ARTICLE

Modern Views, Unblocked: Looking into the Distance in Phú Mỹ Hưng, a Vietnamese New Urban Zone

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ABSTRACT
When describing Phú Mỹ Hưng, an upscale master-planned residential and commercial development located on the peri-urban fringe of Ho Chi Minh City, residents typically emphasize the light, the air, and the openness. They often comment on how modern it is and describe how it offers a new way of seeing the urban landscape—it offers a "modern view." The view residents describe is modern because it is unblocked, has depth of field, and allows people to see beyond the dense webs of social relations and concrete walls that circumscribe views elsewhere in the city. This modern view offers people a generalized sense of "release" or of becoming unblocked. In this article, I describe the ways in which residents and visitors engage with, discuss, and even write poetry about open spaces, parks, wide boulevards, and riverfront promenades in Phú Mỹ Hưng. In the process, I show that the modern view they describe is not only a way of looking at landscapes, but also expresses urban social aspirations, which can carry subtle, yet often powerful, political connotations. [Keywords: Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City, Saigon, urban anthropology, vision, master-planning, New Urban Zones]

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The Sky

Late afternoon skies in Phú Mỹ Hưng literally glow. As the sun begins to sink, the slowly darkening sky above this master-planned urban development is pierced by mesmerizing streaks of orange and yellow light. On all days of the week, but especially on Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, crowds of people from around the city converge on Phú Mỹ Hưng to experience this light and to enjoy the district's famous fresh air. The visitors mainly come by motorbike, circling the district before parking in the temporary lots that spring up on weekend afternoons. Others come on foot and by bus, bicycle, or taxi. Well-to-do Phú Mỹ Hưng residents also join the crowds: they either walk from their nearby homes or make the short journey in the cars that have become increasingly popular among Vietnam's comfortable classes.[1] The crowds congregate most densely near "the Crescent," a half-moon lake and shopping promenade around which the district has been organized. A new kind of public has emerged in what has often been called one of Vietnam's most privatized spaces.[2]

The Crescent Lake was once an oxbow in a minor river running through this formerly rural margin of Ho Chi Minh City (which residents commonly call Saigon). While the lake, river-scape, leafy trees, and ornamental

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Figure 1: The Crescent and Starlight Bridge. Phú Mỹ Hưng New Urban Zone, District 7, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. May 2012.

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Figure 2: Photos on the Starlight Bridge. Just before sunset, groups come to pose at the point on the bridge where the sun illuminates their faces as well as the modern buildings behind them. Phú Mỹ Hưng, May 2012.

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Figure 3: Playing fashion shoot. Throughout the New Urban Zone visitors come to take photographs, often in groups. Many photos are taken in open parks framed by modern buildings. Phú Mỹ Hưng, May 2012.

shrubbery in the area purposefully evoke stylized images of a "green environment" (*môi trường xanh*), the central attractions here are entirely man-made. People come for the walkways, the manicured landscaping, the modern buildings, the restaurants, and the new Crescent Mall, advertised on its website as "one of the largest international standard retail, commercial, entertainment, and lifestyle destinations in Phú Mỹ Hưng."[3] They also come for the light, the air, and the experience of open space. For all these visitors, there is something captivating about the space and the views it affords. Almost all the visitors stop to pose for photographs—taken on cellphones ("smart" or otherwise), pocket cameras, or more expensive digital SLRs.

The Phú Mỹ Hưng New Urban Zone, which forms the background to all these photos, is a master-planned, mixed-use residential and commercial development financed by a Taiwanese and Vietnamese joint venture and designed by the international planning firm Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill (Phú Mỹ Hưng 2005, Phu My Hung Development Corporation 2010). The award-winning development has become the most celebrated example of the new, mostly upscale but increasingly mixed-income, urban districts that the Vietnamese call "*khu đô thị mới*" ("New Urban Zones"), and which urban studies scholars describing other contexts in Asia call New Towns or urban integrated megaprojects (Firman 2004, Shatkin 2011). In addition to the enthusiastic crowds of visitors, Phú Mỹ Hưng also enjoys a reputation as one of the most comfortable residential zones in the city, a place where residents can enjoy wide-open streets cooled by gentle breezes and where the master plan encourages (but does not always actually convince) people to walk to nearby shopping and leisure destinations. All of these characteristics stand out against the rest of the city, which is commonly described as crowded, hot, blocked by traffic, and densely populated. Both state officials and city residents regularly criticize the unplanned urban settlements which have emerged across the city over the past two decades largely due to large-scale rural to urban migration. While loose enforcement of building codes and the active flaunting of household registration laws has actually enabled the city to accommodate many new migrants in inexpensive and flexible housing stock, the unplanned qualities of many city districts are disparagingly referred to by officials and residents as "spontaneous urbanization" (*đô thị hóa tự phát*).[4] Phú Mỹ Hưng, by contrast, is celebrated precisely for its highly planned qualities.

The bulk of academic writing on master-planned communities and luxury housing developments like Phu Mỹ Hưng has focused on the way these urban spaces produce and reproduce landscapes of exclusion. Rightly so: developments like this are intentionally built for elites and clearly emerge out of real estate speculation and land conversions that displace marginalized people, resulting in what David Harvey (2005) has called "accumulation by dispossession" and Petra Kuppinger (2004) has called "urban segregation." While New Urban Zones are being built across Vietnam in great numbers, the country also faces loud protests about evictions, agricultural land-conversion, and claims that the land of the poor is being taken at low prices with little compensation (Gillespie 2014; Harms 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Kerkvliet 2014; Kim 2011; Labbé 2014; Luong 2005; Nguyen Van Suu 2009; Schwenkel 2012; Taylor 2014). While critical attention to the inequities associated with these projects is important and understandably captures scholarly attention, studies of land protests rarely attend to the reasons why master-planned developments like Phú Mỹ Hưng actually appeal to so many people in Vietnam. A comprehensive ethnographic perspective must also account for the complete register of what people actually say about these places. This does not mean renouncing the study of power and inequality, nor does it imply ignoring the critiques of master-planned developments; but it does require complicating the perspectives of critical urbanism in order to consider additional factors in urban development beyond money, force, and accumulation. Also important are the role of desire and hope for what people consider, from an emic perspective, to be appealing projects. As Asher Ghertner (2011) has aptly put it, urbanists can learn a great deal by attending to "rule by aesthetics," a process through which people come to think of urban forms as beautiful and desirable and thereby come to support large-scale developments, in spite of the inequities they may perpetuate.

Such new research directions make it possible to ask two simple yet profound questions: If there are so many problems with these urban developments, why are they so successful? Why do so many people seem captivated by them and describe them as beautiful? With such questions in mind, this article attends to aesthetics and sensory experience in urban development in order to advance an argument about why these developments capture the imagination of so many people in Ho Chi Minh City, including those who could never afford to live in them. What do

people see in this New Urban Zone? This article presents their views and attempts to take them seriously.

I argue that the modern views and the feeling of becoming unblocked or open (*thoáng*) that people claim to experience in these zones are central to their attraction.[5] I will further suggest that the aesthetic views and the visceral feelings people claim to have when experiencing the modern spaces of Phú Mỹ Hưng are also linked to important, yet largely unarticulated and even sublimated, political views. Vietnam is a single-party state ruled by the Vietnamese Communist Party, where opposition politics are strictly forbidden and often subject to severe punishment. In this context, most Vietnamese feel politically stifled and eagerly seek political outlets of open and uncensored expression—bloggers, for example, are the folk heroes of contemporary Vietnam, despite (or, perhaps, because of) being constantly harassed and arrested by authorities. Extended ethnographic research conducted alongside several Vietnamese social scientists working among residents and visitors to Phú Mỹ Hưng revealed that the sensations and open views people were describing were not simply about bodily feelings and aesthetics alone. Expressions of openness and feeling unblocked also evoked a sense of political possibility and served as allegories for imagined forms of urban governance. The New Urban Zone was not just a fancy urban development, but served as both a model of and a model for a possible political future. The sense of bodily liberation they feel in Phú Mỹ Hưng, and the open vistas and views they enjoy, were often conflated with aspirations for a sense of political liberation. These feelings and these views, in other words, offer a view into what many of the residents and visitors to Phú Mỹ Hưng think a politically open society might look and feel like, even if they do not ever actually engage in active political protest.[6] Like the sunsets over Phú Mỹ Hưng, the views they have of the political liberation potentially offered by master-planned development is a decidedly rosy view. Scholarly observers, especially urbanists, often note that New Urban Zones "intensify the process of physical, functional, and social segregation within Vietnam's metropoles" (Waibel 2006:46). But if we wish to understand the persistence of such developments, it remains important to take people's views seriously.

Release

Phú Mỹ Hưng can change people. Phú Mỹ Hưng residents, as well as the visitors and service employees we interviewed, repeatedly said that the new urban zone had the capacity to deliver a sense of release. A member of our research team spoke to a maid who works in Phú Mỹ Hưng but lives in a working-class neighborhood just beyond its borders. The maid described the transformations she witnessed among the residents she looked after in the following way:

> **Ms. X:** When I talk with residents here, they tell me they like it because it is peaceful, it is open and cool, and because they think […] …well…it reduces their stress.
>
> **Interviewer:** Ah…Ah.
>
> **Ms. X:** […]in those houses on the ground in other places, with one house right next to the other, it's really noisy, they don't like those houses. But here, ah, it's quiet, and so the people like it better.
>
> […]
>
> **Ms. X:** The people come back from work, go inside their house, close the door, and they come and go as they please. And if they don't want other people looking at them, well, they also don't want to look at other people. They live in a way that they like, which is sort of Western or something like that.

While it is tempting to say that this reported speech only reflects Ms. X's ideas about what her wealthy employers felt, she herself insisted that she also held these views of Phú Mỹ Hưng. She continued by adding that while she could not afford to live there, she wished that she could:

> **Ms. X:** But even I like it too. Really…Don't just go off and say it's only them. I may be poor and not have enough money to buy a house here, but I still like it, and I dream of having a house here.
>
> **Interviewer:** Ah, is that so? Ah.

> **Ms. X:** Oh yeah, I'd sure like it.…because the…the air makes me feel peaceful, it allows me to think about whatever it is I'm thinking completely, and it's not noisy…well, it makes my body generally feel good if I'm living here.[7]

The maid's descriptions were not unique. My research colleagues and I conducted over 150 interviews with well-to-do Phú Mỹ Hưng residents, as well as the staff who work as maids, waiters, security guards, real estate agents, and customer service representatives.[8] Across class divisions, one clear theme emerged: people felt that Phú Mỹ Hưng gave them a sense of release. They described it as open, cool, peaceful, free of traffic, and orderly. Even those who could not afford to live there explained that it had the capacity to make them feel unblocked and calm. It cleared their mind, made them feel physically liberated, and even had the capacity to reduce their stress and anxiety. Landlords who had originally purchased Phú Mỹ Hưng apartments to rent out to paying tenants ended up visiting their properties on the weekend, enjoying the environment and taking in the views even as they made money off their rentals. Vietnamese Americans discussed the way it allowed them to enjoy what they most loved about Vietnam without being forced to suffer from the hectic confusion they experienced elsewhere in the city. Retirees celebrated its curative properties. Young parents extolled its orderliness and safety (often adding that the schools were more open in their curriculum); and kids said it was everything from "a dream" to a "fantasy." Even security guards and service employees working in the cafés and restaurants explained how they felt calm and peaceful when they arrived by motorbike in the district.

Young professionals were especially keen to note the district's capacity to clear their minds of tension. Take, for example, Kim, a young woman who worked at an import/export company's office in Phú Mỹ Hưng. Even though she could not afford to live there, she said she liked Phú Mỹ Hưng because it is safe, peaceful, and has a lot of green trees. When at work, Kim was able to achieve a sense of peace simply by looking out at the landscape and taking in the view:

> There are times when I'm tired or something and I stand and look out from the window in my room and I see that the view is very green, very peaceful, and it reduces my tension, it makes me feel at ease. Occasionally [at work] I bend my neck towards the computer too

> much and it makes me feel really hot…and my eyes get red…and then on top of it [when in other parts of the city] I look outside and I see disgusting scenes and I feel a sense of dread…But here [in Phú Mỹ Hưng] it is quiet.[9]

The New Urban Zone brings a sense of release. It reduces stress, and makes people feel unblocked. It can do this because it is open and cool; it is not noisy. One can take in these healing properties simply by gazing out at the view.

Modern Views

Despite all the positive sentiments New Urban Zones generate among Saigon residents, the academic literature on the emergence and global spread of planned communities is decidedly critical—certainly less rosy than the sunsets over Phú Mỹ Hưng. To put it plainly, scholars, myself included, have typically treated these kinds of communities with deep suspicion. Planned communities around the globe have been roundly criticized for their artifice, inauthenticity, environmental costs, the way they either express or promote social inequality (or both), and their failure to attend to local social, cultural, or political circumstances (Low 2003; Olds et al. 2002; Schwenkel 2012, 2013; Shatkin 2011; Siu 2005; Spencer 2010). In this sense, it is possible to critique Phú Mỹ Hưng as decidedly foreign to the Vietnamese context. Phú Mỹ Hưng lacks, for example, the alleyways commonly associated with the sociality of Vietnamese cities, and the rich and the poor no longer live alongside each other in such alleys (Tôn Nữ Quỳnh Trân and Nguyễn Trọng Hòa 2007). Planned communities have been described as threats to democracy and civic life, and have been linked to exploitative financial and real estate practices (Davis 1992, Douglass and Huang 2007, Hsing 2010, Springer 2010, Zhang 2006). They have even been linked to racism, classism, authoritarian sympathies, and elitism of various kinds (Caldeira 1999, Herzfeld 2006, Kuppinger 2004, Scott 1998, Van Leeuwen 2011). Phú Mỹ Hưng itself has been associated with "the privatization of entire cities" and derided for having "no public sphere or public spaces" and "no governance structures or civic places beyond corporate management and its offices" (Douglass and Huang 2007:17). Yet in spite of these academic critiques, people who can afford property in these zones are moving into them in significant numbers and developers

continue to replicate such developments. In the Ho Chi Minh City region alone, the Phú Mỹ Hưng model has inspired a massive redevelopment project in the Thủ Thiêm peninsula, an entire New City in Binh Dương province, and a host of smaller developments that are designed to "feed off of" (*ăn theo*) these larger developments. According to the Vietnamese Ministry of Construction, by 2012 there were a total of 764 New Urban Zones across the entire country, 15 of which entailed projected dimensions of more than 1,000 square hectares, and 94 of which had dimensions between 200 and 1,000 hectares (VnMedia 2012). If the proliferation of these kinds of projects has been linked to urban displacement and associated land protests by dispossessed residents, it is also true that people are *still* coming to them in droves—if not to live in them, then for simple visits, window-shopping, picnics, strolls, and photographs.

While the attraction of these spaces is clearly evident, academic attention has primarily focused on these developments as icons of urban exclusion. But recently a few scholars have turned towards describing the popularity of planned communities among everyday people (De Boeck 2011, Ghertner 2013, Labbé 2011, Siu 2007, Zhang 2010). This article adds to this developing perspective within the literature on global master-planned urban developments by taking these celebratory expressions of urban development seriously, trying to understand them in their own terms and also situating them in a wider political context. For residents and visitors to Phú Mỹ Hưng, I suggest, the sense of release brought by the sky, the air, and the orderly landscape is more than just a trivial quest for luxury and comfort. These sentiments emerge in a social and political context where the pre-existing urban landscape is commonly understood as out of control. The standard academic arguments derived from Europe and North America hold that corporate planned urban space threatens democratic civic space. But these critiques do not resonate with the local political context in the same way they do the societies where these critiques have been developed.[10] This is due to the very straightforward fact that there is no representative government in Vietnam to speak of, and also because there are very few public spaces available in the city, aside from public sidewalks and a few overcrowded parks in the downtown core. While the Vietnamese Communist Party claims to speak in the name of the people, it does so on its own terms and often suppresses open public debate or discourse. By contrast, the corporate designers of Phú Mỹ Hưng, while clearly interested in maximizing their private profit, have designed a space

which residents and visitors describe as comparatively open and unblocked. Commercialized or not, those who use this space claim to enjoy the feeling offered up by its modern vistas, open streets, and clean lines. As will become increasingly clear as this article unfolds, these sensations appeal to people, and they also come to embody the kind of openness people wish to see in Vietnamese society but cannot otherwise articulate in words. The recurrent themes of skies open to the light, of coolness and circulating air, and of cleanliness are connected to and bound together by a persistent yet muted discourse of political transformation. Sometimes simply expressed as the ability to look into the distance, the feeling Phú Mỹ Hưng gives people makes it possible to envision a developing political consciousness founded on a notion that liberation, release, and a sense of satisfaction with one's society will come through self-discipline, regulation, and the imposition of order onto urban life.

The relationship between order, feeling unblocked, and being able to look into the distance is a decidedly "modern view" that corresponds in many ways with modernist planning ideas that have been largely criticized in recent literature on urbanism and planning theory (Davis 1992, Douglass and Huang 2007, Jacobs 1993, Scott 1998, Zhang 2006). When describing the space in which they live, and why they find it so satisfying, Phú Mỹ Hưng residents and visitors would find the academic critique of modernist architecture or of corporate urbanism popular in anthropology and urban studies mostly mystifying. In fact, they often seem to directly channel modernist precepts as a form of praise. Consider the following statement from the much maligned mastermind of modernist design himself, Le Corbusier:

> The eye of the spectator finds itself looking at a site composed of streets and houses…If these masses…have not been spoilt by unseemly variations, if the disposition of their grouping expresses a clean rhythm and not an incoherent agglomeration, if the relationship of mass to space is in just proportion…[then,] the mind derives from these satisfactions of a high order: this is architecture. (1986:47)

Phú Mỹ Hưng residents commonly repeated sentiments that almost exactly paralleled these kinds of modernist declarations.[11] Like Le Corbusier, they insisted that the act of viewing clean, orderly space, unspoiled by "unseemly variations" could deliver to their minds "satisfactions of a high

order." While it has become commonplace in critical urban studies to denounce modernist pretensions of this sort, modernist sentiments are very much alive in the world (Holston 1989:5).

The logic of attaining satisfaction through control and order is not only something people say about the built environment in Phú Mỹ Hưng. It also resonates with an important Vietnamese notion of civility (*văn minh*), which promises to deliver liberation through enforced adherence to normative and standardized kinds of social behavior. What develops is a confluence of modernist architectural aesthetics and broad support for notions of disciplined, civilized conduct. The way one views a landscape—in Phú Mỹ Hưng's case, through an aesthetic celebration of long, uninterrupted vistas framed by orderly well-planned buildings—is connected to one's political views about the social order one wishes to live in, which is, in this case, marked by a desire for a more disciplined and orderly population governed by a more transparent form of governance with a demonstrated ability to plan for the future.

The Phú Mỹ Hưng Corporation itself commonly makes such a link between civil engineering and social engineering. Its motto, commonly printed beneath its corporate logo and emblazoned on streetlight flags throughout the district, is that it is a "*Đô thị văn minh—Cộng đồng nhân văn*" (a "Civilized City and Humanistic Community").[12] And like the comments from residents I will describe shortly, the Phú Mỹ Hưng Customer Service Center insists on a political philosophy that links urban spatial order to social organization. A web page called "Forming a Communally Cultural Lifestyle in a Civilized City" lays this out in rules designed to help residents "live a civilized lifestyle" and build a "humane community" (Phu My Hung Development Corporation 2008). The move from space to society is clear:

> Tortuous alleys, illegal land occupation, and bad sanitary conditions do not exist in Phú Mỹ Hưng City area. […] For examples [sic], residents are not allowed to expand their usage area, to change the landscape outside their house to avoid affecting the landscape of the whole area; […] "Residential regulations" shall partially help residents and Phú Mỹ Hưng Corp. build a communal lifestyle in an organized, methodical, and self-conscious way for mutual benefits of a civilized and modern city. (Phu My Hung Development Corporation 2008)

In contrast to "tortuous alleys" that stand for the unplanned city, a "civilized" urban zone is clearly defined as an urban zone with clean modernist architectural lines and strictly enforced rules for protecting a predetermined aesthetic vision. What begins as a simple description of aesthetics and orderly space culminates in a plan to organize lifestyle and create mutual benefits for all the members of this social collective. While this may seem relatively benign, it is not all that far from a theory of governance—a way of mobilizing the language of civility to order people's culture, comportment, and behavior. Thus, while many of the binding demands made in the community rules are actually directed towards the built environment and to preserving its orderly lines, the larger, overarching goal is to build an orderly form of social organization.

The ways people view open space with their eyes are connected to the emerging political views they hold in their brains (and sometimes, lips pursed, which they must hold under their breath in order not to incite the state's coercive censors and police). Simon Schama's (1995) work on landscapes, along with Susan Buck-Morss's (1989) and Martin Jay's (1993) work on vision, suggests that the way people talk about vision or the way they view a landscape can clarify many of the views they hold about culture, society, and politics. If Schama could say, while writing about Yosemite, that even "the landscapes that we suppose to be most free of our culture may turn out, on closer inspection, to be its product" (1995:9), then it should be no less true that intentionally planned urban landscapes are riven with ideology and social meaning. They are not just cultural, but political as well. They are so infused with political and economic sentiments, in fact, that politicians visit them, entire economic programs are founded on them, and they are often even linked to the development policies of a nation. Phú Mỹ Hưng, for example, has been declared a "model urban development" by the Vietnamese government (Vy Anh 2013).

This confluence of modernist urban aesthetics and the disciplined comportment of human beings articulated by the Phú Mỹ Hưng vision can be distilled into a political epigram: freedom will come through control, and release will come through disciplined comportment.[13] As I will further show below, the pretty skies, fresh air, openness, and the emphasis on "civilized" comportment become entangled with a modern brand of politics, which politically active residents commonly insist is based on the notion of rights, responsibilities, and the rule of abstract principles—a world that promises to be liberated by imposed order which nevertheless

manifests visually, experientially, socially, and politically as a sense of becoming "unblocked" or "released." There is a connection between views and views, between what one sees and what one thinks.

Views of Phú Mỹ Hưng

The link between views (of the landscape) and (socio-political) views, however, is not always explicit, and most often comes unexpectedly. For example, on one occasion, while giving me a tour of his apartment, a teenaged boy pulled me aside. He looked out his window, and said, in one breath, that living in an apartment was fantastic because it offered a view of the entire city. Then, in another breath, now reduced to a conspiratorial whisper, he quickly turned this observation into a commentary on what he saw as the failures of socialism. In his telling, the different merits of political systems offered the only way to explain the contrast between the dusty, crowded, hot, uncomfortable, always-blocked streets upon which he must travel to reach his family's apartment and the cool air and unimpeded views he enjoys once he ascends the elevator to his family home. Phú Mỹ Hưng is "a fantasy," he said, and the views are unblocked. And then he added that Phú Mỹ Hưng was able to succeed because it was guided by the vision of a foreign joint venture from famously anti-communist Taiwan, with plans designed by a foreign planning firm from the US. The streets leading to Phú Mỹ Hưng, by contrast, were the work of the Ho Chi Minh City government, and they were blocked, choking as a result of inefficiency. The boy added that road improvements were probably stalled because of corruption and bureaucratic obstinacy, which is the common way to blame everything one wishes to critique in Vietnam.

A view out the window and a gaze across the landscape inspired this young man to turn without warning to a critique of the current political order. These kinds of seemingly mundane connections made while commenting on an urban landscape can in this way capture, express, and even model emergent political visions. For example, residents in Phú Mỹ Hưng almost universally highlighted the way life in the New Urban Zone represented a new mode of "civilized consciousness" (*ý thức văn minh*). They would make the point via seemingly random examples—how people dispose of their garbage, what they see when they look out the window, or, more significantly for the purpose of this article, how they design, lay out, construct, and later maintain urban developments. Such consciousness

was said to be lacking in the rest of the city; and this consciousness, in turn, was commonly articulated in terms of an emergent sense of rights and responsibilities that residents saw as both symbolized by and rising from the orderly roads of Phú Mỹ Hưng and which could be visually depicted by the unimpeded sight lines of Phú Mỹ Hưng views. Residents described the Phú Mỹ Hưng development itself as the triumph of the "long-term vision" of its developers and planners. Likewise, the linked concepts of a new "consciousness," orderly construction, development vision, and the relationship of rights and responsibilities all show that the visual and bodily experience of openness in Phú Mỹ Hưng might be understood not just as a set of sensations, but as part of the way people understand and imagine social organization. Looking out at Phú Mỹ Hưng's open vistas, enjoying the broad open sky and the cool breezes channeling their way through architectural pathways and the clean valleys of modern built construction, residents commonly claimed to be able to look into a different political order. This view is what a functional society looks like. The views are unimpeded, the air is clear, and the breezes feel cool on the skin. This is the modern view. This is how it feels: unblocked.

Once visualized in these ways—once one could see it and feel it—then this new consciousness could also inspire in people certain actions and behaviors. For example, Ms. X, the maid introduced earlier, explained that she had come to see the preservation of orderliness and cleanliness in Phú Mỹ Hưng as a kind of civic duty, even though she did not live in the community. Whenever she found herself in the New Urban Zone, she said she often felt compelled to pick up stray garbage, even when she was not working. She described the beliefs that compelled her to act as if they had emanated from a deep-seated consciousness of the greater civic collective. One must pick up the garbage because one is part of a larger society. Just looking at the environment compelled her to do this.

Consciousness

The links residents commonly made between urban form, social consciousness, behavior, and politics were omnipresent. They animated the early morning walks I would take as a form of "participant ambulation" with groups of retired lawyers, businessmen, doctors, scholars, and former state bureaucrats who take to the streets and park paths for exercise on the Crescent District walking circuit every morning beginning around

5 a.m. and continuing until around 7 a.m. One member of this group, a retired lawyer and a devout Buddhist, often told me during these walks that studying social life in Phú Mỹ Hưng cut right to the heart of a social transformation in Vietnam. Phú Mỹ Hưng, he told me, had to be understood as an experiment with rights and responsibilities. Like many of the retired lawyers I have met over the years in Vietnam, he adamantly believed that true political reform depended on the need to reinforce "the rule of law," which, he added, depended on a willing submission to regulation. As we walked around the Crescent, he would carry a string of Tibetan Buddhist prayer beads, counting mantras bead by bead. In between mantras, he would often comment on the general state of politics in Vietnam. Over months of walking, he repeatedly told me that Vietnam had become overrun by individualism and greed. The problem appeared not only in government, but in the everyday behaviors of all kinds of people, spreading everywhere from the city to the countryside. The solution, he always explained, required that individuals cultivate a form of willing submission to a set of higher ideals. But the problems of corruption, greed, and political self-interest were so rampant in Vietnamese society, he added, that politics were almost beyond repair. The political system was stuck, and people felt blocked. Phú Mỹ Hưng was a break from all that.

Talking while walking, with clicking prayer beads punctuating his thoughts, one of his favorite forms of evidence was to use the Phú Mỹ Hưng landscape to illustrate his claims and to express a sense of hope for an alternative future. He saw the New Urban Zone as an experiment in consciousness-raising. It was successful, he said, because it was governed by rules and regulations. Taking the cool air and open views as an example, he explained that the strictures governing architectural form made the vistas and open spaces possible, which in turn let the wind flow through. And these rules, in turn, provided a model which instructed residents to discipline themselves and embody a sense of urban civic consciousness. But most importantly, he argued—and this was where spatial order and bodily comportment began to constitute a political philosophy—these rules and regulations all depended on a devotion to self-discipline and self-regulation which was directed towards achieving a higher, almost transcendent, state of social collectivity. He explained this approach to self-control as if it was a kind of universal, because, as he put it, the approach resonated not only with classical political dictums about rights, responsibilities, and the "rule of law," but also with his own understandings

of Buddhist devotional practice. In everyday social interactions, political organization, and meditative practice, he believed that a kind of release could come from the renunciation of immediate desires. This was precisely what he believed was being promoted in Phú Mỹ Hưng—a consciousness of urban space that made every resident aware of themselves as part of a collective whole, with corresponding rights (*quyền*) and responsibilities (*nghĩa vụ*). He pointed to the orderly construction, the clean, traffic-free streets, and the lack of litter on the ground as evidence of this.

For both residents and project developers, the arrangement of buildings in Phú Mỹ Hưng gave visual support to a political philosophy founded on the benefits gained through a willful sense of restraint. Such restraint, I was repeatedly told, preserved open spaces for people to enjoy. I was told that a typical Vietnamese real estate investor in any other part of the city would have subdivided, resold, and allowed people to build something on every available meter of space, which would have crowded out the sunsets and the fresh air, and would have left no open space. Phú Mỹ Hưng's cool breezes and open skies, they reminded me, were not a gift of nature but a willful act of planning, forged from a disciplined commitment to a greater purpose. The ability to subordinate the selfish desire for immediate gain in order to patiently wait for larger collective social improvement was often ascribed to the "vision" promised by Phú Mỹ Hưng.[14]

In this mode of explanation, the clean unimpeded views in Phú Mỹ Hưng offer a way to literally see and make visible the political conviction that restriction could lead to liberation. One of the preeminent critiques of the political system in Vietnam is the notion that both political leaders and everyday people have become selfish or greedy (Kim 2011). Most of the problems in urban governance have been attributed to the way previous master plans have almost always been subordinated to individual interests, either in the form of corrupt party cadres selling out the plan for bribes, or individual residents flaunting the rules. Despite these common critiques, however, it remained too politically dangerous to overtly agitate for any real legal transparency in Vietnam's political landscape. The best avenue for enacting change was to experiment with the not quite political realm of everyday life and personal conduct. If one couldn't press too rapidly for overt political change in the formal legal system, one could at least push for change in the way people followed rules and regulations in the conduct of life and in the design and habitation of urban space. Advocating overtly for citizenship rights might be politically dangerous; but advocating for civility

and civilized conduct offered a politically safe medium for articulating a political theory of rights and responsibilities. In this way, civility could do some of the work that discourses of citizenship rights do in other contexts, without making overt (and hence dangerous) demands on the state. The demands of civility were instead made on individuals, who were compelled by moral claims rather than legal authority to embody modes of comportment that minimized negative impacts on others. Such demands could be made without challenging the authority of the state and also without challenging the class privileges inherent in the zone itself. The language of civility and the celebration of orderly urban space offered a relatively safe form of seemingly political discourse that was always safely apolitical.

As my friend the Buddhist lawyer moved his Tibetan prayer beads one by one, it became clear that these conversations about a well-planned community, civilized living, and politics were not interrupting his mantras. The concepts of civilized living and the renunciation of immediate desire were themselves the mantras, and they were connected to the experience of openness that we could feel with our bodies as we moved through the unblocked roadways and passages of Phú Mỹ Hưng. The open vistas that framed sunsets or made for peaceful morning walks were, in this logic, made possible by the deliberate limitations placed on built form. One could see the sunset so clearly because of the master plan's consciously designed sight lines: buildings frame but never block the sky.

Unblocked Views

The sunsets leave an impression. Saigon residents encountering Phú Mỹ Hưng's new kind of spatiality for the first time are typically so impressed by it that they feel compelled to photograph it and to place themselves in the picture. The crowds of pedestrians and amateur photographers who converge in the district on late-week evenings and weekends gather in greatest numbers on and around the "Starlight Bridge," an illuminated stainless steel arc that gracefully bends across the Crescent Lake and connects the mixed-use residential zone on one side with the commercial shopping and dining district on the other. During that fleeting time just before sunset, when the light glows but the sun no longer burns, the gentle curve of the bridge allows visitors to take photographs with the sun illuminating their faces while also glinting off the gleaming new shopping district behind them. The modern lines of the glass, steel, and white concrete buildings

glow against the sun and reflect on the surface of the lake. Everywhere one looks there are people posing for photographs: couples embracing before the lenses of wedding photographers; young girls dressed in crisp dresses and polished heels, as if practicing for a fashion shoot; families posing with the view of the New Urban Zone behind them; couples posing in staged moments of romance framed by a garden backdrop. In all these "photo shoots," the sentiment conveyed projects a generalized sense of youthful "happiness"—broad smiles, energetic poses, bounciness. They are "life is good" kinds of pictures.

The same sky that attracted these visiting photographers to Phú Mỹ Hưng was enough to inspire one 70-year-old resident to poetry. Uncle Long is originally from Hanoi, and moved into a very large Phú Mỹ Hưng residence to live with his daughter, who along with her Malaysian husband owns one of Vietnam's biggest candy and snack food import and distribution companies. After returning home from a trip to visit family in Australia, Uncle Long wrote several very sentimental poems about Phú Mỹ Hưng, which he sang aloud one morning over noodle soup with a full table of friends, all from Hanoi. Here is part of a poem he sang with great conviction, entitled "Fairylike Phú Mỹ Hưng" (*Phú Mĩ Hưng thần tiên*):

Phú Mĩ Hưng thần tiên	**Fairylike Phú Mỹ Hưng**
Một trời thiên nhiên lộng lẫy	Beneath a splendid natural sky
Ngỡ mình lạc bước thần tiên	I wander, lost, into fairy steps
Nhấp nhô lâu đài ẩn hiện	Where castles disappear and reappear
Dòng sông ngọt ngào uốn bên	Beside the sweet river bend
Trời xanh, nước xanh, cây xanh	Blue sky, blue water, green trees
Rộn ràng đường thơm hoa lá	A bustling road fragrant with flowers
Diễm tình Phú Mĩ Hưng xinh	The love story of charmed Phú Mĩ Hưng
Cảm ơn tình yêu Quốc tế	With thanks to the world for its love
Bao năm dốc nghĩa thắm tình	So many years of devotion and profound love
Đã biến đầm lấy nước đọng	Turning swamps of stagnant water
Thần tiên Phú Mĩ Hưng xinh…	Into charming, fairylike Phú Mĩ Hưng
Cả một bầu trời bừng sáng	An entire sky lights up
Muôn đời ngưỡng mộ tôn vinh	Endlessly admired and respected
Cả một bầu trời bừng sáng	An entire sky lights up
Lâu đài Phú Mĩ Hưng xinh	For the pretty Phú Mĩ Hưng castles
Cả một bầu trời rực sáng	An entire sky radiates
Tuyệt vời PHÚ MĨ HƯNG xinh	Wonderful pretty PHÚ MĨ HƯNG

Uncle Long's poem, with its fixation on the sky and its sentimental focus on the visual and sensual experiences of color and fragrance in "wonderful pretty PHÚ MĨ HƯNG," crystallizes residents' thoughts about this space. For Uncle Long, as for so many of his neighbors, "an entire sky radiates."

The mesmerizing light and sky, of course, were not invented by the Phú Mỹ Hưng Corporation but by nature. The sun, of course, sets not only over Phú Mỹ Hưng, but also over other districts in the city. The difference in Phú Mỹ Hưng, however, is the way the sky is framed and how this framing enables one to contemplate and engage with it. In most places elsewhere in the city, the urban fabric is so dense and life so often takes place on flat surfaces at street-level that the built environment frequently blocks the light of the setting sun. Night, of course, comes everywhere, but there are no sunsets in an alleyway, no distant horizons in the zigzag maze of corridor streets downtown. But Phú Mỹ Hưng, as Uncle Long's poem indicates, somehow allows the sky to light up and to be seen in ways heretofore ignored.

This is not just a poetic sensibility. Both residents and visitors alike explain that Phú Mỹ Hưng differs from the rest of the city because it enables people to see and experience light and distance in new ways. For example, a teenaged girl in junior high school who was attending school in Phú Mỹ Hưng, but lived in a working-class neighborhood of dense alleyways in District 10, explained that Phú Mỹ Hưng was special to her because it had "a view." When I asked her to explain what she meant by this, she struggled to give an example because there are actually few significant objects or landscapes of arresting beauty in Phú Mỹ Hưng—there is no great mountaintop, no statue to admire, no natural wonder, no beautiful bay. What, I asked her, was the view *of*?

After some reflection, she explained that the idea of a view to which she referred did not consist of the ability to look *at* any particular object of reflection, but rather was the ability to "look beyond." She gave the specific example of being able to see beyond the houses across the street. In the rest of the city, she explained, focusing specifically on the working-class District 10 where she lived with her parents, residents look out their windows or front doors only to find their gaze immediately interrupted, literally blocked by the concrete of other built construction. This sentiment was precisely the same as that evoked in the Phú Mỹ Hưng Corporation's reference to the "tortuous alleys" of Ho Chi Minh City, the jumbled world of densely packed urbanity that has come to define most of the residential

quarters of the city—the world of unplanned, spontaneous, auto-constructed neighborhoods. This feeling of being blocked in by the city is common in most central districts, but does not occur in Phú Mỹ Hưng. The object of the view in Phú Mỹ Hưng—the thing being looked at—is precisely "the view" itself, the very ability to gaze into the distance. She was not the only one to cherish this kind of view. Many of the apartment complexes in Phú Mỹ Hưng have names that play explicitly on the notion of visual sightlines, with names in English like "Grandview," "Panorama," or "Skygarden," or Vietnamese names like "*Mỹ Cảnh*" (Beautiful View) or "*Cảnh Viên*" (Park View). For so many residents who have lived their whole lives in dense urban alleyways, the process of looking into the distance can be revealing; the sky, which has, of course, always been there, literally comes into view. It is as if the sky did not exist until built constructions like the "Skygarden" apartments or the "Grandview" called it to mind.

Phú Mỹ Hưng residents all praised this openness, and they commonly referred to Phú Mỹ Hưng's breezes and lack of congestion. They often expressed this spontaneously when returning to Phú Mỹ Hưng after trips away. For example, I heard it on the drive back into Phú Mỹ Hưng at the end of an overnight car trip with a group of three male friends who had invited me to their vacation home in the countryside near the sea. As we drove, Mr. Cường, who was sitting with me in the back seat of Mr. Hà's brand new sport utility vehicle, continuously insisted, without a sense of hyperbole, that Phú Mỹ Hưng was becoming, literally, "the greatest place to live in the world." He was prompted to say this when, after an hour of tense driving through the city, we turned a corner into Phú Mỹ Hưng. "Look," Cường said without prompting, "It is wide-open and clean." He then went on to reiterate that *this*—this openness and orderliness—was why Phú Mỹ Hưng was probably the best place to live in the world. Returning to the broad streets of Phú Mỹ Hưng, we all eased back in our seats. There was a palpable feeling of being unblocked, released. The roads were empty and straight. The space felt open (thoáng).

Framing Openness

Phú Mỹ Hưng did not invent the sky, but it frames it in new ways. The unblocked modern view offers not so much a view of something in particular as much as it frames an open space across which one might look or within which one might gaze without undesired interruption. Residents commonly

extolled the virtues of openness whenever I visited their homes. On a visit to their well-appointed eighth floor apartment in the upscale Grandview C residences, for example, a pair of "empty-nesters" in their early 60s pointed to the view across a small river to a horizon of low-lying wetlands. When I asked them what they looked at when they looked out the window at this view, they emphasized that they didn't really look at anything but instead enjoyed the depth of field and the breeze that entered the home from across the space beyond. They were exceedingly happy with their home and told me many times that this view of nothing but distance and the breeze was the main reason. On another occasion, a Vietnamese American in his late 50s took me to see a four-story rowhouse which he had recently constructed as his anticipated retirement home. He explicitly highlighted how his home was built right next to a park and emphasized its prime location by noting, "They'll never be able to build next to me," as if this were something one would commonly fear when building in Saigon. He then pointed out all the windows he had installed, adding that he could always look out, feel the cool wind, and take in unimpeded views. He ended the tour triumphantly, telling me that the value of this particular plot of land rose faster than other plots, for precisely the fact that it would always be open on the park side. Openness was a good investment.

The notion of having a view, it becomes clear, is not so much about "looking at something" as being able to experience the sensation of feeling "unblocked" and protecting oneself from the prospect of being hemmed in by the incursions of others. Phú Mỹ Hưng's great attraction is the conscious way in which it avoids being blocked in by its own construction, and these are design elements that consciously depart from the unplanned qualities of built construction elsewhere in the city. Ngô Quan Hiền, principle of NQH architects and the very talented designer of many of the apartment buildings in Phú Mỹ Hưng, explained that his building designs carefully attend to the flow of wind and the circulation of air. He pointed to large architectural openings in the middle of his buildings, which serve as air tunnels, and which offer visual dynamism to the structures, so they do not appear as static, hulking concrete boxes but instead give a sense of visual openness and depth of field (see Figure 4).[15]

Openness is not the same thing as emptiness. This sense of being "open" and unblocked does not result from a simple absence of buildings.[16] Instead, the sense of being unblocked emerges as a specific

PHOTO BY ERIK HARMS

Figure 4: Architectural Openness. Note the three young women taking photographs of each other at the base of the stairs. The photographer bends down, photographing from below in order to frame the subject against a backdrop of "distance." Phú Mỹ Hưng, May 2012.

relationship between built form and the sense of open passage through, across, or beyond it. It is a sense of looking through and along the pathways and corridors formed by a built landscape—across the Crescent Lake; through an architectural "hole" in an apartment building; down a long, open, traffic-free boulevard framed by modern buildings on either side; or down a tree-lined neighborhood street. This specific kind of openness might be termed a "modern view" in which, to follow Martin Jay, "we confront again and again the ubiquity of vision as the master sense of the modern era" (1988:3). In this modern aesthetic, wide expanses become the ground against which modern figural constructions and subjectivity can be displayed, and where the structuring binaries of inside and outside, private and public, and personal and communal acquire a moral force. To produce this modern view, furthermore, requires restraint; it requires resisting the temptation to fill the space in.

Conclusion

People who know the history of Phú Mỹ Hưng often speak of the "vision" of its Taiwanese founder, Lawrence S. Ting. They describe how he could see into the future, how he broke down boundaries and hacked away at swampy wasteland (and bureaucratic red tape) to build a new urban civilization (Nguyễn Văn Kích et al. 2006). And now that it has been built, Phú Mỹ Hưng is famous for its modern views, both physical and metaphysical. And most of the people who choose to live in Phú Mỹ Hưng in order to enjoy these views describe themselves as visionaries too, with their own distinctly modern views about where their country should be heading. Urban Vietnamese are increasingly looking to become politically unblocked, and particular recurrent themes—of skies open to the light, of coolness and circulating air, of predictability and cleanliness—resonate with a persistent, yet often muted, discourse of political liberation which is tied to notions of how personal responsibility must be the foundation for collective betterment. Translated to the language of Western social science, this emergent politics clearly sounds like a Vietnamese version of neoliberalism—the parallels are obvious in the celebration of privatization and the uncritical embrace of corporate urbanism.

Simply calling this neoliberalism, however, obscures basic ethnographic facts about what people living in these zones really claim to see in them, which is a vision of freedom that embraces social control, not libertarian abandon. In the fantasy sunsets of New Urban Zones, one finds not only privatization, neoliberal governmentality, modernist hubris, and elitism, but also what residents themselves understand to be a very real critique of a certain political order in which the self no longer responds to the collective. In this sense, the skies in Phú Mỹ Hưng are not just pretty, but express political views. They give visual expression to a wish—they offer openness, they allow people to feel "unblocked." People connect the visceral, bodily feeling of spatial release and becoming unblocked that they experience in New Urban Zones with ideas and dreams of becoming unblocked politically.

But these sunsets and sensations, in all their seductiveness, can also divert attention from very real social concerns. The kind of liberation offered in these developments depends on highly regulated conduct and restrictive forms of living that are contained within carefully ordered spaces controlled by profit-seeking corporations that do not always place civic interest as their first priority. Residents describe this as a revolutionary

form of urban living, but like earlier historical revolutions, it is led by a bourgeois vanguard class that does not always recognize the degree to which this new vision remains unattainable for the great majority of citizens who live in the world they promise to transform. Although residents and visitors describe it as offering release, the processes enabling the construction of places like Phú Mỹ Hưng are linked to powers of exclusion and a history of enclosure. The current frenzy of urban demolition throughout Saigon is known as "land clearance," and is inextricably connected to this sense of "unblocking" Vietnamese cities. The Vietnamese word for the process of demolition and mass eviction currently transforming cities everywhere in the country is *giải tỏa*, which literally means to release the burden, to unblock, or to clear something of obstructions. In urban development, the kind of unblocking that comes with giải tỏa emerges when developers demolish built construction through the process of eviction. In this way, when viewed from the wider perspective of the city as a whole, the story of some people's quest for release from the physical and political blockages of the city is tangled with the story of turning other people's homes into rubble. ■

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Endnotes:

[1]It is tempting to call Phú Mỹ Hưng residents "the new rich" or the "rising middle class." But these imprecise terms obscure wide income disparities in the district. For a more precise measure of class diversity, I have compiled an extensive table showing the range of sale and rental prices for housing in Phú Mỹ Hưng. In 2012, some apartments sold for as little as US $67,000 and the most expensive villas were in the millions (available at http://campuspress.yale.edu/newurbanvietnam/files/2013/10/LandPricesSheetPhuMyHUngComplete.MyLe_.xls).

[2]Non-Vietnamese urbanists commonly describe Phú Mỹ Hưng as an example of privatized and exclusionary space (Douglass and Huang 2007, Spencer 2010, Waibel 2006). For their part, Phú Mỹ Hưng developers reference the principles of "New Urbanism" (see NewUrbanism.org) and celebrate its public spaces.

[3] This exact phrase appears in many online descriptions of the Crescent Mall and seems to have been repeatedly copied and pasted from a single source, now untraceable. For a particularly striking use of the term, and a dramatic computer-generated video of the mall itself, see the YouTube video uploaded by redbrandbulders (2010).

[4]"Đô thị hóa tự phát" can also be translated as "unplanned urbanization." An even better translation is "auto-urbanization," which resonates with Brazilian practices of "autoconstruction" (Holston 2008:8).

[5]"Thoáng" is often translated as "well-ventilated" or "open." I use the term "unblocked" here to refer to a broad range of key words that came up repeatedly in my interviews, such as "well-ventilated" (thoáng), wide open (*thông thoáng*), cool (*mát*), of escaping from constriction (*thoát khỏi*), and so on. "Thoáng" is also used to refer to "liberal policies" or "open policies" (*chính sách thoáng*) (Viện Ngôn Ngữ Học 1997:701).

[6]Although the ethnographic evidence shows residents making claims about critical political consciousness (*ý thức*), there is little evidence that they engage in active political resistance.

[7]Interview, June 5, 2012.

[8]I conducted interviews together with three Vietnamese anthropologists and two undergraduate research assistants from the US. I also lived and conducted participant observation in Phú Mỹ Hưng over two research periods for a total of seven months.

[9]Interview with author. June 12, 2012.

[10]Discussions of the threats that privatized corporate development and gating pose for the public sphere are especially convincing in North American contexts (Davis 1992, Low 2003). Attempts have been made to apply such critiques to Vietnamese planning (Douglass and Huang 2007).

[11]Most Vietnamese architects read Le Corbusier with approval rather than criticism. For an example connected to Phú Mỹ Hưng, see Nguyen Minh Hoa (2013).

[12]The translation used by the Phú Mỹ Hưng Corporation itself is "Civilization City—Human-Oriented Community."

[13]Ann Marie Leshkowich makes a similar point: "what many middle-class urban Vietnamese women experience as an ability to exercise choice in shaping their own lives is, in fact, closely connected to constraint" (2012:109).

[14]This notion of "vision" was also a common theme in accounts of Phú Mỹ Hưng's founder, Lawrence Ting. See Nguyễn Văn Kích et al. (2006).

[15]Interview with author, February 21, 2011.

[16]Unlike the urban setting, openness in undeveloped landscapes is often derided as sad (*buồn*) or denigrated as "wasteland" (*đất hoang*). Before Phú Mỹ Hưng was built, the land there was commonly called a wasteland (Harms 2014).

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Foreign Language Translations:

Modern Views, Unblocked: Looking into the Distance in Phú Mỹ Hưng, a Vietnamese New Urban Zone
[**Keywords:** Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City, Saigon, urban anthropology, vision, master-planning, New Urban Zones]

Những khung cảnh hiện đại mở rộng: Ngắm nhìn quang cảnh khu đô thị mới Phú Mỹ Hưng ở Việt Nam
[**Từ khoá:** Việt Nam, Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, Sài Gòn, Nhân học Đô thị, tầm nhìn, quy hoạch tổng thể, Khu Đô thị Mới]

现代观点，解封锁：远眺富美兴，一个越南的新兴都市区
[**关键词**：越南，胡志明市，西贡，都市人类学，愿景，总体规划，新兴都市区]

Разблокирован вид на современность: Как смотрят вдаль в одном из новых городских зон Вьетнама — Фу-Ми-Хынг
[**Ключевые слова:** Вьетнам, г. Хо Ши Минь, Сайгон, антропология города, зрение, мастер-планирование, новые городские зоны]

Vistas Modernas, Desobstruídas: Olhando à Distância em Phú Mỹ Hưng, uma Zona Urbana Nova Vietnamita
[**Palavras-chave:** Vietname, Cidade Ho Chi Minh, antropologia urbana, visão, plano mestre, Zonas Urbanas Novas]

الآراء الحديثة، بلاقيد: النظر لبُعد في فو مي هونغ، منطقة حضرية فيتنامية جديدة
كلمات البحث: فيتنام، هو تشي مِن، سايغان، انثروبولوجيا الحضر، الرؤية، التخطيط الرئيسي، مناطق حضرية جديدة