Hoi An Public Spaces Research Report

(Photo Source: http://www.pbase.com/pnd1/street_photography&page=6)
Hoi An public space research team

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Background

In 2008, for the first time in history, more than half the world’s population is living in towns and cities and by 2030 almost 5 billion people will be living in an urban setting (UNFPA, 2007). Much of this urbanization will occur in Asian cities. Such high levels of growth have major implications for the health and wellbeing of residents. How we build cities in the future, and how we shape existing ones through policies and projects, will determine how liveable they are. As elsewhere, so too in Vietnam, where the urban population is set to increase rapidly over the next 10 to 25 years - almost doubling by 2020. The Ministry of Construction predicts the urban population will account for 45 percent of the national total by 2020.\(^1\)

High urbanization, with its need for vastly more housing, means that real estate values skyrocket and public spaces are at a premium. The pressure to develop all existing spaces for other uses means that outdoor open spaces become scarce. Water bodies and wetlands are being filled in, and public buildings such as pagodas are under threat and are being taken over for commercial and private functions. Children lack spaces for play. Adults and the elderly do not have enough space for exercise. Meanwhile with increased motorization, walking and cycling become difficult and dangerous, thereby further increasing the need for public spaces for exercise and socializing.

HealthBridge and Action for the City have collaborated to conduct research on public spaces in Hoi An in order to formulate recommendations for guidelines and policies to improve public spaces in Vietnamese cities. The recommendations are meant to be of use to a wide audience including political authorities, planners, designers, and community members. In this project we limit public space to open spaces, parks, and community buildings. Streets and sidewalks, though important public spaces, have been excluded from the research.

Introduction to Hoi An

The city of Hoi An has been chosen as the research site. As a UNESCO protected city, Hoi An has strong urban preservation policies which keep public spaces from being exploited for development and other uses. Due to these protective policies as well as the beauty of the existing architecture and natural setting, the city is well known for its walking streets, attractive riverside, small squares, and traditional public buildings. While the city is popular among tourists, all of those public spaces are widely used by the local population as well.

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\(^1\)Coulthart et al., 2006, page 4.
Hoi An city belongs to Quang Nam province in central Vietnam. The city is administratively divided in nine wards\textsuperscript{2} and four communes\textsuperscript{3}. Hoi An City is located near the mouth of the Thu Bon rivers that connect to the sea. The area has numerous rivers and streams, as well as a long coast with many beautiful beaches.

Hoi An’s architecture and urban space reflect the centuries of outside influence which have created a very personal style in this city.

In recent years, Hoi An has witnessed a fast development pace. Population and population density are increasing and will continue to increase and the tourism sector is predicted to grow steadily as well. The Hoi An People’s Committee will be expanding the city by 100ha in order to accommodate the population (including tourist stays) as forecasted for 2020. This development pressure is present in cities across Vietnam, and it provides an opportunity for our research to influence future planning practices for public spaces. To date, no clear guidelines and policies have been developed for public spaces development. This research will bring Hoi An city a step closer to the development of guidelines specific for public spaces.

\textsuperscript{2} Minh An, Son Phong, Cam Pho, Thanh Ha, Tan An, Cam Chau, Cam An, Cua Dai, Cam Nam.
\textsuperscript{3} Cam Thanh, Cam Ha, Cam Kim and Tan Hiep.
Research

The research focused on the following questions:

1. How are public spaces developed and maintained in Hoi An by communities and by authorities, and what are specific problems and successes?
2. What are the needs of people in Hoi An regarding public spaces, and are these needs met?
3. What is the physical condition of the public spaces in Hoi An and are they well used?
4. What are people’s general perceptions on how public spaces should be?

The research team identified six public space categories in Hoi An (details can be found in Appendix A) and for each category, one case study was chosen. In addition, a second city park was chosen because of the importance of city parks. The cases were selected based upon their practicality (access to the site, approval from authorities, etc.) and potential for becoming the best functioning public space of the category.

Cases chosen:

1. Two city parks (Riverside Park and Hoi An Park)
2. One community house (Thanh Nam)
3. One Hoi Quan (Hoi Quan Ngu Bang)
4. One sports field (Cam Chau sports field)
5. One neighbourhood pocket park (Nguyen Duy Hieu)
6. One inner-city square (Kazimierz Square)

Figure 1. Chosen research study sites
Each of the seven sites selected was audited. The audits consisted of one general audit and one activity audit per site. The observation gave us information about the use and conditions of each of the seven sites. In addition, a quantitative survey was conducted of park visitors and local residents to examine visitors’ behaviour, to gain insight into people’s perceptions on the conditions of the spaces, to collect opinions for improvements, to investigate differences in perceived needs regarding public spaces, and to identify why certain people may not visit the public spaces in their neighbourhood. A policy review was also conducted that examined international examples, a review was conducted of Hoi An policy documents, and interviews were carried out with authorities and residents.

Observation of selected public spaces in Hoi An

“Public spaces enable people to play, to rest and to regenerate energy.” (a resident of Minh An ward)

“... our desire is very simple. Hoi An before had a park but it is now moved to Tan An. It is so far away that people cannot get there. The ward wants a park for children to play and entertain during Tet holiday.” (a resident of Cam Chau ward)

The Park Observation Survey was intended to answer the research question: what is the physical condition of the public spaces in Hoi An and are they well used? Each park was assessed looking at issues related to attractiveness, cleanliness, maintenance, facilities, and activities.

City Parks

Riverside Park

Riverside Park is a linear park that is 10 m wide by 500 m in length. It was frequently used by Hoi An residents and tourists during our observation period and the research team observed many activities occurring throughout the day. The park has no entrance fee and is easy to access, has a number of key amenities such as chairs and shelter, and has a good appearance with landscaping, art and sculptures. There is a large road right next to the park without pedestrian aids, speed limits or signs, which may make it difficult for people to access the park. We would recommend these features be added to make the park safer to access from the other side of the street. In
addition, the space is not very green as hard surfaces dominate the area, and we would suggest adding a few more green features. There was litter in the park, probably due to the lack of litterbins. This could easily be improved upon. The park seems to function well. It is well used by the residents with different activities going on throughout the day but there are no playgrounds for children. Vendors provide food and drinks, tourists visit, and in the evening there is a night market nearby.

Hoi An Park

“There are so many places suitable for building a museum but why did they have to take the land of the park? They also plan to build a basement parking garage underneath the museum but who would need a garage in Hoi An?” (a resident of Minh An ward)

Hoi An Park is a central-city park, but it was not very frequently used during our observation. It is large but unfortunately half of it is now taken by the new museum. Although this park is much older than Riverside Park, it seems not to have had much attention. The park is fenced and gated with an entrance fee when the kids want to play some trains, which significantly reduces its accessibility to local people. It is surprising that visitors need to pay a fee because this park does not appear very well maintained. The play equipment for kids has deteriorated, there is litter and trash in the park, and the greenery is poor. The park as well is limited in its access due to the busy road surrounding the park. We saw very few people in this park during the whole day. We strongly recommend to increase the accessibility of this park and to create reasons for people to want to use this space as it has a great location and could easily be developed into a well-functioning park.

Neighbourhood Park – Nguyen Duy Hieu

“There is nothing for you to sit on, there are no benches, and the place is dark in evenings because there is no lighting, so people come there to drink alcohol.” (a resident of Cam Chau ward)

Pocket park Nguyen Duy Hieu was observed to be a well-used park despite the lack of places to sit and lack of lighting. It has green spaces of average appearance, but well maintained. Accessibility to the park could be improved with more crossing aids to help people cross the busy street. As well the park has been taken over by commercial activities and parking at some times in the
day. Enforcement will be needed to ensure that cars, motorbikes, and merchants do not use the park space inappropriately. The park, given its important role in the neighbourhood, should have facilities for children to play and for the elderly to sit.

Hoi QuanNgu Bang
Hoi Quan Ngu Bang is an open space with lots of flower pots and the observers considered it to be a lovely, peaceful place. Activities taking place in the park included tai chi, walking, sports and social activities. The pocket park section of the Hoi Quan appears very well maintained. It is located in the area with restricted motorized traffic, which helps keep it peaceful. The street is calm and easy to cross. The open yard is well-used by young and older people. The space appears as a good example of a well functioning public space in Hoi An.

Community House Thanh Nam
“A community house should have a library for people coming to read. Traditional games or activities such as Chinese chess for the elders are almost forgotten. Children’s games also sink into oblivion.” (a resident of Minh An ward)
“The cultural house is a place that serves most activities. There is no other better place for people to go to so it’s still the most favourable for everyone. However, as a matter of fact, the meeting hall is still too small and there are not many activities organised here. (a resident of Cam Thanh ward)

Thanh Nam community house has a typical community house design consisting of a one-storey house with a courtyard out front. During the observation, people were seen playing sports, including volleyball and badminton; children were playing, and people were walking and resting. Inside the building, meetings of local associations were being organized. Interviews suggested that, on occasion, performances take place. People practice music here during the summer twice a week, and Children and Youth Unions have summer activities here. This was a large amount of activity given that the space provided virtually nothing in the way of facilities such as play equipment and urban furniture. However the ambiance is peaceful, there is little traffic in the
surrounding area and no fee to access the space. There are tremendous opportunities to increase the functioning and community enjoyment of the space.

**Cam Chau Sports Field**

Cam Chau sports field appeared poorly maintained, had little greenery and shade, and had no services. We observed the space being used by residents and pupils from schools in the area. The building is also used for meetings. It has the potential to be a great public space due to its size and its location near residential areas. However, the space could be made much better by updating the equipment, adding benches and litterbins, ensuring regular maintenance and improving the greenery.

**Inner-City Square – Kazimierz Square**

“When they built Kazimierz monument and statue garden, they didn’t ask for our opinions. Sculptures then are placed there but none of us understands the meaning of those art works.” (a resident of Minh An ward.)

Kazimierz square is a well-maintained public space consisting of an area planted with trees and grass, and an open yard paved with stones. The space appears to be well designed and regularly maintained. However, there is little in the way of facilities. This square is located in an area with restricted motorized traffic, which makes the surrounding calm and easy to access. The square is well used by both tourists and residents. Residents were observed participating in leisure and sport activities such as walking, exercising, playing sports, walking with children, sitting, and chatting. Kazimierz Square is also used as a resting and visiting spot for tourists and we observed some traditional games for tourists such as “breaking clay pots blindfolded”.

**Opinions and ideas of users of public spaces**

Two quantitative surveys were conducted for this project: one with users of public spaces and one with residents. A total of 259 people were interviewed, mostly aged 20-74 years, with an equal distribution of the sexes.
User survey: Visit behaviour

Most (almost 70%) of the users of the public spaces live in the ward where the space was located (Graph 1). This suggests that public spaces have important neighbourhood functions.

Graph 1. Location of residence

However, there was variability in the number of visitors from inside the ward for different spaces. When the public space was not regularly visited by people in the ward, there is potential to create an environment that is more conducive to neighbourhood activity.

We wanted to understand the visiting behaviour of park users and chose to look at two variables: the frequency of visits overall and the frequency of visits during different seasons. Hoi An experiences a rainy and warm winter and a hot and dry summer. Given the nature of many activities in the parks, we believed there would be a difference in frequency of visits during the different seasons. The user survey suggests that there was a difference in frequency in terms of both number of regular visitors overall and the number of regular visitors during the different seasons. Those public spaces that have better shade/shelter are more used throughout the year than those that do not. Further, the pocket park, Kazimierz Square, and the Hoi Quan Ngu Bang act as places where the community can regularly go for activity and socializing, whereas Thanh Nam community house, Riverside Park, and Hoi An Park are places to go for more specialized visits.

The main starting location for people to travel to the open spaces was home (79.9%) followed by friends’ and relatives’ houses (7.3%), and work (6.6%) (Graph 2). This overall trend holds true when we examine each individual park. However, Cam Chau sports field has a higher proportion of people who travel to it from work and school (24.3% and 8.1%) and Thanh Nam community house has a higher proportion who visit from work and friends’ houses (14.7% and 14.7%).
More than half of the trips to public spaces are made by foot or bicycle, while 44% are by motorbike (Graph 3). A little more than 90 percent of the trips only took 5-15 minutes. Very few trips to public spaces took more than 30 minutes. This again suggests that parks are acting as places for people to visit within their own neighbourhood.

Most people visit public spaces in Hoi An for exercise, to get some fresh air, and to meet friends; those three reasons account for about 40 percent of reasons to visit (Graph 4). Others come for peace and quiet (20%), to experience nature (14%), to relax or think (13.9%) and to study (4.2%).
Graph 4. Reasons to visit the public spaces

Those who visit public spaces in order to exercise are mostly aged 50-74. A few more men visit public spaces for exercise than women (54.2% compared with 45.8%). Similarly, those who visit for fresh air are mostly aged 50-74. Females and males are equally distributed in this group (50/50). It was mostly younger people (20-29 years old) who visit public spaces to meet friends, followed by those aged 50-74. Females and males are again equally distributed in this group (50% and 50% respectively). Finally, those who visit for peace and quiet are mostly aged 50-74 years old and 20-39 years old, again equally divided between men and women.

There was little variation in the main reasons to visit the parks. Unsurprisingly, people prefer to exercise in some of the larger or more open spaces, while people mostly go to Kazimierz Square for peace and quiet, study, and to experience nature; to Hoi Quan Ngu Bang to relax or think, to Cam Chau sports field for physical education classes; and to Thanh Nam community house for peace and quiet.
Table 1. Reasons to visit public spaces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons to visit this open spaces by Open space and Parks</th>
<th>To relax or think</th>
<th>For peace and quiet</th>
<th>To study</th>
<th>To experience nature</th>
<th>To do exercise</th>
<th>To get some fresh air</th>
<th>To meet friends</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pocket Park Nguyen Duy Hieu</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazimierz Square</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoi Quan Ngu Bang</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cam Chau sportfield</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverside Park</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoi An Park</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanh Nam community house</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

100.0 100.0 100.0 100.0 100.0 100.0 100.0 100.0

Perceptions about conditions of the public spaces

All the users were asked to rate the condition of the public spaces on design and appearance, cleanliness and maintenance, urban furniture, safety, plantation and greenery, facilities and/or services for children and the elderly, availability of sport facilities, and overall impression.

Table 2. Percent ranking each category for each public space “very good” or “good”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Space</th>
<th>Design</th>
<th>Clean</th>
<th>Furniture</th>
<th>Safety</th>
<th>Access</th>
<th>Green</th>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Elderly</th>
<th>Sports*</th>
<th>Overall**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All public spaces</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
<td>42.8%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>87.7%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>58.7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>40.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverside Park</td>
<td>77.5%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
<td>84.6%</td>
<td>94.6%</td>
<td>53.8%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>71.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoi Quan Ngu Bang</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>78.3%</td>
<td>56.5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazimierz Square</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>82.1%</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
<td>97.5%</td>
<td>97.5%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>51.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nguyen Duy Hieu park</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>90.9%</td>
<td>95.3%</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanh Nam community house</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>88.3%</td>
<td>70.6%</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cam Chau</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>77.8%</td>
<td>88.9%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
* As some of the facilities had no sports facilities at all, the question of quality was not applicable to 25% of the interviews, so this response does not cover all the facilities.

** This is the percentage of respondents who are “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the public spaces.

The public spaces did not score well on design and appearance, with only a little over a third (36.7%) ranking these measures as very good or good (Graph 5).

**Graph 5. Design and appearance of public spaces in Hoi An**

Public spaces did slightly better on cleanliness and maintenance (Graph 6), with 42.8% ranking them very good or good on these measures. However, 23.6% ranked them as poor and very poor. The highest ranking were Kazimierz Square, Riverside Park, and Hoi Quan Ngu Bang, all at over 78% approval; Cam Chau sports field scored the lowest, at 16.7%.

**Graph 6. Cleanliness and maintenance of public spaces in Hoi An**

Cleanliness of the parks is partly related to the availability of litterbins. More than half of the public spaces do not have litterbins, and for those that do, they are often not in good condition.
In terms of urban furniture including benches, the public spaces overall received low marks, with only a fifth of respondents saying they are good or very good (Graph 7). Although there was a wide difference between users of different parks, all parks could be improved in this area.

**Graph 7. Urban furniture present in the public spaces in Hoi An**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No facilities</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very good</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very poor</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Users of the open spaces feel quite safe, with almost 90% ranking safety as good or very good. Some respondents expressed concern about the safety of children at Riverside Park as there was no fence to protect them from falling into the river. In addition, accessibility of the public spaces surveyed in Hoi An was relatively good. Overall, 88% rank accessibility as good or very good.

Public spaces did less well in terms of greenery. Just over half of respondents (58.7%) ranked them as good or very good (Graph 8). Riverside Park and Hoi Quan Ngu Bang scored the highest and Hoi An Park, Thanh Nam community house, and Nguyen Duy Hieu the lowest. Given the important role that the community house, the pocket park and the city park play in the community, they should score better than they do.

“There still is a lack of real play area for children to run about. There is not enough green lawn for them to run and play. How can we let them to run on concrete. There should be a soft play area. A lot of children are out there, what a big mistake of adults if we forget about their needs.” (a resident)
As mentioned earlier, the public spaces did not score well in terms of facilities for children (Graph 9). Just over half said there are no facilities, and only 5% said that existing facilities are good or very good. Further analysis is needed to determine if there are other spaces in the neighbourhoods that provide facilities for children. It is important that children be within reasonable walking distance of spaces to play.

“A public park should serve mainly children and the elders. They are the two target users who need public space most.... However, they are being forgotten.” (a resident of Minh An ward)

The public spaces scored better on facilities and services for the elderly than on such services for children. However, they still scored poorly overall. Overall only 12% said such facilities and
services are good or very good, while almost half said there are no such facilities at all (Graph 10).

**Graph 10. Perception of facilities for elderly in the public spaces**

Finally, the public spaces overall did poorly on the ratings of sports facilities. The definition of sports facilities may have varied widely among the respondents, accounting for the different rankings of the same spaces. For instance, tai chi only requires an open space, whereas others may have considered sports facilities to consist of something more than an open space or the presence of goals for playing football. Overall, only 12.7% ranked sports facilities as good or very good (Graph 11).

**Graph 11. Availability of sport facilities**

Satisfaction with public spaces overall was only 40.1% (Graph 12), though the level of people satisfied or very satisfied with each public space varied widely, from a low of zero for Hoi An Park to 71.8% for Riverside Park and 80% for Hoi Quan Ngu Bang (Graph 13). In general, public spaces ranked highest on access and safety, and lowest on facilities for children, the elderly,
and sports.

**Graph 12. Overall impression of public spaces**

![Overall impression of the open spaces and parks](chart12.png)

**Graph 13. Overall impression per public spaces**

![Overall impression per open space and park](chart13.png)

**Users’ suggestions to improve the public spaces**

As shown in Graph 14, by far the most common suggestions were to build benches and to plant more trees. Interestingly, many of the suggestions, such as banning street kiosks, organizing social events, having more items to aid in relaxation, more traditional games, and building a fence, were endorsed by less than 5% of those surveyed.
However, when it comes to specific public spaces, the suggestions for improvement varied widely. People requested more benches particularly in Nguyen Duy Hieu pocket park, Kazimierz Square, and in Hoi An park. In most places people would like more trees. Other requests are shown in the Table 2 below.
Table 2. Main suggestions for improvement, by public space

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Space</th>
<th>Benches</th>
<th>Trees</th>
<th>Lights</th>
<th>Toilets</th>
<th>Field surface</th>
<th>Better maintenance</th>
<th>Children’s Playground</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Riverside Park</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoi Quan Ngu Bang</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazimierz Square</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Nguyen Duy Hieu</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thanh Nam community house</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cam Chau sports field</td>
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<td>Hoi An Park</td>
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</table>

**People’s perception of public space**

People most commonly describe public space as a place “Where everybody can come” (29.3%) and “Where people can play games or entertain themselves” (26.3%). Another fifth of users consider a public space as a place where people feel relaxed and have peace, and a fifth say that it’s a place “where there is no entrance fee.” Users associate public space with activities such as meeting and chatting (19.7%), engaging in sports and exercise (15.1%), and enjoying nature and fresh air (12.7%).

Those under age 16 are most likely to perceive public space as an area for games, entertainment, sports, exercise, and meeting and chatting with friends. Other age groups mostly mention free (no entrance fee) access for everyone, a place to meet friends, and somewhere to relax and feel peaceful. Women are more likely than men to associate public spaces as a place “where people can play games and entertain;” more men say that public spaces are “where people meet and chat.”
Opinions and ideas of residents living near public spaces

In addition to the surveys within the public spaces, 80 residents living near public spaces were also surveyed. They were mostly in the age groups of 20-39 and 50-59. Both the young and elderly were under-represented. They were almost equally divided between males and females. Almost 90% of the residents surveyed live within 600 metres of a public space; of those, almost 40% live within 100 metres. Most (90%) of residents visit the public spaces in their vicinity.

The main reasons people gave for visiting public spaces in their neighbourhood are good security and easy access (each at 46.3%) and a good space to walk or play (37.5%). Other reasons including meeting friends, good landscape design, and cleanliness (Graph 15).

Graph 15. Reasons to visit public spaces

Youth mostly visit when accessibility is easy. The elderly come for good spaces to walk, for good landscape design, good security, and easy accessibility. The age groups between 20 and 59 basically come for all reasons, except the 40-49 group seems not to care much about park furniture. The 50-59 year olds, on the other hand, give high appreciation to park furniture, as well to good security and cleanliness of the public spaces. Males and females express similar reasons to visit except for good landscape design, good security, easy access and meeting friends, which are all more commonly expressed by men than women.

“First of all, the community house doesn’t have a nice architecture. Most community houses in Hoi An are the same. Toilets are always locked; plastic roofs of the verandas have holes due to corks of champagne bottles. ... The communal house does not give the people a real feeling of trust and belonging, they feel controlled by it.” (a resident of Minh An ward)
It was important to understand not only why people visit the parks, but why they do not. Only three places are not visited by some of the nearby residents. The most important reasons not to visit are bad walking space, bad or no park furniture, bad landscape design and lack of cleanliness (Graph 16). Women also expressed concerns about security. In particular, Kazimierz Square was not visited due to bad security. Cam Chau sports field was not visited for many reasons, especially lack of urban furniture, no landscape design, dirtiness, and because friends do not go. For Riverside Park only two reasons were given, bad walking space and poor accessibility.

**Graph 16. Reasons why residents do not visit the parks in their neighbourhood**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason residents don’t visit open space and parks</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My friends don’t go here</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad security</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to access</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirty park</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad landscape design</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad or no park furniture</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad space to walk</td>
<td>8.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Suggestions by residents to increase visits to the public spaces in their neighbourhood are similar to those discussed by users, with the main suggestions again being more trees and benches. This suggests that not only will improvements in these areas enhance the experience of park users, but they may also encourage people to visit more regularly.

**Other comments**

People were overall dissatisfied with both the quantity and quality of existing public spaces. With very little land available for public space, communal houses and small pocket parks were seen as the most important public spaces. However, residents were not happy with the management and maintenance of the communal house. Some say the communal house is controlled too much by leaders in the neighbourhood and is mostly used for political related activities. Also, the communal houses all have similar layouts, as their design was under the direction of the city government. In that sense residents preferred the Hoi Quan, whose
different styles articulate different identities in different neighbourhoods. People say they feel more bonded to the Hoi Quan. They thus also feel more responsible for managing and maintaining them.

As will be shown in the policy review, the public spaces that are heritage-protected in the inner city were considered better taken care of than the public spaces in the outlying neighbourhoods. Public space policies should include all areas of Hoi An. The aim should be not only the maintenance of an attractive and vital inner city with well-developed and well-maintained public spaces, but a similar development for the rest of the city as well. In addition to overall maintenance, more benches and trees would increase the use of the public spaces. More social activities and more play areas for children could also encourage use. Finally, people stressed that all public spaces should be free of charge.

Development of public space policy

“In fact, in Cam Chau specifically or Hoi An generally, there is no place to be considered as genuine public space. A public space should be large and appealing enough to attract people to come. Adults could go there to rest and relax, children go there to play. However, at present, there is no place here that fully meets these demands, thus, there is yet nothing to be considered as public space.” (resident of Cam Chau ward).

Public space is typically defined as a place where the public has free access. This can include parks, squares, plazas, playing fields, streets, and sidewalks. Throughout the world, public spaces are well-used and well-loved by both sexes and those of all ages as a place for exercise, socializing, relaxation, and play. Discussions with architects, planners and governmental officials in Hanoi revealed that there was generally no clear consensus on what constitutes public space. The term “public space” is used in very different ways. When talking about public space, for instance, most authorities in Vietnam refer to “park” (cong vien)⁴. Therefore, the Urban Development Agency, the policy advising body under the Ministry of Construction, is presently working on a general and operational definition of the term as they revise Vietnam’s public space policy.⁵

Hoi An does not have specific policies regarding public space; however, there are three sets of strategies and planning regulations partly addressing public space: Regulation for urban construction No 777Q; Public space as part of eco-city development, and Public space as part of

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⁵ The policy should be proposed to the National Assembly in 2012.
heritage protection. (For details on these regulations, see Appendix A). In these regulations, issues such as tree protection, eco-city development, and heritage protection are discussed. However, it was clear after reading these policies that public spaces are not specifically considered. The lack of policies related to public spaces in Hoi An creates a void that allows the development and maintenance of open spaces to be disorganized and seemingly unplanned.

Issues associated with investment in public spaces are also not clearly defined. This was not surprising given the lack of specific policies to address these spaces. The heritage protection policy regulates that communities (the residents) and the local and city government will contribute financially to public space development. The document does not clearly state how funds will be mobilized.

**Development and management of public space in Hoi An**

The development of public spaces in Hoi An was mainly the responsibility of the authorities, under supervision of various departments:

- The Department of Natural Resources and Environment makes decisions related to infrastructure (electricity, water, drainage) and is in charge of classification (homestead land, land for production, land for public space);
- The Department of Culture and Information submits proposals for new construction, alterations of existing public spaces, and management of utilization of public spaces;
- The Center of Preservation addresses such public spaces as temples, communal houses, assembly halls, and public space for religious activities;
- The Center of Culture and Sports looks after cultural houses and stadiums;
- The Department of Urban Management addresses green areas.

Developing public spaces in Hoi An involves multi-sectoral collaboration between residents and official agencies and this process can be complicated. Plans on paper may not always materialize in reality and, to date, the community has not been involved in the process to any great degree. In the absence of public input, the authorities plan public spaces, make decisions on investment, and provide initial investment for capital construction and infrastructure.

The lack of responsible agencies and lack of policy has resulted in a lack of budget for the maintenance of public spaces. Most are currently funded by the government, which has to date been unsuccessful in carrying out its plan to encourage people to contribute their money and labour towards the construction and maintenance of public spaces. “It’s not a problem to call

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6 Based on interview with Mr. Do Lai – Deputy Head of Hoi An Urban Management Department, 22/5/2012 & Mr. Nguyen Van Lanh – Head, Department of Culture and Information of Hoi An City, 31/5/2012.
for contribution from people but how to ask for their contribution is important... It would be
great to build a garden within the ground of the cultural house. It is practical and people will get
direct benefits from it.” (Mr. Phan Lac Hung, Minh An ward)

Community involvement in the development of public space

The National Assembly in 2009 specified the importance of collecting citizen’s opinions in order
to increase local democracy. But this process is relatively new. The City of Hoi An is learning to
apply the method through democratic discussions with communities in order to promote
community initiative and community involvement in public space development. Officials are
trying to find ways to support local initiatives so that the communities can play a more vital role
in the development of public spaces.

The process of community input is by no means simple or straightforward and involves multiple
departments. This has resulted in mixed views on the level of involvement of residents in these
decisions. Some say that the opinions of residents is indeed solicited: “The residents are asked
to express their opinions on things like which direction should the cultural house face, how to
build a playground for children, what functions it should have, how trees should be planted,
etc.” (a resident of An My block, Cam Chau ward). Others argue that it is mostly leaders, not
residents, who have input: “Residents are not able to participate much in the development of
public spaces in their neighbourhoods, and their opinions are not asked much either. That is
mostly limited to leaders in the residential area.” (a resident of Minh An ward).

Residents tend to agree that public input will lead to better results: “When the residents believe
in the project they will support it. When the information is vague or planning is not sustainable
they will be less willing to contribute. I need to know about the future plan after the
implementation. If there is no clear plan then I won’t participate. If we receive a financial
donation, we need to know how to use it so as to make it happen and make it last.” (a resident
of Minh An ward).

Maintenance of public spaces in Hoi An

The authorities are responsible for supervision, guidance, maintenance, repair, facilities
upgrade, planting of trees, and quality improvement of public spaces. Authorities have three
main tasks: 1) search for annual funds to develop public spaces to the standards of an
ecological city; 2) check regularly and supervise closely the preservation and maintenance of
public spaces; and 3) make regulations for preventing and handling violations as well as actions
that could affect public spaces.
Maintenance was another area where there was overlap in terms of jurisdiction with multiple agencies and community groups involved. There was some level of public involvement in maintenance of public spaces, though that involvement depends on the type of space. For example, community houses get more local involvement than parks. Also, it was considered easier to mobilize mass organizations such as the Women’s Union and Youth Union than individuals.

“The Youth Union collects rubbish in this river every month. On Sunday mornings, there often are campaigns of cleaning being launched at the park. Just last Sunday morning, the Youth Union, Women's Union and Veterans’ Association had a campaign to clean the park. On the days of campaign of various associations, they also do cleaning of the place and watering plants.” (a resident).

In wards, the maintenance budget was provided to the residential groups of the wards every year. However, the provided expenditure was very small so repairs are carried out only when there are damages; there was no regular maintenance. The willingness to contribute money or labour depends on a perception of likely benefit as a result:

“People would be willing to pay their contribution if they benefit from it. If there would be a place near my house, I would also pay my contribution as I or my nephew would benefit from it. People generally have high sense of collective ownership for public spaces. They are longing for a green space, they will be glad to participate in creating such a place.” (a resident of Minh An ward).

What Hoi An is still lacking is a detailed work assignment, a clear allocation of responsibilities and precise measurement of the contribution of the community in the maintenance of public spaces.

**Privatization in development, management and maintenance of public spaces**

Public space is public property. It should not be privatized and it should remain free for all residents. However, the Hoi An city government has begun promoting private sector investment as a way of increasing their overall budget for public spaces. This has far reaching ramifications for the development of public spaces in Hoi An as there was little incentive for developers to create spaces that support social cohesion and equity. As private companies seek a return on their investment, they will not pay for planting trees for example. They will,
however, fund such items as a stadium or playground for children where they can charge a fee for use. User fees, by their very nature, limit the use of spaces.

In order to lessen the impact of user fees, authorities try to ensure that entire public spaces are not privatized, and that the user fees pay for maintenance of free spaces as well. For example, some public spaces (Hoi Quans, playgrounds) in Hoi An charge an entrance fee. Officials argue that these cannot be considered as privatization or commercialization since the fee is used for repair and maintenance and people can still access to and benefit from these places if they pay the fee. However, fees serve as a way of excluding certain members of the population.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

Good quality public spaces are much loved by the community and enhance community life and individual well-being. People value their public spaces, and if they feel some sense of ownership, may be willing to contribute their labour to maintaining them. People agree that public spaces should be easily accessible and free of cost. Unfortunately, within government, there was confusion as to the meaning of public spaces, and the multiplicity of agencies overseeing public spaces may make it difficult to determine who is responsible for what. It also means that responding to public requests can be complicated and cumbersome.

The quality of the sampled public spaces in Hoi An ranges from poor to quite good, but there is room for improvement even in the best spaces. Much could be done, mostly at low cost, to make existing public spaces more attractive and popular. The current move towards privatization of public spaces brings with it the danger of harming the very essence of such spaces: that they are public, belonging to all. Private companies will not invest without the hope of a financial return. Other sources of funding within government could be sought to avoid this risk.

**Recommendation 1:** Cities in Vietnam that do not have a public space master plan yet, should develop a comprehensive one and policy document that contains:

- The vision, goals and objectives of the public space plan
- A park hierarchy classification which defines the size of the park, population the park is to serve, the features of the park, amenities within the park, and, where applicable, the distance of the park from people’s homes
- Clear responsibilities of relevant government departments
- Funding mechanisms
- List of permitted uses
- Maintenance requirements
All cities should have one comprehensive document that outlines how public spaces are to be developed and managed. Creating one Public Space Master Plan would give clear direction to government and the public about various issues regarding public space. This Master Plan should explain what the city’s vision is regarding public space and what goals and objectives the city hopes to achieve. In addition, this Master Plan should serve as protection against encroachment of spaces and clearly outline the importance these spaces have in the functioning of the city.

Not all public spaces serve the same function, and different functions meet the needs of different people at different times. For example, city-wide parks serve the whole community and are places where festivals and major events in the city can occur. These parks are large in size and can draw people from all over the city. Playgrounds, on the other hand, are much smaller in size, generally serve one neighbourhood, and are important for families and children. A city may only have a few city-wide parks but many playgrounds. In fact the public needs a wide variety of public spaces to meet all its needs. The Master Plan will create a park hierarchy that explains the different parks and their functions. The Master Plan will then provide maps that visually depict where current and future public spaces are to be located.

Given that responsibility for public spaces falls under the domain of many different departments, at a minimum the Master Plan should clearly outline who is responsible for what and how implementation and maintenance should occur. However, the government should also consider the value of consolidating these roles under one department in order to ensure streamlined implementation of the plan.

**Recommendation 2: To prepare for the Public Space Master Plan, cities should require an inventory of all types of public spaces and their current quality.**

Hoi An’s Regulation No. 777Q, Article 31 requires an inventory of all types of public trees in the city and this article can serve as the model for the development of public space regulations. A city needs a variety of public spaces to meet residents’ needs and these spaces should be of a certain quality. A public space inventory will allow the authorities to understand what they have and what they are missing. This will support the Master Planning process and allow the city to develop a comprehensive plan.

**Recommendation 3: Ensure residents are full participants in the Master Plan process as well as in the implementation and maintenance of the public spaces.**
Community participation is critical for the development and management of public spaces. Each neighbourhood is unique and as the Master Plan develops, it is important to integrate these differences into the Plan. Not only will this create better community engagement and perhaps more interest from the community to contribute funding and labour, but it will also strengthen the Plan and ensure that public spaces meet the needs of residents. Various mechanisms to gain ongoing community participation, after the Master Plan is completed and implementation and maintenance begins, should be explored.

**Recommendation 4: Ensure that all current and future public spaces are free to use.**

Almost all of the people interviewed in our research said public spaces should be free of charge. Unfortunately, because private and commercial companies are currently creating many parks, fees are being charged to the public to enter public spaces. Regardless of who develops public spaces, they should always be free of charge.

**Recommendations Specific to Hoi An**

**Recommendation 5: Develop pilot projects that fix the specific problems in Hoi An and test the community participation model.**

There were several issues that were noted about the current state of public spaces in the seven public spaces we assessed. Issues related to maintenance, lack of park furniture including trash bins, lack of shade and trees, and poor safety features in the surrounding roads are all issues that need to be addressed. As a result of these problems, we recommend that two pilot project be initiated in order to develop more specific park criteria that will be useful for the Hoi An Public Space Master Plan process. In addition, it would be useful to pilot test a community engagement model that would seek to involve the community as active participants in the re-development of their public spaces. Work has already begun by Action in the City in Cam Chau, Cam Thanh and Minh Anh to develop relationships with the local community. Because of these relationships these two wards are excellent intervention sites for the pilot project.

Hoi An is already a charming city well-loved by residents and visitors alike. It has many public spaces, some of them in quite good condition. With a bit of work, Hoi An could go even farther towards becoming a model of a people-friendly, liveable city with well-used, well-maintained, and much-loved public spaces popular amongst all ages and both sexes.
Appendix A: Strategies and planning regulations partly addressing public space

Regulation No 777Q, 15 March 2011

In this regulation article 2.3 says that “public services, trees, parks and water surfaces are defined as part of social infrastructure”.

Article 4.2 classifies parks into two functional groups: public parks and service parks, which includes multi-functional tourist attractions. However, it is not clear what the difference is between these two functional groups. Squares are not defined and only a few squares are mentioned. Also, the article state why there are different functional groups or whether they each subject to different regulations.

The responsibility of management and maintenance has not been clearly established in this regulation. Article 28 says the government will take care of lighting and flowers in gardens and parks. However, other maintenance functions, such as fixing broken equipment and maintaining cleanliness, are not clearly defined. Only in Article 31 are there specifics outlining tree management, as well as encouragement of people to plant trees, within the scope of the governing regulations. Article 31 also prohibits destruction or harm of trees.

Article 44 sets out who is responsible for implementation. This includes various government agencies, local People’s Committees, communities and social-political organizations. However, it is not clear who is responsible for what.

Public Space as part of Eco-City development, 2009

The Hoi An People’s Committee has developed specific standpoints and directions for Eco-City development in 2009, which also influences the development of public spaces in the city. “Eco-City” is defined as follows:

“An Eco-City is an urban area which manages to maintain, during development process, an ecological balance, without depleting natural resources, with no environmental degradation, no harmful influence on the community health, and suitable for human living and working. In short, ecocity is a human settlement with the best living quality for its residents where natural environment is well respected…”

and,

“An Ecocity should be a city of space, greenness, cleanliness and beauty with the least polluting emission, proper utilization of clean energy, renewable energy (sun, wind, tide and so on) and the use of building materials that is environment-friendly, to preserve and promote green space, belt and urban trees”.

More specifically, the plan sets out:

1) To build a city with a distinctive identity, as reflected through traditional cultural values... As such, urban areas shall be developed to conform to local topography and
natural conditions and shall be linked with one another. Close linkage is also promoted between inner and outer city in a synchronized complex...

2) To ensure sustainable development in socio-economic and environment aspects, building an Eco-City that is owned by the people and that works for the people. Thus, in the process of city building, ecological balance should be maintained between the nature and the society, in order to meet the demand for best quality life for local residents while remaining attractive to tourists.

To develop Hoi An as an Eco-City, seven specific tasks have been formulated, including building social infrastructure, maintaining a green city, protecting diversity, and encouraging sustainable economic development. Although public spaces are not specifically addressed in the documents, we believe that public space development will support the above-mentioned goals, particularly in building social infrastructure, preserving local cultural identity, ensuring social progress, increasing quality of life, promoting sustainable tourism, and developing urban greenery.

Public spaces are more specifically addressed by the Hoi An People’s Committee through the establishment of specific targets for green space development up to 2020: “Apart from approving and organizing the planning for tree-lined streets, there is a need to plan for parks and public spaces across the city with lots of trees....On the basis of planning for park trees and public tree planting, focus should be directed to the construction of 2-3 parks as key places of interest for the city. Other parks should also be developed as satellites. Flower and tree clusters should be grown at traffic points. Parks should be constructed as open without concrete/iron fences and should be put under clear management responsibility to create space and comfort for the local community and tourists” (Hoi An People’s Committee 2009).

To realize the tasks, the People’s Committee of Hoi An has urged the development of plans and concrete measures to promote people’s self-governance, to mobilize them to join-forces with the authority, fatherland front and other people’s associations, civil society organizations in urban management at grassroots levels, especially with regards to sanitation and environment, socialization and community building in the direction of Eco-City development. In addition the People’s Committee recognizes that there is an urgent need for legal documents, guidelines, directions by competent authorities to suit Hoi An conditions.

Although the goals in the Eco-City plan are ambitious, there are no details as to how the self-governance and mobilization described in the plan can be achieved. The Eco-City strategy as well says that on the basis of planning for park trees and public tree planting, the focus should be directed to the construction of 2-3 parks as key places of interest for the city. Other parks should also be developed as satellites. Flower and tree clusters should be grown at traffic points. Parks should be constructed as open without concrete/iron fences and should be put under clear management responsibility to create space and comfort for the local community and tourists.
Public space as part of heritage protection, 17 July 1999

Hoi An as a UNESCO-protected city has strong policies to protect the existing city. This means that public spaces are kept out of reach of developers and the other uses that threaten public spaces in other Vietnamese cities.

The People’s Committee in Hoi An developed heritage protection strategies in a document from 1999. In this document articles 3 and 4 give regulations that include public space and green space developments.

Article 3 (Maintain landscape of house – garden and green spaces along the belt protecting the ancient town) mandates gardens and green spaces to protect the ancient town, including planting trees when building new houses. It also states that cultural education should be promoted.

Article 4 (Planning, building and promoting cultural institutions effectively) discusses upgrading various facilities including “planning and construction of parks, flower garden, ecological lakes, monuments zones, architectural and sculpture construction so as to restore town’s landscapes, especially to pay attention to new urban residential areas”.

The second focus in this article is on ward and communal levels. This article 4 states that there “should be a focus on improving existing locations for cultural and sports activities as well as to change procedures for more efficient operation. On the other hand, to continue planning and making rational investment for the development of cultural institutions in communes and wards, consisting of: culture-sports area, commune cultural post offices, stadiums, children’s recreational areas, memorial monuments for heroic martyrs etc” in this (1999) document the aim was set that by 2005, each ward or commune would have at least two cultural houses which are a cultural-sport zone (commune level), and cultural-sport houses (ward level) and public performance team in wards, communes.

The third aspect of article 4 is investment. “Investment plan for construction is prepared based on annual plan. In terms of funds, besides expenditures deducted from budgets of the town, the communes and the wards, authorities of the wards and the communes need to mobilize contributions from local residents (in cash, facilities or labour day) by implementing democratic regulations at ward and commune level”. Thus the policy states that communities (the residents) and the local and city government will contribute financially to public space development.

In 2008 more regulations on relic management, preservation and usage for commercial business has been set by the Department of Trade and Tourism under Hoi An People’s Committee. Article 13 protects old trees, ensures the planting of new ones in Zone 1 (inner city), it permits cutting of trees, and it protects the courtyards.
Amendment of item 4 article13 states that “The courtyards, gardens and landscaped yards in historical relics of the Ancient Town are used for ventilation and natural lighting. They are actively contributing to the improvement of the Ancient Town’s environment. As such, they should be preserved carefully. They should not be narrowed for the purpose of expanding other parts”.

Regarding the heritage protection policies, public spaces in Hoi An should not be of secondary importance. Rather, they should be integrated into heritage protection, and improved and developed at the same time with the new cultural public buildings. In addition, while this regulation protects trees, courtyards, gardens and landscaped yards in the Ancient town, it does not give any regulations outside the Ancient Town.

As in the other two policy documents, in the heritage protection as well, authorities of the wards are asked to mobilize contributions from local residents (in cash, facilities or labour) by implementing ‘democratic regulations’ at ward and commune level’. Again there are no clear guidelines how to mobilize funds and provide more support to community initiatives.