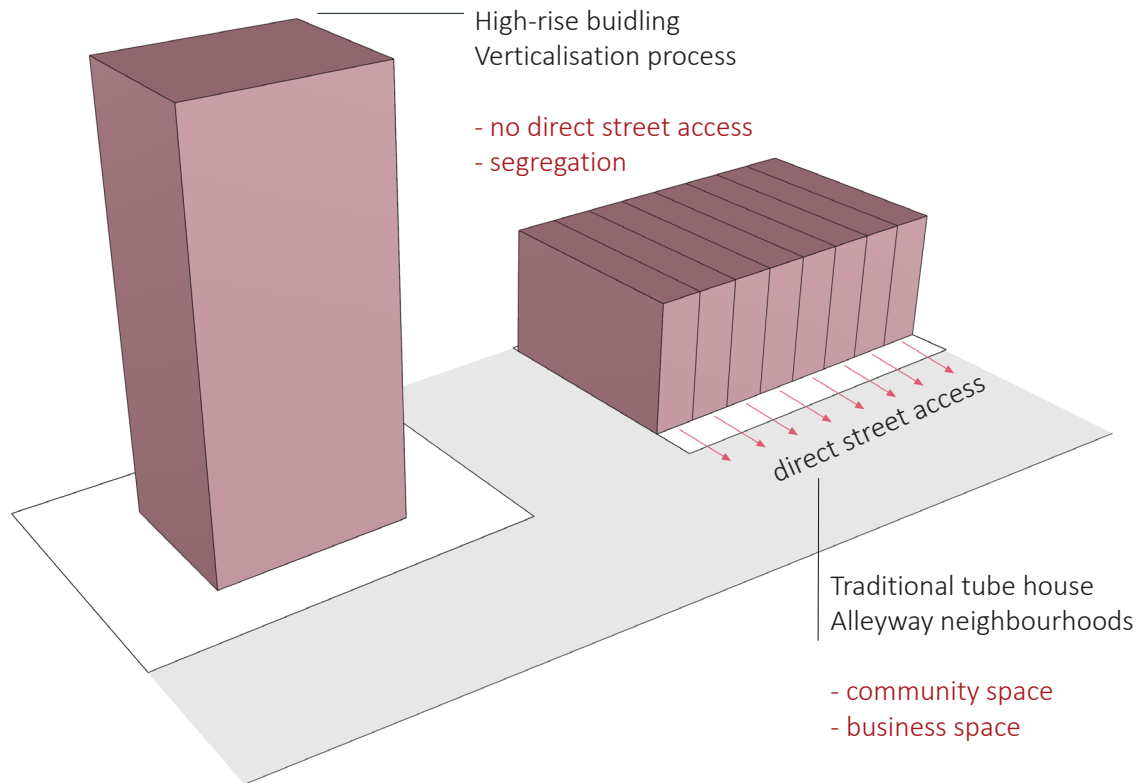
As the Vietnamese economy is strongly characterised by small businesses, the urban process of verticalisation doesn't suit the local lifestyle and economic needs of the citizen.

Reorganisation of the alleyway

- since 1975 «all land belongs to the State...»
- new land law policies allow people to sell and exchange the right to use land
- in this context, analyse the gain and lose for the citizen in the alleyway

the citizen lose...

- an isolated courtyard space
- strong separation towards the public
  realm of the alleyway

the citizen gain...

- more ventilation & light
- recreation space & improve public health
- green space to combat climate change
  issues
- safety (wider street, winding road
  reduces the speed of moterbikes)
- stronger community
- modern scenery
- more activities and ammenities in the
  alleyway (shops, stores, street vendors,...)

Conclusion

The reinterpretation of Ho Chi Minh City's alleyway's spatial layout is a mix of reincorporating traditional forms of architecture and way of life adapted to modern demands and the comfort of today. The spatial organisation of the alleyway's public space combines its former highly multifunctional use with the urban authorities' new demands of a modern city. Public functions like café's or shops, act as meeting points for social interactions between the neighbourhood and passers-by while the semi-public spaces create recreational space for the residents of the alleyway, offering space for sport activities, board games, playgrounds for children or simply enjoying the open space in the shadow of the trees. The revitalisation of the alleyway's outdoor spaces create a high-quality urban environment within these neighbourhoods and is able to adapt to different ranges within society with only soft interventions into the city's urban heritage. This approach would certainly represent the image of a modern city which adheres to its local identity, while still providing high quality living spaces for its citizen.

This represents a countermovement towards the blind implementation of international models, destroying HCMC's unique urban heritage, its local architecture and the social structures within the alleyways. This proposition offers more diversity, flexibility and performance within a low, but dense urban structure which is able to compete with the high density of detached high-rise residential buildings.

The aim of this project is to showcase an alternative solution of modernisation while respecting the local identity and way of life at the same time. It supporting the vitality of the city's public spaces and preserves the urban tissue of Ho Chi Minh City.

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