

# Re-thinking sidewalk activities. The case of well-designed residential area in Phu My Hung urban area, District 7, Ho Chi Minh City

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■ Received: 11/02/2025 ■ Revised: 04/03/2025 ■ Accepted: 11/05/2025

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## ABSTRACT

*In recent years, many cities in Vietnam have continuously proposed and implemented “model streets” as an effort to improve urban condition. However, most of the proposed projects are based on the technical and aesthetic aspects of streets without properly assessing the value of sidewalks in Vietnamese context. This article focuses on studying the activities of sidewalk spaces in a well-developed neighborhood through the case of mix-used residential zone in Phu My Hung urban area, District 7, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The research is conducted in the perspective of everyday urbanism through the inheritance and analysis of relevant documents in parallel with the method of field survey and mapping to reflect the reality of the relationship between sidewalk activities and space in a model urban area. The research results show that sidewalk activities are not a manifestation of a residential area lacking infrastructure or weak management, but the necessity and richness of sidewalk activities are part of the characteristics of Vietnamese urban areas. This shows the urgency of considering the sidewalk as a flexible public space, playing a transitional role and resonating with surrounding functional spaces, contributing ideas about sustainable urban development and rich local identity.*

**Keywords:** Public space, informal economy, sidewalk, urban identity, sidewalk activities, everyday urbanism.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Along with the urban development process, cities are paying more and more attention to urban beautification through many public space projects, especially streets. In 2016, Le Trong Tan Street was renovated with the orientation of becoming a model street of Hanoi. In addition to expanding the roadway and sidewalks, regulations on street landscape and townhouse facades were also implemented with the expectation of bringing a neat street image of a new urban area. Two years later, Dinh Thon Street was also developed with a similar orientation. In 2024, Ho Chi Minh City also proposed to renovate Thai Van Lung Street into a model street for the city center area.

Many other cities also have model street proposals, with the general design orientation

of creating a neat street space to serve traffic and urban image. These efforts only focus on upgrading the external appearance of street sidewalks based on infrastructure design standards, without recognizing the nature of Vietnamese urban sidewalks, leading to inevitable failure compared to the original orientation. After a period of development, Hanoi’s “model streets” have not brought about the difference as expected by the local government, when the strong development of sidewalk activities gradually replaced the neat image when it was first completed. However, the failure to control the urban image does not reflect the true value of the neighborhood.

The diverse use of sidewalk space in front of houses, on the contrary, shows the high economic value of the area, creating a bustling commercial image. It can be seen

that following the neat form of neighborhoods does not go hand in hand with the practical value of urban life, but also limits the use value of the space. This common mistake in urban development stems from the ambition for neatness and order of urban strategic planners. Activities taking place on public sidewalks bring a sense of chaos and slovenliness and are associated with the image of an urban area with poor infrastructure development and lack of management that urban managers always want to eliminate. It can be seen that the sidewalk is a space of conflict and potential, thus, it should gain more attention from academic field [1][2].

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

Everyday urbanism theory shows a special focus on how people actually use spaces designed by architects, who are partly influenced by complex political relationships in the urban environment, through spontaneous designs that transform provided spaces [1] [3]. Thus, previous studies on sidewalk activities have focused on complex and unsightly areas of the city, associated with vulnerable groups in society. This limits the universality of everyday urbanism and does not provide a comprehensive view of urban sidewalk activities.

This study contributes to building an overall view of sidewalk space from the perspective of everyday urbanism, focusing on assessing the value of residential sidewalk space through studying daily activities in an area of Phu My Hung, District 7, Ho Chi Minh City. The study site is approximately 15 hecta, located in the center of an well-developed and invested in a systematic way with high design and construction standards, along with professional infrastructure maintenance and management (Figure 1). In such an environment, the arguments that sidewalk activities are chaotic and unmanaged can be dismissed, instead, the nature and necessity of sidewalk activities can be viewed more objectively. The mapping method used to

record information from the direct observation process shows different types of activities at three times of the day to provide an overview of the changes over time.



*Figure 1.* Location of study site in Ho Chi Minh City.

Moreover, sidewalk public life documentation could be used for understanding urban transformation process, evaluating the planning and urban design work, and to envisioning future cityscape [4]. Finally, suggestions for developing sidewalk use values are presented through design research scenarios, visually representing the design guideline.

## 3. SIDEWALK CULTURE IN HO CHI MINH CITY

### The role of sidewalk activities

There are always mixed opinions about sidewalk activities, supporters believe that this is a necessary and encouraging activity because it contributes to feeding 30% of the population, providing cheap services, contributing to creating culture and honoring local history, while opponents see sidewalk activities as offensive, dirty, posing a risk to

food safety and hygiene and causing traffic congestion, and therefore should be eliminated [1]. In fact, urban management policies have always limited sidewalk encroachment, urban order management teams patrol and administratively fine violators and confiscate related items.

This effort to build order comes from the desire to show a civilized and developed urban image following the precedents in Western countries. Meanwhile, Western studies have also continuously pointed out the important role of sidewalks in building a safe neighborhood and a successful city. Typical successful areas demonstrate three elements: a clear separation between public and private spaces, street views from buildings, and continuous sidewalk activities [5]. Thus, order in urban management policies is only subjective in terms of aesthetics, demonstrating the structure and privilege of social class [1]. Sidewalk activities in Ho Chi Minh City are not only not disorderly as they are mistakenly thought, but are also a space that connects urban people through humane mechanisms.

Sidewalk activities take place everywhere in the city, urban people consider it an indispensable part of life, therefore, there is no discrimination or prejudice against sidewalk squatters. Not only that, sidewalk activities also receive widespread social sympathy from owners of houses adjacent to sidewalks and the functional forces implementing urban sidewalk management [1]. Street vendors are always aware of that and they accept urban management as inevitable and do not blame those who carry out the management work. They also accept the risks as part of their livelihood and are willing to fulfill administrative commitments and pay fines according to regulations.

Sidewalk activities have formed a unique cultural feature and are growing strongly, the most typical of which is sidewalk cafes. It does not stop at street vendors with cheap

coffee for low-income people but has also become a trend among young people with the participation of high-end stores and large-scale store chains (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** A bustling sidewalk cafe space in an area of District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. Source: Author

### **Sidewalk activities in well-designed neighborhood.**

The central area of a suburban area like Phu My Hung is no exception, sidewalk activities are also bustling and diverse. Even sidewalk encroachment activities here do not have to face the urban management unit, there is no scene of confiscation of equipment and items like in the city center. There are always guards patrolling the sidewalks around the neighborhoods, but sidewalk activities themselves including street vending are not considered to be a cause of disorder, and the residents and guards themselves use these services ( Figure 3)



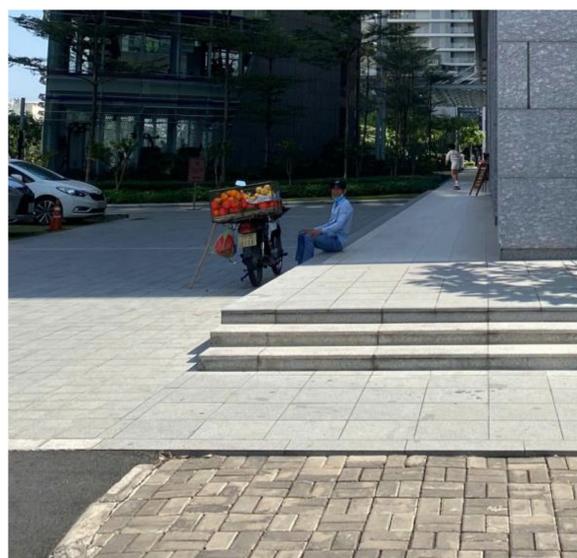
**Figure 3.** Workers are eating lunch on the sidewalk instead of the adjacent park. Source: Author

Figure 6 show the map documents the location and type of activity occupy the sidewalk during rush hours and lunch break period. Sidewalks in this neighborhood are strictly follow Vietnamese construction standards, ensuring a minimum area for pedestrians. Adequate condition for walking is the evidence for safe, healthy and sustainable urban area [6] However, the phenomenon of urban sidewalk space occupation is taking place strongly, interrupting the walking route in many locations, pedestrians have to use the road instead. Due to the characteristics of a residential area, the traffic density on the road is not high, so it still ensures convenient walking activities.

On the central commercial routes of the area, activities change rhythmically according to the time of day, in the morning the dominant activity is jogging, children walking to school. During lunch break, sidewalk spaces in shady locations are also transformed into relaxing and lunch spaces for workers and laborers working nearby. In the afternoon, food and beverage services develop strongly to meet the needs of local people to gather and have fun after work. The least changed activities include the expansion of shops onto the sidewalk to increase seating space for cafes, the most important activities in modern cityscape [6], dining or even supercar showrooms.

Meanwhile, on the branch roads of the villa area, most of the sidewalk space is used for decorative planting and remains quiet throughout the time. As can be seen, the sidewalk has never been a simple space for traffic, even in residential areas like the case study. On main roads with high commercial value, the sidewalk is always occupied as an extension of the store. This leads to an increase in the space for parking on the sidewalk, although there is a parking lot but it is not enough to meet the number of motorbikes of local people, especially on weekends. In essence, sidewalk activities in this area are no

different from other areas of the city, but the quantity and density are more stable, so they do not create pressure on urban management activities. Therefore, the area security also shows consensus with sidewalk activities, they only intervene when there are vehicles parked in locations that obstruct traffic, or too many people gather. Street vendors receive friendly treatment from security guards (Figure 4)



**Figure 4.** Street vendors are welcomed by the local and security board. Source: Author

Moreover, street vending also comes from residents in million-dollar villas, households that do not have regular business activities (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Local residents take advantage of the sidewalk to sell agricultural products. Source: Author.

This once again affirms the distinctive character of Vietnamese sidewalks as healthy and vibrant public spaces. Instead of rejecting the entire value of sidewalk activities, keeping these diverse activities at an appropriate level is a more effective solution for urban management and development.

### **Sidewalk as public space**

It is important to accurately identify the informal nature of streets [7] to develop a suitable vision for streetscape and management policy for the specific neighborhood. Even in a well-designed and managed area, there are still many parallel problems and potentials that need to be properly recognized for improvement.

Firstly, the sidewalk should be recognized as distinct public space [8][9] both in official policy framework and design guideline. This is the foundation for the entire process of designing, operating and managing effective sidewalk space. Besides, local people must play a central role in the operation of sidewalk activities.

Secondly, the standard for sidewalk design should be improved by extending the minimum width to not only ensuring the pedestrian movement but also provide enough space for potential socio-economic activities. Street stores have 0.73% more chance of being formed for every 30cm increase in sidewalk width [10]. More space for sidewalk means more space for street furniture, green space, permeable surface, tree shadow, creating an ideal platform for sidewalk coffee, vendors and recreational activities [9][10]. A diverse and complex urban space with different groups of activities closely interwoven is the best image of a lively city [6].

Thirdly, the sidewalk could be a mix-used space, highlighting the livability and social cooperation when the rhythm of activity

over time are integrated into the planning process [11].

Finally, public facilities for sidewalk spaces are also potential objects for public art, both providing basic urban amenities and elevating the space as an outdoor exhibition to convey important and accessible social messages. Art can be easily accepted if it is connected to the local community, becoming a short-term connection, and a local history in the future [12].

Figure 7 illustrates a scenario that demonstrates the potential for physical design improvements that emphasize sidewalk culture on the basis of a well-developed residential infrastructure. The new perception of the sidewalk as a roadway should be updated to accept the flexibility of space as a vital expression of the city. On the existing infrastructure, a flexible management mechanism should be applied, ensuring that different elements coexist, such as parking spaces, billboards, decorative planters, but still have enough space for pedestrians.

Piloting mobile tables and chairs on the sidewalk is feasible in conditions where the neighborhood has security activities in parallel with a high sense of community among residents. Public facilities on the sidewalk can meet the necessary relaxation needs of those who do not want to use food services. There is no need to divide the road for bicycles in stable traffic conditions of the neighborhood. But perhaps sidewalk benches could provide cyclists with a more convenient place to rest than going into the park. In contrast to Westerners who always love to be active under the sun, Vietnamese people in general and in the study area in particular always choose the shade. Therefore, sun-shading structures right on the sidewalk can become an ideal place for new activities or support existing activities.

Moreover, the design can incorporate connection with public spaces, turning space community art activities to enhance people's to place.

Legend

- Shop extension
- Street vendor/ working
- Planting
- Parking
- Walking / Exercising
- Relaxing / Hanging out

7:00 am - 9:00 am



11:00 am - 1:00 pm



5:00 pm - 7:00 pm



50 100

Figure 6. Map and series of photos of sidewalk activities. Source: Author

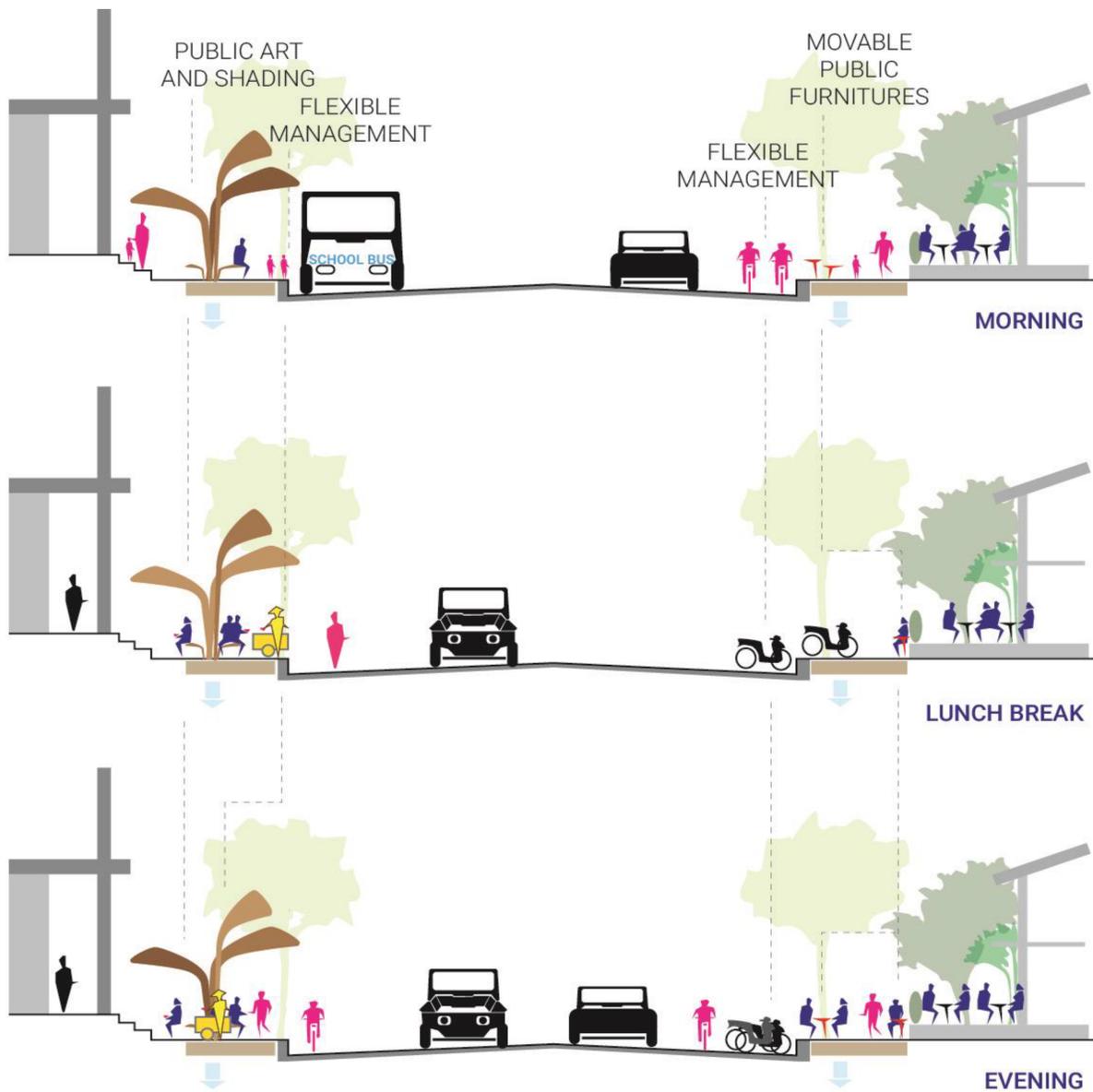


Figure 7. Scenario of improving the physical design to enhancing sidewalk culture. Source: Author.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

To due with the increasing in traffic jam in big city, there is proposal for narrow down the sidewalk for more road wide. However, a counterintuitive decision to give more space for the sidewalk could generate more benefit for the city as a whole.[10]

This study reaffirms the role of sidewalks as flexible and strategic public spaces in creating healthy residential environments.

There is no coherent policy to apply for the whole city sidewalk system, thus, the incompatible activities need to be balanced in urban sidewalk design and coordination

efforts [2]. The local authority should focus on the neighborhood in the planning process to achieve the vision of liveable city [1][7]. Changing the entire legal system around city public space cannot be done in a short time, but first, adjustments in sidewalk definitions and design standards can be made to gradually change the legality of sidewalk activities, thereby improving the overall urban quality and moving one step closer to sustainable urban vision.

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