Interrogating 'Saigon Space': Spatial Practices in Laneways of Ho Chi Minh City

by
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This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), the largest city in Vietnam, faces challenges in rushing towards the 'megacity' model with rapid urban development. Attention is given to the global trend towards the 'super-block' in urban planning, but the characteristics and resilience of small urban settings like *Hem* (laneway) neighbourhoods deserve greater consideration in identifying opportunities and challenges for good city-making practice. This includes addressing spatial design issues via documentation and analysis of settlement patterns from which appropriate design strategies can be developed for specific local conditions. Some such studies have been done at urban block and street scale. However, there is almost no intensive study of settlement patterns and uses of public and domestic space from the perspective of its smallest urban units, *Hem*, this study's focus. This has broad significance because HCMC has about 4,000 laneways, accommodating the majority of the city's population, often marginalised communities.

To develop a research framework, this thesis first examines spatial concepts by theorists, such as Henri Lefebvre whose thoughts suggest a theoretical basis for the study. This thesis then reviews related literature by architectural and planning scholars, such as Christopher Alexander, Allan B. Jacobs, and Jan Gehl whose ideas suggest some important design aspects that frame the analysis of spaces and buildings in *Hem*. This research looks at two *Hem* and a *Hem*-style spaces in an apartment block as case studies about their formal and spatial characteristics, and relationships to larger urban units like streets and blocks. These studies, with on-site observations and interpretations of everyday life and architectural changes, are conducted in specific spaces and places.

The first case study examines the built form and everyday life of a typical *Hem,* recently renovated, in District 3. Looking at changes to this representative *Hem* is significant because it reflects the local resilience regarding the everyday use of *Hem* spaces in HCMC. Secondly, the thesis looks at physical changes, such as building and renovation activities, in an American-style apartment block in District 3. Local residents have gradually transformed this foreign building typology into *Hem*-style spaces that suit their everyday needs. Thirdly, the thesis looks at a *Hem* in HCMC's Chinatown to discuss spatial practices influenced by *phong thuy*, the traditional Vietnamese belief system similar to Chinese *feng shui*. This includes discussion on ritual practices, methods of site evaluation for building, and the use of *phong thuy* charms, which are popular in Chinatown. Implications from these studies provide insights into the

contribution of the spatial practices in *Hem* to local life and architectural characters in Ho Chi Minh City. This also helps to generate some recommendations to maintain the significance of spatial practices in *Hem* as the City undergoes rapid changes. This research suggests that local spatial practices as illustrated in the everyday spatial uses and changes for needed social, ritual, and small-scale business activities and their resilience should be considered as essential factors contributing to local livelihood and the making of the built environment in *Hem*.

Declaration

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(i) This thesis comprises only the original work toward my PhD submission except where indicated by references. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where indicated by references. This thesis is less than 100,000 words in length with the exclusion of tables, maps, and references.

(ii) The thesis uses *The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association: APA Style* (6th edition, 2013) as a guide for writing. As suggested in Section 3.09 and 3.18 of this manual or Section 4.16 (APA 7th, 2020), I use 'I' and 'my' as the first-person pronoun in some thesis chapters, which involve writing about my actions and personal experiences as part of the research.

Tran Huynh Buu Loc

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Acknowledgment

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Chapter 1. Introduction and Background

1.1 Research Context, Aims, and Objectives: The City's Laneways – *Hem*

Figure 1.1 Everyday life in a *Hem* of Ward 1, District 3 (Sketched by the author, 2017)

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), still referred to locally as Saigon, is characterised by rapid transformation and development. The city has been shaped by almost a hundred years of French colonisation (1859-1954), several decades of American support (1954-1975), a decade of strict Socialist ideology after South Vietnam unified with North Vietnam (1975-1985), and the recent *Doi Moi* policies, economic reforms that have eased the strictness of Socialist ideology and allowed the country to open up to the world (Bao Nguyen, 2016, p. 17). The city has embraced globalisation and developed the characteristics of a megacity, with large-scale development of transportation facilities, advanced urban infrastructure, and the use of 'super-blocks' to house an increasing population (Waibel, 2016, pp. 30-33). This rush towards the development of HCMC as a megacity has turned it into the largest centre of industry, finance, trading, tourism, services, science, culture, and education in Vietnam. The HCMC Department of Urban Planning and Architecture (2015, p. 2) reports that the city had more than 8.5 million inhabitants in 2016, spread over 500 square kilometres of urbanised area.

It is estimated that 85% of HCMC's population reside in the laneway areas known locally as *Hem*, where population density can reach 80,000 people per square kilometre (Gibert, 2016, pp. 1-4). There are more than 4,000 *Hem* networks in HCMC. In these *Hem* communities, the public open space along the length of the *Hem* has been adapted to accommodate daily social, work, commercial, and domestic activities and local religious beliefs (Gibert 2016, pp. 6-13; Drummond, 2000, pp. 2382-2385; Kim, 2012, pp. 226-229; Harms, 2012, pp. 737-740; Givental, 2013, pp. 33-41; Earl, 2010, pp. 94-99). The adaptation by the public of *Hem* can be observed in physical changes to their spaces with self-built structures and extensions added to housefront and doorstep areas. These *ad hoc* structures typically use the public space of the *Hem*, making the narrow laneways even narrower. Despite this, *Hem* are still enriched by the human presence of everyday encounters, daily routines, neighbourhood gossip, and small-scale retail occurring along their lengths. Hence, the term 'Saigon Space' as adopted in this thesis shall contextually represents *Hem* space and its everyday life in HCMC.
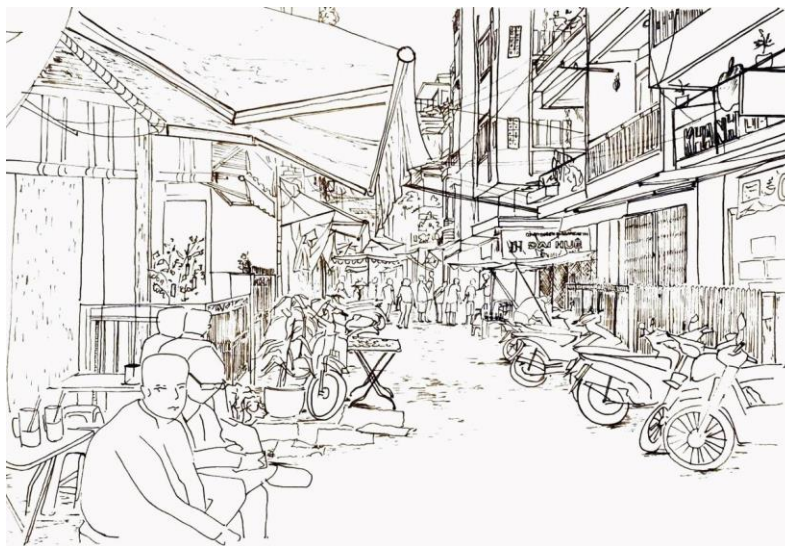
Figure 1.2 Customers sitting outside a café at *Hem* 109 Nguyen Thien Thuat Street. Their motorcycles are parked at the house front opposite the café (Sketched by the author, 2018).

However, the non-compliance with formal planning and construction guidelines of *Hem* space is regarded by the local government as 'messy, uncivilised, and slum-like', thereby negatively impacting on the city's urban image (Gibert, 2016, p. 8; Earl, 2010, p. 94). The government has implemented several strategies to clean up the informal use of public *Hem*, including the *Hem* expansion project which aims to reverse the 'informal' occupation of public land and encroachments by structures used by *Hem* residents. Nevertheless, these strategies and campaigns have faced some resistance from *Hem* communities, and *Hem* that have been expanded and 'cleaned up' by government intervention

gradually return to local informal use. *Hem* residents reconstruct recently demolished structures and resume informal ways of using the public and open *Hem*. This thesis examines the local uses of *Hem* spaces and the spatial changes that lead to ongoing 'tension' between *Hem* residents and government planning strategies while these spaces still exist.

It is clear that government strategies and expansion campaigns are intended for the good of the people of HCMC and, in particular, the residents of *Hem* areas. Nevertheless, it is still possible to respect the positive contributions of their traditional spatial characteristics to the everyday life of *Hem* communities in the face of urban development. My thesis sets out to gain a better understanding of how the everyday life of *Hem* residents influences the physical landscape of *Hem* and their cultural, social, and economic meanings in the lives of local residents. The aim and focus of this thesis is to study the roles of architectural and spatial changes occurring in *Hem* as reflections of the everyday lived experiences of residents.

Residential Row Houses   Hem Space   Residential Row Houses
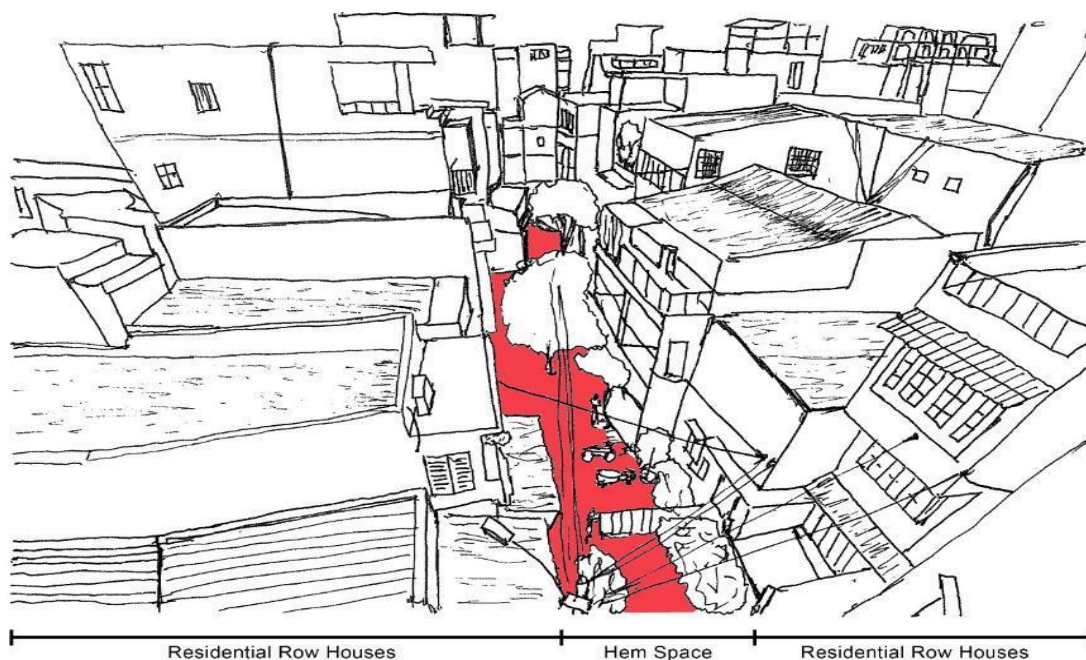
Figure 1.3 Aerial view of a *Hem* in District 3 (Sketched by the author, 2018)

In the quest to study these architectural and spatial transformations, this thesis considers several aspects of spatial theory, such as the ideas of *perceived space* and *conceived space* coined by the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre in his book *The Production of Space* (1992). In brief, *conceived space* refers to spaces that are professionally created by the knowledge and work of architects, urban planners, and policymakers. *Perceived space,* or spatial practice, is created by the local routines, habits, and lived

realities of inhabitants. One resilient aspect of spatial practice proposed in Lefebvre's theory is that spatial practice does not need to follow the logic, rules, and regulations of *conceived space*. This thesis hypothesises that given the fast urban changes brought by various urban development plans in HCMC, local spatial practices, represented by the everyday spatial uses and changes as the result of social, ritual and small-scaled business activities and their resilences, appear to be essential factors that contribute to local livelihood and the making of the built environment in *Hem*. The built environment is defined as the open public pathways, building setbacks, front door areas, and domestic interiors of houses in *Hem.*

The term 'spatial practice' bears a broad meaning and has been interpreted by many theorists, including Michel de Certeau (1980) and Edward Soja (1996), each with different interpretations. However, the application of spatial practice research to a specific urban context will unveil the significance of the underrepresented ordinary everyday lived experience, and the associated architectural/spatial adaptation, which is usually suppressed or ignored in government planning activities, under the influence of modernisation and globalisation (Chalana and Hou, 2016, pp. 3-5). This conceptual aspect of spatial practice allows this thesis to take a bottom-up perspective on the research topic, and to examine spatial transformations at specific *Hem* in HCMC. Together with the proposed hypothesis, the following two key questions of this thesis will assist my research to fulfil its aims:

- What are the roles of various socio-cultural factors, such as social, ritual and small-scaled business and building activities in the making and transformation of *Hem* space? How and why are these factors significant in spatial practices in *Hem*?
- How can the theoretical concept of spatial practice be applied in the *Hem* research context, from an interior and architectural design perspective?

The literature review in Chapter 2 will be conceptually grounded in Lefebvre's notion of space – conceived space and spatial practice – and will encompass relevant architectural and design theories to ensure that my conceptual understanding of Lefebvre's ideas is properly applied to the architectural/interior design perspective and the research scope.

Until now, there has been limited research on the spatial transformation of HCMC's *Hem* spaces (Gibert, 2014, 2016, 2018). There is almost no in-deep investigation into these spatial physical changes, practices, and adaptations to the everyday lived experience and livelihoods of *Hem* residents from an architectural and design perspective. For this reason, this thesis aims to investigate human-space

relationships via spatial changes and practices which bring the built environment of *Hem* spaces physically closer to the everyday living realities, routines, beliefs, and cultural values of *Hem* residents.

This thesis approaches spatial practice and change in HCMC's *Hem* contextually via case studies. In each case, the analysis is based on firsthand recordings of human activities, building details, physical changes, and adaptations in *Hem* to excavate the phenomenon of spatial practice within that context. These recordings will also investigate the finest urban grain of each *Hem* – the living spaces and homes of several *Hem* residents. This thorough investigation of public and domestic spaces will allow us to see how residents' lived experience inside their homes influences physical changes in the public areas of the *Hem*. In brief, the thesis will present three main case studies:

1. *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street of District 3, and two houses, of Mrs V and Ms H, the senior residents of the *Hem*. As mentioned earlier, there are more than 4,000 *Hem* in Ho Chi Minh City and each *Hem* is shaped differently, just like the everyday lives of their residents. I chose *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang because many aspects of local everyday routines of living and working here are representative of the phenomenon of architectural changes in the public *Hem* of the HCMC. Details will be discussed in Chapter 4.

2. An American-built apartment block in Nguyen Thien Thuat and two residential flats, of Mr N and Mr B. Structural changes to these housing blocks seem to closely resemble the spatial changes and adaptations of the city's *Hem* spaces. Moreover, the pathways between the blocks are interconnected with the nearby *Hem* networks, which means life in the blocks also participates in the community life of the nearby *Hem*. Chapter 5 will investigate the spatial practice of residents living in Nguyen Thien Thuat housing and investigate how these structural changes are perceived by the residents and the nearby *Hem* communities.

3. *Hem* 206 Tran Hung Dao Street (locally known as Hao Sy Phuong) and the house of Ms P.G at *Hem* 252 Nguyen Trai Street in Chinatown. This case study in Chapter 6 will look at the spatial changes to local *Hem* and houses under the influence of a local belief system, *phong thuy,* which is similar to the Chinese *feng shui*. This chapter aims to explore how the spiritual meanings of *Hem* spaces to local residents, and their belief in *phong thuy* practices, influence spatial practice and changes in this *Hem*.

Figure 1.4 Added structures and building extensions on the façades and at ground level of Blocks D and E of Nguyen Thien Thuat housing (Sketched by the author, 2018)

Figure 1.5 *Phong thuy* charms, objects, and altars on a façade in *Hem* 206 (photographed by the author, 2018)

The theoretical application of Lefebvre's concept of spatial practice to understanding spatial transformations of *Hem* suggests that there should be more consideration of the everyday lived realities of *Hem* residents, which is currently neglected in the city's urban development. The theoretical interpretations of spatial practice in the specific context of *Hem* aim to broaden its meaning in the current literature drawing on Lefebvre's spatial ideas. Finally, the discussion of spatial practice and current planning exercises by local government, as part of each case study, aims to generate

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consideration of the maintenance of positive aspects of spatial practice in *Hem* and to inform future design and planning strategies for urban development in HCMC.

1.2 Motivation for this Study

Growing up in HCMC, life in the *Hem* formed an important part of my childhood memories. I clearly remember everyday *Hem* scenes, such as a family of twenty gathering in front of their house to share their life and work, kids playing with their friends, a housewife cooking a meal outside her housefront while chatting with neighbours, food and grocery vendors bringing together local residents into clusters along the *Hem* space. These images are familiar to me, and probably also to most people in HCMC.

Figure 1.6 (Left) Gathering with my relatives in front of my aunt's house in *Hem* 72 Hai Ba Trung. (Right) Cafe at block D of Nguyen Thien Thuat housing (photographed by the author, 2017)

I always recall these memories when visiting my friend who has lived in a Nguyen Thien Thuat apartment since the 1990s. Whenever I visited him during the semester break from studies in Australia, he always invited me to sit at a café in Block D, about 100 metres from Block B where he lived. It is one of our favourite spots, and perhaps also for the local residents too, thanks to the generous shading of the bougainvillea hedge above the café. While sitting in the café, I was inspired by observing the different structural changes to housing structures and apartment interiors made by the local residents. I decided to research these 'local-style' structures of Nguyen Thien Thuat housing for my undergraduate Honour's year thesis. I felt that the structural changes which have occurred at Nguyen Thien Thuat were similar to those in HCMC's *Hem* spaces. Everyday life in front of the flats and between the blocks, and a strong sense of community, mean that these structural changes to the housing blocks seem to invite daily community interaction.

I will never forget the joy of doing a 'family job'. My mom always asked me to burn the joss paper on top of a manhole near our home on the eve of the Lunar New Year, *Tet*. She said that I was the 'best candidate' for this job because my birthdate brings wealth and happiness to the family. She believes that the nearby manhole is a source of evil, bringing bad luck to our family, which burning the joss paper

can help to eliminate. Our neighbours share this belief about this 'evil manhole' and they also burn their own joss paper, together with my family, on Lunar New Year's Eve.

Figure 1.7 Burning joss paper on top of the manhole near my family home (Photographed by the author, 2019)

In the early 2000s, the city was rapidly transformed by urban development which impacted on the local life and communities of many *Hem*. I then wandered around the *Hem* area and took photos of everyday life in the *Hem.* I took these changes for granted until I came to study in Australia in 2011, when I became more aware of the changes in these urban spaces. After the city government rapidly widened many *Hem* around HCMC, everyday activities in them slowly disappeared as residents retreated into their homes. The structural changes made by *Hem* residents to the public pathways of *Hem* were often labelled by the government and state media as 'traffic obstructions', 'unsafe', and non-compliant with government construction standards, thus bringing a negative image to Ho Chi Minh City. This sort of criticism has also been applied to structural changes at several of the American-built housing blocks, including the Nguyen Thien Thuat block. My friend told me that local officials had demolished all home-made structures attached to the balconies of Block B in 2012 and constructed a new balcony system. He said the government did not approve of these structures on the block's façade because they give the appearance that the housing is rundown, slum-like, and unsafe.

However, everyday life activities return to many of the *Hem* after they are 'renovated' and cleared out by government developments. I observed this resilience of life in the *Hem* while wandering around HCMC during my study breaks. Although the structural changes made to accommodate everyday *Hem* life are criticised by officials, I believe such changes and the related everyday activities are an essential part of urban livelihoods and landscapes which significantly contribute to the lives of residents of HCMC. Many families' main sources of income rely on the public space of *Hem*. Furthermore, some physical structures of *Hem* have religious meaning and are part of the spiritual beliefs of local residents and communities. A lack of consideration of the spiritual meanings of physical structures or spaces means that sudden changes or demolition, for example, may have a negative impact rather than a positive one

on the lives of residents and communities, particularly regarding beliefs related to everyday activities and livelihoods. The above observation is a one of the key motivations to do this research.

1.3 Problem Statement and Key Research Questions

The 'Megacity Idea' and the Neglected Role of *Hem* Spaces

Ho Chi Minh City is heading towards megacity status, with a projection of 10 million or more inhabitants in 2025, according to the HCMC Department of Urban Planning and Architecture. However, current planning policies and megacity-style urban development are known to neglect the role of the City's *Hem* spaces and the associated everyday life activities of residents. This is evidenced by urban sociologist Marie Gibert, who has described the built form of the city's *Hem* as a paradigm of "half-way modernization and urbanization" (2016, p. 19). Since the introduction of planning policies and regulations, and their effects on urbanisation, the city government has been facing strong resistance from *Hem* residents who are reluctant to follow these planning policies and regulations (Gibert, 2016, pp.8-20). In this section, I will address this problem, which inform my research investigating *Hem* spaces, community life, spatial changes, and their roles in fulfilling the everyday needs of *Hem* communities.

The ongoing population boom in HCMC has driven an increase in the use of private vehicles, providing immediate pressure for the development of planning strategies to rapidly construct transportation infrastructure. However, initiatives such as the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) network, crossing bridges, and street expansions still cannot cope with the demand for traffic circulation capacity and fluidity (Gibert, 2016, pp. 9 -12). Since the early 2000s, government and planning agencies have used *Hem* networks to facilitate automobile circulation (Gibert, 2016, p.6). In particular, *Hem* expansion projects were implemented as part of Government Decision 88/2007/QĐ-UBND to significantly increase *Hem* widths by reclaiming public land encroached on by *Hem* houses and demolishing "obstructive and hazardous structures that could potentially prevent public automobile circulation" (People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City, 2007, para 1). However, *Hem* residents do not share this perspective on these expansion projects.

Previous studies of HCMC urban spaces have noted that public spaces are generally used for informal private extensions of domestic housing and activities (Drummond, 2000, pp. 2382-2384; Gibert, 2016, pp. 9-13; Kim, 2012, pp. 227; Kim, 2015, pp. 23-24; Waibel, 2009, pp. 30-32; Givental, 2013, pp. 32-35, Pham et al., 2021, pp. 34-45). Gibert (2016, p. 19) adds that these private extensions into the *Hem* are multifunctional in nature and commonly used for family-based retail, street vending, neighbourhood

socialising, and as annexe for domestic activities, including cooking, laundry, dining, children's play, and pet spaces. *Hem* residents use *Hem* as personal spaces where they adaptively transform their house doorsteps and front areas by creating additional structures without regard for official regulations. These constructions and building activities, along with private use of the *Hem*, are considered to bring a negative image to HCMC's urban spaces and are seen as a hindrance to urban development and modernisation (Gibert, 2016, p. 15).

Figure 1.8 (Left) Photograph of Ho Chi Minh City illustrating the 'megacity style' (Waibel, 2016). (Right) A propaganda poster promoting an exhibition about 'Constructing Ho Chi Minh City to be a Smart City' [Red text] (Photographed by the author, 2017).

One notable urban campaign that attempted to transform the image of the city is the Civilized and Modern City (*do thi van minh hien dai)* campaign which was introduced in the early 2000s. This campaign promotes Western-style urban planning, landscaping, and public space usage and it specifically targeted *Hem* spaces because informal usage and adaptation of *Hem* are deemed to be an "uncivilized lifestyle and unsafe" (Gibert, 2016, pp. 13-20). Furthermore, the irregular spatial changes made by *Hem* residents have been associated with the creation of slum-like low-income areas that do not reflect the government vision of a modern city. Both the *Hem* widenings and the Civilized and Modern City campaign have brought in strict regulations and urban usage policies covering *Hem* spaces, which have gradually led to loss and exclusion of the character of *Hem* life, its activities and spaces.

However, the proposed campaign, expansion projects, and megacity vision set out a socio-architectural context that is alien to the everyday experience and context of the majority of the population of HCMC, in particular the *Hem* communities. The problems of 'modernising' *Hem*'s spaces can be seen when decision-makers with megacity visions, for example, face the comeback of spatial changes and the associated everyday local activities, despite the *Hem* having been expanded and 'upgraded'. This problem indicates that government planning and its urban policies do not give enough consideration to spatial changes and public usage of *Hem* space, consequently disregarding their role in the livelihoods of

Hem residents. Hypothetically, the unresolved differences between the municipal perspective and *Hem* residents' perspective have led to the resilience of spatial practice in *Hem* spaces. It is the aim of this thesis to mediate between these two perspectives, in the hope that this investigation of *Hem* urbanism and spatial changes could reconcile them.

This problem pushes the thesis towards investigating *Hem* space and the everyday life of *Hem* residents to bring forward a better understanding of the characteristics of *Hem*, including the spatial transformations made by residents to adapt to the everyday needs of economic, social, cultural, and economic life. Furthermore, to effectively interrogate the making of *Hem* characteristics via spatial changes and practices, the investigation should not be limited to analysing the physical appearance of *Hem* space and its human lived experiences as two separate entities. The investigation should look into the human-spatial interrelationship as manifested in everyday routines and real-life lived experiences of *Hem* residents who make changes to the physical structures and spaces of the *Hem* (their house, their doorstep, or the public footpath of the *Hem*), and the roles of these changes for the life of *Hem* residents. This investigation generates several key research questions whose answers will hopefully achieve the research aims. The below sub-questions are developed from the main questions noted earlier:

> **1. What is the spatial/architectural role of *Hem* in the creation of urban structure and in the everyday life of *Hem* residents and communities?**
>
> **2. What are the key factors that influence the making and transformation of *Hem* spaces?**
>
> **3. How have local residents physically adapted *Hem* spaces to their everyday needs in different urban contexts?**
>
> **4. How do various cultural and social factors, such as local belief systems and retail activities, play a significant role in spatial practices in *Hem*?**

As discussed, each *Hem* in HCMC has a unique social context and cultural and historical background that influences the spatial changes and local built form of that *Hem*. To examine the above questions this thesis presents case studies from three different contexts as mentioned earlier: (1) *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang, a typical *Hem*; (2) *Hem*-style spaces in Nguyen Thien Thuat apartment blocks, built with American support; and (3) *Hem* 204 Tran Hung Dao in the Chinatown area. Detailed explanations of these case studies are discussed in Chapter 3.

The Gap in Knowledge: Spatial Practice and *Hem* Communities

There is not much research on the *Hem* of HCMC, and even fewer intensive studies of *Hem* space from an interior/architectural perspective. As shown in Table 1.1, the most recent scholarly work on Vietnamese urban spaces related to *Hem* has been undertaken from other perspectives, including urban geography, social studies, and human anthropology. There is a gap in knowledge about the life and spatial transformation of *Hem* spaces. This thesis, which looks at spatial practices in *Hem* from an interior and architectural perspective, builds upon and adds to the existing body of knowledge about *Hem* and to Vietnamese urban studies more broadly.

Researcher	Researcher's Background	Focus of their Studies
Lisa Drummond	Human geographer	General context of the public and private sections of the general urban space of Vietnamese Cities (2000)
Erik Harms	Anthropologist	HCMC morphology through an anthropological perspective in suburban districts (2011, 2012, 2014)
Catherine Earl	Social anthropologist	Social norms and interaction in public spaces of HCMC (2005, 2008, 2010)
Annette Mie Kim	Urban planning researcher	HCMC sidewalk culture and history (2012, 2015, 2016)
Marie Gibert	Urban geographer	Ongoing issues during the government urbanisation process in *Hem* areas (2016, 2017, 2018)
This Thesis	**Interior Architecture**	**Examination of the adaptive transformation of *Hem* from a design perspective. How local communities have been constructing this space via their spatial practice.**

Table 1.1 Summary of key studies related to this thesis (Produced by the author, 2018)

As discussed earlier in section 1.1, ongoing tension between the local and municipal perspectives on *Hem* space has led to the development of this study's hypothesis, to fill a gap in understanding and studying the ways that local communities have transformed *Hem* space physically to adapt it to daily

local practices and social routines, as well as to meet cultural and economic needs. The theoretical concept of spatial practice is often invoked to identify the significance of urban space created in the ordinary, mundane, and under-represented urban life of local communities that is hidden, neglected, or under threat from urban transformation, rapid urbanisation, or globalisation (Chalana and Hou, 2016, pp. 8-13). These spatial practices are similar to those in the HCMC *Hem* context, with stigmatisation and negative criticism by the government and planning agencies of *Hem* areas as 'slum-like, uncivilised' due to their lack of orderly planning.

This thesis is inspired by a number of philosophical works, including *The Production of Space* (1991) by Henri Lefebvre and, in particular, his concepts of spatial modes, *conceived space,* and spatial practice. There are two key lines of urban theories that inform my research. The first line is the spatial theories of philosophers whose work draws on the relationship between human experience and spaces have been largely influenced by or related to Lefebvre's works. Edward Soja (1996) proposed the concepts of *first space* and *second space* to better reconcile the inhabitants' feelings and experiences regarding the human-built environment, nature, and politics. Michel de Certeau (1980) introduced his two spatial modes, those of *voyeurs* and *walkers,* experiencing a space, respectively, as professional designers/planners and as ordinary citizens walking on the street or living in a space. These experiences and understandings of human-built experience are also discussed by Edward Relph (1976), who coined the terms 'insideness' and 'outsideness' to describe and understand the different perspectives on human experiences of physical spaces.

The second line of theories informing my research are design literature from architectural scholars, planners, and designers, including Jan Gehl (2010), Christopher Day (1999), and Allan B. Jacobs (1985, 1997). These theories offer insight into how the physical characteristics of buildings, houses, public spaces might influence human behaviour, experience, and consciousness, as well as how the human psyche, everyday experiences, and aspirations drive structural change, design, and adaptation of spaces in which people live, work, and socialise.

While the first line of theories suggests a theoretical base for this research the second line contributes to the analytical framework of this thesis, including data collection and analysis methods.
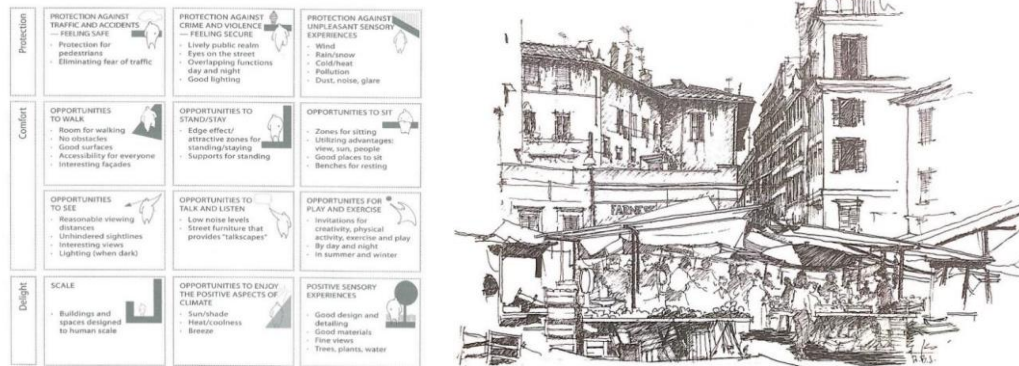
Figure 1.9 (Left) Criteria to create an ideal public space for pedestrians, illustrated by simple sketches and categorised into groups (Jan Gehl, 2010, p. 239). (Right) The street and its market in Via dei Giubbonari, Rome by Allan B. Jacobs, in his book *Great Streets* (1993, p. 20).

As insightful as these concepts are, any theoretical understanding will still need to establish a firm link with the research context of HCMC *Hem* space. There is a theoretical gap in how spatial theories, in particular Lefebvre's spatial modes, can be adapted to understand and investigate the spatial practice of *Hem* residents and communities. The concept of spatial practice has a broad meaning and has been used for research in different disciplines, such as political studies, theatre, economic management, literature, human geography, modern media theories, and art history (Ghulyan, 2019, p. 4; Watkins, 2005, pp. 209-215). This gap poses the question – what are the possibilities for my investigation to elude the theories of spatial practice, that is, to practically identify the influence of locational characteristics such as history, culture, economics, tradition, and daily routines on the spatial transformation and adaptation of *Hem* spaces and on local residents?

I will respond to this theoretical gap in Chapter 2 by conceptually grounding both spatial and architectural theories in their understanding of both the physical characteristics of *Hem* space and its human lived experience. These are fundamental aspects of researching the practice of spatial changes, particularly as my thesis is investigating the characteristics of *Hem* landscapes and life. These grounded knowledges will provide insights, ideas, and methods for my investigation to move beyond the limitations of subjectively framing the physical appearance of physical spaces in *Hem* without considering the motivations, aspirations, and everyday needs of local residents and communities. Doing so will allow me to more effectively interrogate the spatial practice of HCMC *Hem* spaces, with a better understanding of the everyday life of *Hem* residents.
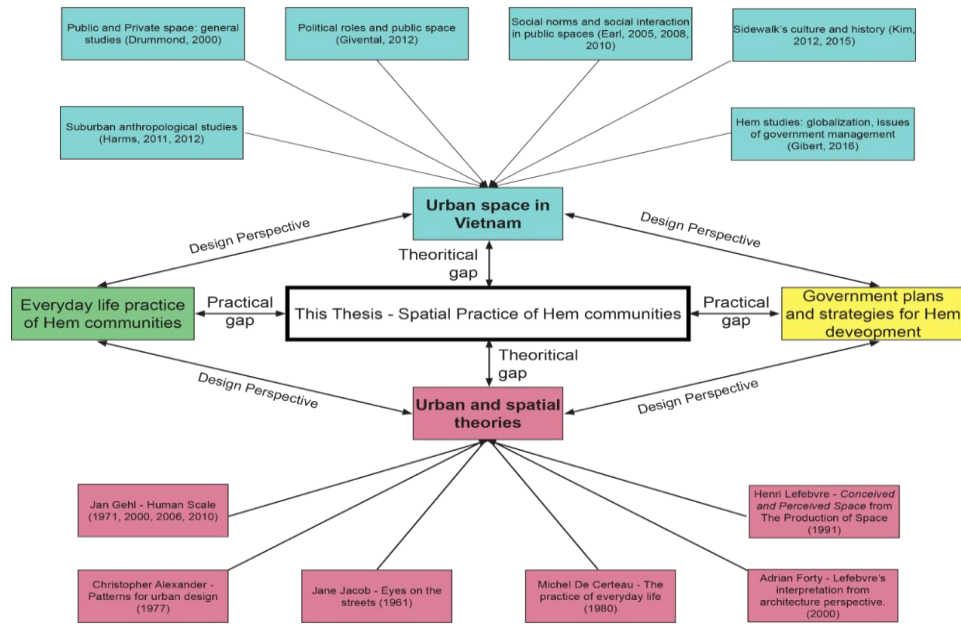
Figure 1.10 The key ideas from the existing literature that have helped form the conceptual framework and theoretical position of this thesis (Author, 2018).

1.4 Urban Development in HCMC: A Contextual Background

Travelling around Ho Chi Minh City today, it is not hard to notice the *Hem* running off its main streets. Each *Hem* is unique; some have narrow entrances leading to a spacious yard, some have spacious entrances but are cul-de-sacs, others have narrow passages meandering through maze-like series of smaller lanes, and some are perpendicular and bisect two parallel streets. The shapes of the *Hem* network are mostly 'organic' and seem to have developed without following any planning standards.
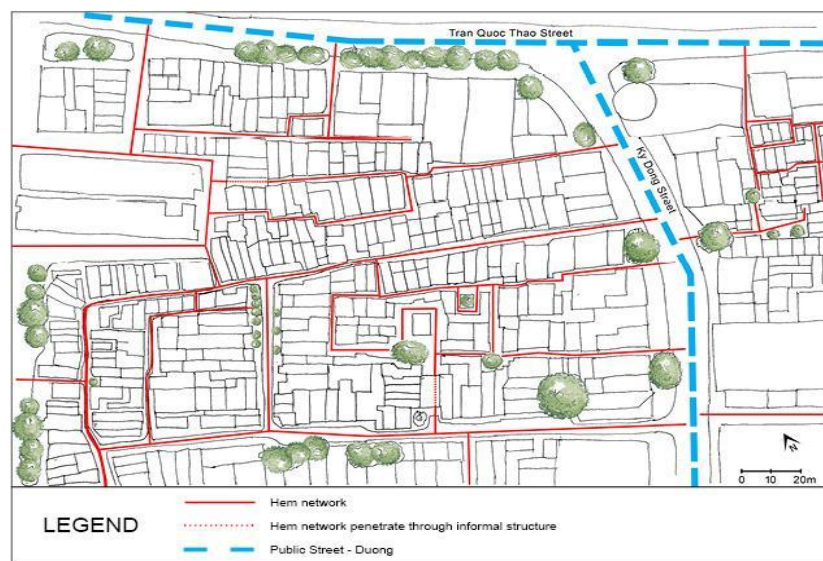
Figure 1.11 *Hem* network in Ward 9 of District 3 – Reproduced from GPS (Author, 2017)

The establishment of *Hem* networks has been part of HCMC's urbanisation for decades. In several historic districts, such as Districts 1, 3, and 5, some of the *Hem* were formed centuries ago (Thai Nguyen, 2017, p. 116; Dinh Nguyen, 2018, p. 229). Some *Hem* in these historic districts were constructed with the professional urban planning of the French colonial period, or by the South Saigon government with US government support (Thai Nguyen, 2017, p. 79). Other *Hem* have been influenced by spiritual beliefs brought into the City by migrant populations centuries ago. For example, the practice of *phong thuy* was brought in by ethnic Chinese who migrated to the city in the 16th and 18th centuries (Dinh Nguyen, 2018, p. 229; Doling, 2019, pp. 38-46).

These layers of the city's history have given different characteristics to *Hem* places and spaces. The end of the Vietnam War in 1975 brought a new Socialist period to the City, with many changes to the lives of most people in the City, including for *Hem* residents, whose private businesses were strictly controlled and regulated.

Figure 1.12 (Left) The entrance to the Manufacture d'Opium, constructed by the French government in the early 19th Century. (Middle) The remnant of the entrance at the present day. (Right) Western-style restaurants in the courtyard (Collected from Doling, 2014, photographed by the author, 2019).

In this section, I will provide the contextual background of HCMC's urban development, with a special focus on *Hem* space. Study of Ho Chi Minh City's historical layers will contribute to the understanding of present-day landscapes of *Hem* space, and thus help contextualise my later discussion of the spatial and architectural transformations of *Hem* spaces in my case studies.

Delores Hayden (1997, pp. 227-230) asserts that the history of an urban place/space is not only learnt from the succinct descriptions of books and scholarly works. It can be further investigated by engaging with the memories of local residents, such as elders living there, who can illustrate the meaning of spaces through their ordinary lives over the decades. Off-the-record comments and the viewpoints of historians and preservationist can also be taken into account. Therefore, this contextual review of HCMC *Hem* will include my interviews with several senior residents and academics who have intimate knowledge of *Hem* spaces and life. They are: Mrs V, a respected senior resident living in *Hem* 60 of Ly

Chinh Thang street since the 1950s; Associate Professor Hoang Ngoc Lan, currently a lecturer at Ho Chi Minh City University of Architecture (HUA), a planning expert researching the urban morphology and development of HCMC; and Doctor Nguyen Thi Viet Ha (HUA), who researches the community and public spaces of urban areas.

Figure 1.13 (Left) Tall tube-houses in *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street. (Right) A breakfast venue along the path of *Hem* 53 Cao Thang Street (Photographed by the author, 2017).

The Making of the Metropolis – from Prey Nokor to French Saigon

Ho Chi Minh City has a relatively short history of only about 400 years of development, in contrast to Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam. In the 16th century, the site of today's HCMC was a muddy wilderness area named Prey Nokor, which was part of the Khmer Kingdom. According to historian Vu Hong Lien, it was a marshland comprising small villages inhabited by the Khmer people (Vu, 2013, p.3). The Nguyen Lords who held power in central Vietnam began to expand their territories toward the south in the early 17th century. They laid claim to the land by establishing trading outposts (Vu, 2013, pp. 4-6). The Lords built a citadel named Gia Dinh, an octagonal military fortress surrounded by villages segmented by networks of canals and roads for transportation. Approximately five kilometres from Gia Dinh, a population of Chinese immigrants established their own market town and settlements called Cho Lon, the present-day Chinatown where wholesaling activities still thrive (Vu, 2013, pp. 13-17).

Figure 1.14 Prey Nokor (Ho Chi Minh City Museum collection)

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After colonisation by the French in the 1860s, the southern region of Vietnam was renamed Cochinchina and its capital, Saigon, comprised the Gia Dinh citadel region and the Cho Lon area (Vu, 2013, pp. 18-23). The colonial government then transformed Saigon from a collection of informal settlements into a metropolis. Using planning and architectural styles borrowed from contemporary Paris, French Saigon was given the moniker 'The Pearl of the Far East' for its glamorous and elegant architecture and its broad and well-designed boulevards reflecting European urban landscapes (Vu, 2013, pp. 30-34). The major urban planners of Saigon were: Paul Coffyn, Lieutenant-Colonel of the Marine Engineering Corps Roads and Bridges Department (1862); Ernest Michel Hebrand, head of the Indochina Architecture and Town Planning Service (1923); and the urban planner Henri Cerutti (1942). Their masterplans transformed the once uninhabited Prey Nokor into a cosmopolitan centre of administration, industry, and commerce, with 500,000 inhabitants, including approximately 8,000 from European countries, by the end of the 19th century (Bao Nguyen, 2016, pp. 16-17). Wendolyn Wright (1991), an urban historian, asserts in her book *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* that city planning and building were major activities of French colonialism (pp. 15-20). In fact, Saigon's masterplans show the predominance of French culture and architecture in Saigon infrastructure. The aim, according to the historian Nguyen Duc Hiep (Hiep, 2016a, pp. 27-83), was to recreate European lifestyles for foreign workers, including expats, traders, officials, and soldiers from France and other European countries. This heritage is still visible today, particularly in District 1 (the Central Business District of HCMC) and parts of District 3.

Figure 1.15 French-style shops and a café along Rue de Catinat, known today as Dong Khoi Street, one of the most decorated streets in Saigon, photographed by Ludovic Crespin in 1910 (From Hiep, 2016a, p.35).
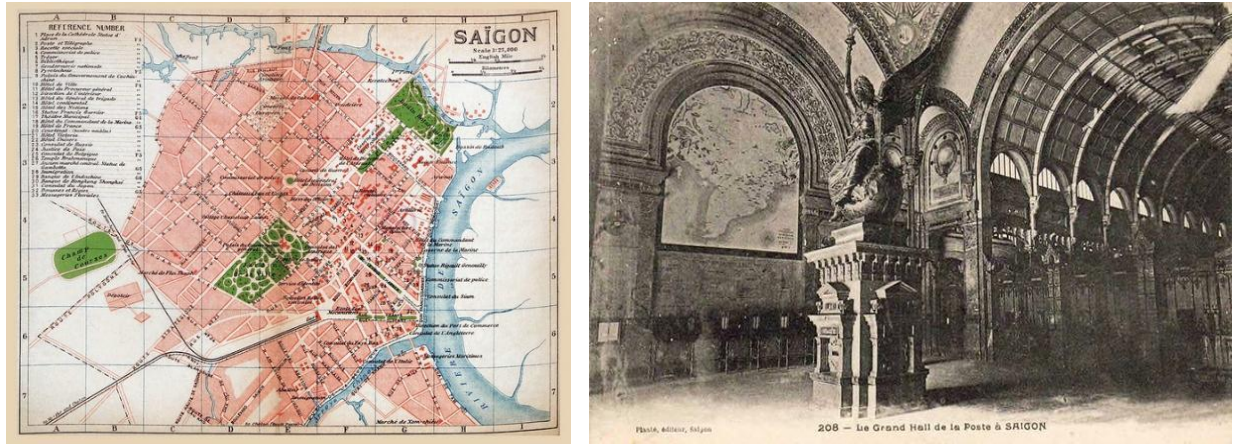
Figure 1.16 (Left) Plan of Saigon by Hebrand from the 1920s. (Right) The Central Post Office of Saigon – *Poste centrale de Saigon* – designed by Cochinchina's first chief architect (From Hiep, 2016b, p.137 and Doling, 2014, p.70).

Colonial infrastructure was limited to the radius of the city centre, including today's Districts 1 and 3. The area exclusively served European expats and the bourgeois population of Saigon. Other areas of Saigon were out of the picture and not accounted for in official planning. Many people were drawn to the city in the 1920s and 1930s, including many people from poorer and rural areas. These people were housed in informal settlements in wilderness areas on the outskirts of the central district, which the planning systems had not yet covered (Vu, 2013 pp. 20-28). In an article published in *Youth News* (*Tuoi Tre*), the journalist Cu Mai Cong (2016)[1] questioned the French colonial planning and development of Saigon. He criticised the negligence of the colonial government in dealing with the rapid population boom and the mushrooming of thousands of informal settlements. The area between Saigon and Cho Lon remained a marshland until the 1910s (Vu, 2103, p. 28). Locals who lived here, including the rural immigrants, built thatched houses and formed groups of informal settlements connected by small lanes and muddy pathways (Cong, 2016; Vu, 2013, p. 29). These pathways and lanes are believed to have been the first form of the present-day *Hem* of HCMC, with several areas characterised by informal settlements and networks of *Hem*.

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[1] Retrieved from https://tuoitre.vn/vien-ngoc-sai-gon-thoi-thuoc-phap-sang-co-nao-1093378.htm
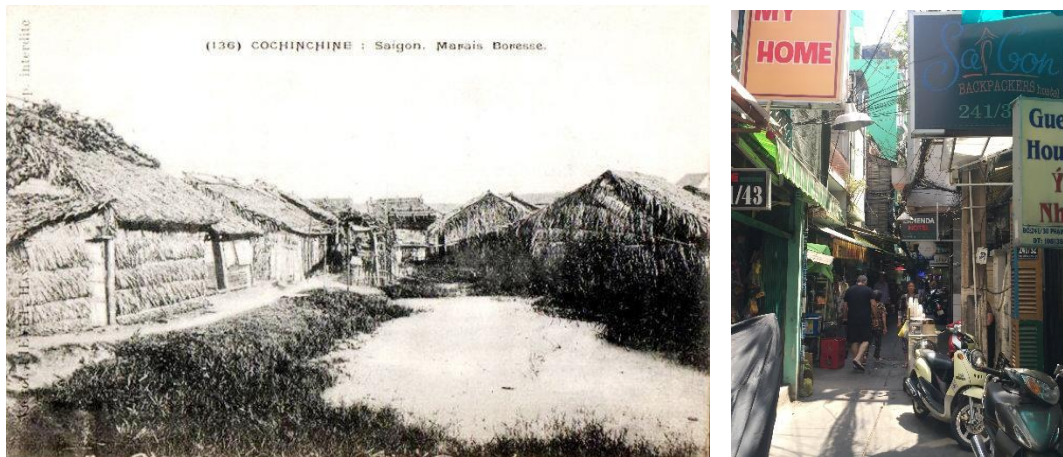
Figure 1.17 (Left) A typical thatched house in Boresse Swamp (From Cong, 2016). (Right) The area is now a bustling tourist hotspot and its *Hem* are full of guesthouses and hostels (Photographed by the author, 2018).

Residents of these remote and neglected *Hem* areas made their way to the districts of Saigon and Cho Lon to conduct their business (Kim, 2015, pp. 34-53). Otherwise, they made their living by selling cheap products from their homes in the *Hem*, such as palm leaves for making water buckets, little oil lamps, and knick-knacks (Vu, 2013, p. 27). The Boresse Swamp, situated between the marshlands of Saigon and Cho Lon, was the location of many informal, unregulated settlements and networks of *Hem* (Gibert and Peyvel, 2016, p. 519). This area is now a famous tourist spot – the Bui Vien area attracts millions of international tourists, travellers, and backpackers annually. About 20 *Hem* still exist today, and can be accessed via the streets of the Bui Vien area.

Figure 1.18 Architectural model of houses and *Hem* networks in District 1 during the 1930s (Ho Chi Minh City Museum collection).

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Although the French colonial government of Saigon[2] did not directly contribute to the formation of *Hem*, the uncontrolled densification of migrant settlement is believed to be behind the creation of HCMC's *Hem* spaces during this period (Gibert and Peyvel, 2016, p. 519). French architecture, particularly of the *Beaux-Arts* style, is linked to the infamous colonial regime which the Vietnamese people fought hard to gain independence from, so it is interesting that present-day residents of HCMC often regard aspects of French culture and architecture as prestigious. A number of *Hem*'s residents, especially, those are of middle-income and above also share this perspective. According to the architect Nguyen Huu Thai (2017, p. 140), one notable element of French-style architecture which remains is the veranda space favoured by most inhabitants of HCMC. Functionally, the veranda at the front of the house improves natural ventilation and allows filtered light to enter the house. Symbolically, houses with verandas are associated with the wealthy classes, especially when the house is decorated with French-style corbels and ornaments. Several wealthy households in *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang (see Chapter 4) have reconstructed their houses in the French villa style. These houses also have veranda spaces, but they are frequently occupied by local street vendors and food stalls.

Saigon's Chinatown – Cho Lon

During the French colonial period (1887-1954), the Cho Lon area was the economic capital of Cochinchina, while the City of Saigon was the administrative and political capital (Doling, 2014, p. 30). Cho Lon is approximately four kilometres south-west of the central business district (District 1) of Saigon. The town was established by two major influxes of immigrants from China in the late 16th century and mid-18th century (Doling, 2014, pp. 25-30). The Chinese immigrants came from various provinces, towns, and villages in China and were mainly of Fujianese, Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka, and Hainanese ethnicities. Their background was largely from mercantile communities specialising in agricultural products, metal artisanship, ceramics, constructions materials, boat building, and commodity trading (Doling, 2014, pp. 28-30).

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[2] The origin of the naming of Saigon remains unknown, except for the fact that the French government officially labelled it Saigon, which has been its name since they established their regime. Many unaccredited stories exist of how the name was come to. Nghia Vo, in his book *Saigon: A History* (2011), suggests that before the Turtle Citadel was built in 1790, the area was a muddy wilderness full of wildlife under the rule of Cambodian King Chey Chetta II. Prei Nokor was the name of the area (p.9). The French misheard "Prei" as "Sai" and "Nokor" as "Gon" (2011, pp.10-12). Whether or not this story is true, the name Saigon was kept as the official city name and is still commonly used by Vietnamese people today.

Figure 1.19 Map of Saigon and Cho Lon areas in 1882, published by Inspector of Lands Boilloux (From Hiep Nguyen, 2016b, p.214, reproduced by the author, 2019).

The ethnic Chinese who migrated to Cho Lon brought with them their social and cultural customs. As a result, the urban characteristics of Cho Lon are greatly influenced by these traditions. One prominent ritual building practice which was vigorously applied in the urban landscape of Cho Lon was the geomancy system of *phong thuy* ('wind and water') adapted from the Chinese *feng shui* (Kim, 2015, p. 35; Doling, 2019, pp. 43-45). The journalist Dinh Nguyen (2018), the author of *Chuyen nho o Cho Lon* (*The Little Stories of the Big Market*), based on his 20 years of research and observation of Cho Lon's everyday rituals and building customs, suggests that Cho Lon's streets were laid out to follow the North-South axis perpendicularly because this would help to attract wealth and luck for the livelihood and business of local communities.

Unlike the informally built and unplanned *Hem* in the Saigon area, Dinh Nguyen (2018) notes that the *Hem* in Cho Lon were systematically built and planned by local communities sharing the same ethnic or trading backgrounds (Dinh Nguyen, 2018, p.227). Each *Hem* was named accordingly to these backgrounds as way to reflect their local cultures or identity. Furthermore, '*Hem*' was spelt differently according to the local dialect, e.g. *phuong*, *ly*, *hang,* which further reflects a strong local sense of community. To name a few examples, Tung Que Phuong (present-day *Hem* 236 Tran Hung Dao Street) is home to the Cantonese boat-builder community. The people of Tue Hue Ly (present day 712 Nguyen Trai) came from Tue Hue village in China and are of Cantonese background. It is estimated that there are almost 200 *Hem* in Cho Lon which are characterised by collective lifestyles and internal cultures (Dinh Nguyen, 2018, pp. 162-219).

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Figure 1.20 (Left) The gate of Kieu Hung Ly, now *Hem* 137 Luong Nhu Hoc Street (From Dinh Nguyen, 2018, p.228). (Right) Trieu Thuong Hang, now *Hem* 257 Cao Van Lau Street (Author, 2018).

Most of the houses in Cho Lon's *Hem* were built and planned in rows by local investors or property developers. Each *Hem* also has its own landmarks expressing the community's background, such as entrance gates with the *Hem* name engraved in Chinese text or public altars and communal shrines dedicated to the deities and guardians which are worshiped at nearby *hoi quan* (assembly halls), which are communal buildings that provide a social gathering place for various Cho Lon ethnic communities (Dinh Nguyen, 2018, p. 218; Doling, 2019, pp. 42-48). The orientation, design, and location of *Hem* landmarks, including shrines and entrance gates, are determined by local geomancers specialising in *phong thuy* practices, to provide auspicious orientation and placement which will bring wealth, health, and good luck to the residents and businesses of the community. According to Dinh Nguyen (2018, pp. 227-230), the geomancy system of *phong thuy* is one of the key architectural and planning tools used throughout the entire landscape of Cho Lon. All local landmarks, such as *Hem* gates, public altars, shrines, *hoi quan*, temples, and even houses, exhibit well-considered orientations and designs reflecting *phong thuy* guidelines and beliefs. Nguyen believes that *phong thuy* influences, along with the local ethnically based collective lifestyles have helped to foster a sense of community and allowed the Cho Lon ethnic communities to feel at home while living in a distant land (Dinh Nguyen, 2018, p. 227).
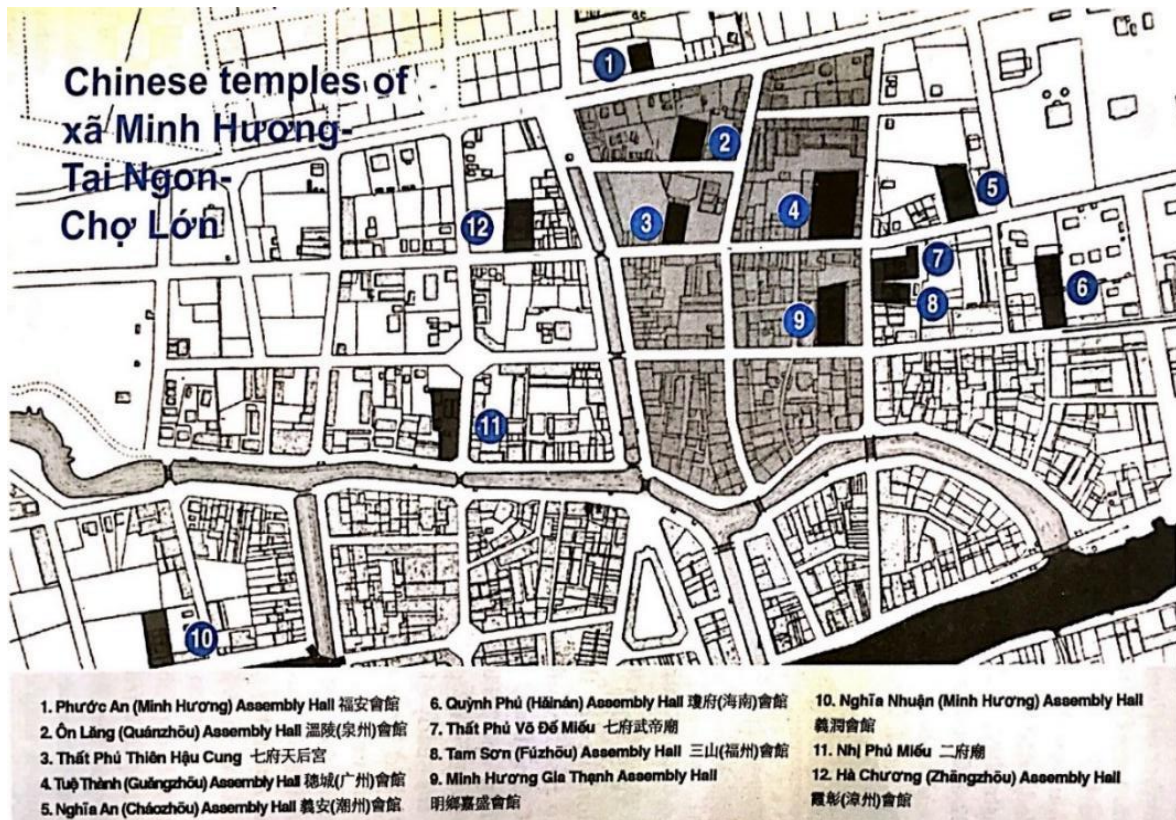
Figure 1.21 The locations of *hoi quan* (assembly halls) around Cho Lon in the early 20th century (From Doling, 2019, p.44).
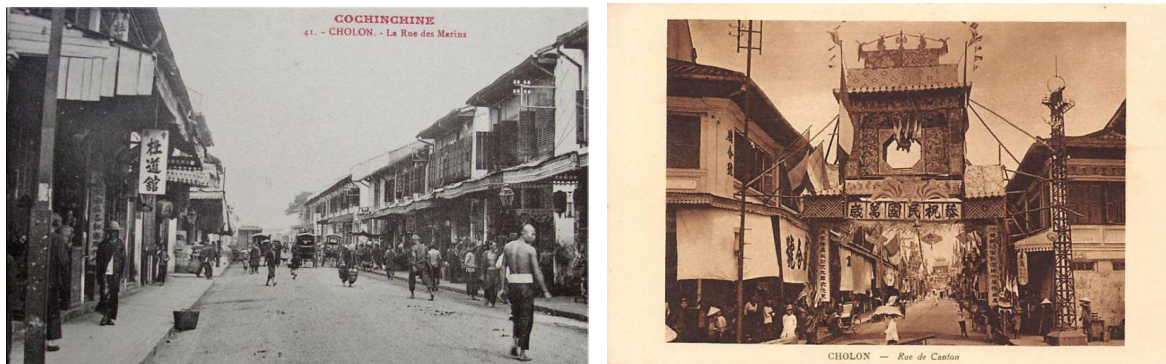
Figure 1.22 (Left) Shop-houses at Rue des Marins, present-day Tran Hung Dao Street; (Right) A welcoming gate at Rue de Canton, present day Trieu Quang Phuc Street (collected from Hiep, 2016b, p.188).

In Chapter 6, I will examine in detail how this local belief system shapes the public and domestic space of a *Hem* community in Cho Lon, Hao Sy Phuong (present-day *Hem* 206 Tran Hung Dao), which is one of the oldest *Hem* and has had only minor changes to its built form. Another critical investigation will look into how *phong thuy* influences the architectural (re)design process, the meaning of these *phong thuy* alterations for a house's occupants, and how *phong thuy* beliefs have been applied in the past and continue to be applied today to the landscape of Cho Lon's *Hem*. Examination of *phong thuy* influences

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on spatial transformations will give us a better understanding of how the spiritual aspects of *phong thuy* have been applied to the built environment and spatial practice in *Hem* spaces. I will briefly review the general principles of *phong thuy* in my examination of its influences on the built environment of *Hem* spaces in Chapter 2.

'American Saigon' Spaces

Following the departure of the French colonial government in 1954, the United States government entered and Vietnam was divided into two parts: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north, with Hanoi as its capital, which followed the socialist ideology of the former Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China; and the Republic of Vietnam in the south, with Saigon as its capital, which followed the capitalist ideology of the United States of America. As Saigon had grown into a huge metropolis of nearly 1.5 million habitations by the end of the 1950s, the city began to expand its territories, including opening up the uninhabited marshland between Saigon and Cho Lon with public streets, bridges, and transportation infrastructure (Doling, 2019, p. 56).

Figure 1.23 Downtown Saigon, District 1, pictures taken by American GI William Ruzin. (Left) Looking at the City's Opera house from Le Loi Boulevard. (Right) Aerial view of the grandeur of Nguyen Hue Boulevard (From (From the Louis Weisner Collection, Open Library of the Vietnam Center and Archive of Texas Tech University).

The ongoing Vietnam War led to a surge of rural populations fleeing war zones in other provinces and migrating to Saigon. According to a report by James E. Bogle (1972, p. 31), spontaneous informal settlements had sprouted in all districts of Saigon. There were thousands of *Hem* networks characterised by makeshift one-room shacks made of recycled materials which had "drifted out of the alleyways onto the public lands, parks, railroads rights-of-way" and could be found "everywhere within urbanised Saigon" (Bogle, 1972, p. 31). Bogle refers to these spontaneous informal settlements and *Hem* networks as having turned the city into a "huge slum" because most management and financial funding given by the USA in support was poured into the ongoing war with the North (Bogle, 1972, pp. 28-44).
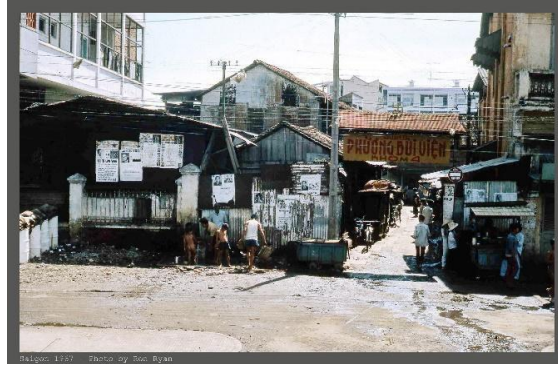
Figure 1.24 (Right) An entrance to a *Hem* neighbourhood on Bui Vien Street in 1967, taken by Australian Army soldier Ron Ryan (From the Louis Weisner Collection, Open Library of the Vietnam Center and Archive of Texas Tech University).

According to the urban researcher Annette Kim (2015, pp. 47-53), the population living in *Hem* were mostly low-income workers who relied for their daily earnings on running businesses along the public pathways of the *Hem*. Lisa Drummond (2000, pp. 2382-2385) further suggests that houses in the city's *Hem* were generally poorly built and did not have enough domestic space to accommodate both living routines and retail activities. Local households tended to informally use their housefront and doorstep areas for retail activities, where business owners casually mix in with other 'spill-over' domestic activities like cooking, children playing, and family dining. This led to the locals physically adapting the structures of their housefronts by adding extra structures which are convenient for domestic and retail use. These images of *Hem* can still be observed today in almost every *Hem* in Ho Chi Minh City. Adaptations of housefronts can now be seen in the form of things like shade canopies protruding into the public *Hem*, made of recycled plastic and supported with bamboo sticks, and window sills full of sauce and condiment bottle for cooking, to name just two. I will look at these ordinary scenes from *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang in District 3 in Chapter 4, where such images have been part of the local community for decades.

The war and its horrific urban destruction were also significant in bringing new development to the existing urban fabric of Saigon, but this did not eradicate the embedded patterns of the city's fabric, including the grand French-style boulevards, the Chinese-style streets, and the sprawling *Hem* networks. However, certain parts of Saigon were severely affected, including several *Hem* networks in Districts 3 and 5 where many houses were destroyed (South Vietnamese Museum Collections and Archives). Medium-scale residential apartments, locally known as *chung cu* (CC), were built on former *Hem* sites in the devasted *Hem* areas of the City, including the site of the present-day CC Nguyen Thien Thuat and Ngo Gia Tu complexes (South Vietnamese Museum Collections and Archives). These were built to house people in Saigon who had lost their homes in the war, as well as a million or so rural refugees. According

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to the architect Nguyen Huu Thai, the rapid construction of American-built CC introduced a new American-influenced architectural layer to Saigon's urbanisation (2017, p. 79).

Figure 1.25 (Left) Aerial view of Nguyen Thien Thuat, devasted by the war, in 1968. (Right) Construction of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat (From the Stuart Koch Collection and the Douglas Pike Collection, Open Library of the Vietnam Center and Archive of Texas Tech University).

The layout and architecture of American-built CC around Saigon were similar, comprising several four-to-six-level residential blocks. According to local architecture researcher Mel Schenck (2020, pp. 223-225), the planning of the CC areas was similar to that of modernist-style social housing in the USA. Pathways between the blocks intersected perpendicularly and were wide enough for automobile traffic. However, in some CC, the planning of the residential blocks and pathways blended in with the *Hem* network and the private houses which survived the war. CC Nguyen Thien Thuat, the largest of the CC, is typical. Travelling to the Nguyen Thien Thuat area today, the lively interconnection of the CC blocks with the nearby *Hem* is obvious. CC pathways have been adapted for commercial activities like street vendors selling groceries or cooked food, and domestic activities like sun-drying laundry.

Figure 1.26 Site plan of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat, showing the distribution of the blocks mixed in with private land areas (Reproduced by the author, 2018, from the People's Committee of District 3).

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Closer examination of the CC blocks shows that their physical characteristics have changed significantly. These structural changes seem to closely resemble the characteristics and images of the city's *Hem*. While the CC represent global modernist architecture applied to public housing, similar to the *unite d'habitation* designed by Le Corbusier (1952), spatial changes in present-day CC reflect the social, economic, and cultural resilience of CC residents. It is important, in my opinion, to investigate the factors influencing these structural changes at CC Nguyen Thien Thuat, given that similar phenomena are occurring in almost every American-built CC in HCMC. Chapter 5 examines CC Nguyen Thien Thuat and its spatial transformation, which is characterised by adaptation into '*Hem*-style' apartments.
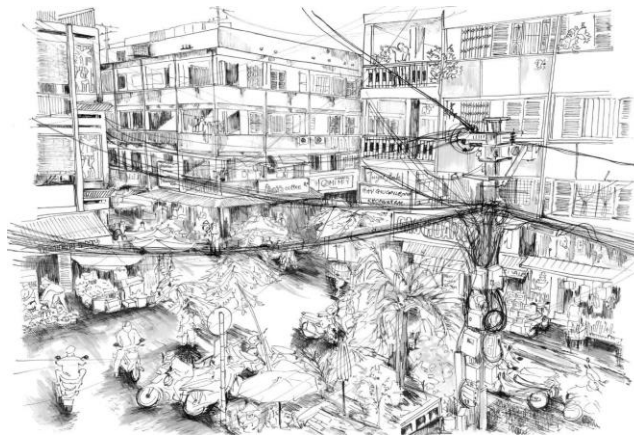
Figure 1.27 The public park of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat has been adapted for use as a pop-up market for CC residents and the nearby *Hem* community (Sketched by the author, 2018)

The Socialist Layer – From Saigon to Ho Chi Minh City

After the Vietnam War ended in 1975, the North and South united and became the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Saigon renamed as Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) after the late President Ho Chi Minh with Hanoi as the capital of the unified Vietnam. The city then received another influx of two million migrants from nearby provinces and the North. This led to overpopulation and a severe housing shortage (Bao Nguyen, 2016, p. 17). According to Gibert (2016, pp. 8-20), during this period the government encouraged the population to build their own their houses through a subsidy scheme which distributed land to the people. Due to the hardships of recovery from the Vietnam War, the government's planning management system could not cope with the overwhelming densification and rapid construction in *Hem* which had happened in all districts (Gibert, 2016, p. 12). As a result, 80 percent of residential houses during this period were built without government planning or management (Gibert, 2016, p. 12).

Densification and house construction were concentrated in the city's *Hem* areas. Properties in the *Hem* were popular among the migrant population because they were cheaper, due to being less accessible

than houses on bigger streets because of the quirky shapes of *Hem* paths and spaces (Gibert, 2016, p. 6). Households in the *Hem* raced to further informally extend their homes and encroach into the vacant land of *Hem* areas before their neighbours did. I will look at one such case of a house owned by Ms H's family at *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street in Chapter 4. Informal extensions of her private premises have been ongoing since the 1970s, which has resulted in many complications caused by legal disputes between the family and local officials, as well as between family members. The urban fabric of HCMC during this period of subsidies was characterised by the proliferation of thousands of unregulated *Hem* networks and the informal construction of *Hem* houses which, according to architect Nguyen Huu Thai (2017, p. 116), is hindering present-day government efforts to 'modernise' the city and its image.

The subsidy period brought a new socialist experience to the city's urban fabric, along with restrictions on private business and property ownership (Jamieson, 1995, p. 360; Thai, 2017, p. 125). According to Jamieson (1995, p. 362), MacLean (2008, pp. 282-297), and Phuong Dinh (2009, pp. 31-33), the socialist influence is less obvious in Ho Chi Minh City's urban fabric than in Hanoi's urban fabric because it came several decades later. However, it still had an impact on the economy and on urban spaces which is perhaps most visible in the population's reaction to the socialist regime, including those living in the City's *Hem* and CC.

Government-managed retail shops, or *hop tac xa,* were introduced to replace privately owned retail shops around HCMC, including in the city's *Hem*. According to Mrs V, a senior resident living in *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang street, a *hop tac xa* in the *Hem* used to be located in an abandoned house which belonged to a family who had fled to America as refugees.[3] Despite the strict regulation of private businesses and the establishment of *hop tac xa*, the local community of *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang street, along with several street vendors, nevertheless informally established a pop-up market on vacant land opposite the *hop tac xa*. Local officials frequently patrolled the areas to enforce the rules and deter market gatherings, but business quicky resumed after the officials left, according to Mrs V. Local use of this vacant land is still prevalent today, and now it is a locally famous public food court. Furthermore, the local government has deployed several policies to support the management of this food court. I will go into more detail about how the nature of this food court has changed over the past decades in Chapter 4, including the use of the food court, the structural changes made by the local business community, and the support of the local government.

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[3] Interviews with Mrs V by author, 2018 & 2019.

Similar resilience of private businesses is also obvious in the American-built Nguyen Thien Thuat CC. According to Mr B and his family, who have been living in Block B since the 1980s, flats on the ground level have been adapted to accommodate family-owned business, including grocers, restaurants, and beverage and tailor shops.[4] Mr H, a frequent visitor to the CC Nguyen Thien Thuat area, also suggests that American products, such as domestic appliances, were offered for private sale around the CC, mostly 'underground'.[5] Both Mr H and Mr B also noted during our interviews that physical changes to the formal structures of CC blocks had occurred rapidly. These changes included domestic renovations and informal adaptations of the shared public corridors, CC façades, and balconies. These structural changes were made to manage local issues regarding lack of domestic spaces or retail areas, but do not appear to comply with formal construction regulations.

Figure 1.28 (Left) Flags of the National Liberation Front displayed at Nguyen Thien Thuat *chung cu* during the Fall of Saigon (From the Open Library of Texas Tech University). (Right) A former kiosk *hop tac xa* at *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang Street (Photographed by the author, 2018).

Unlike the strict socialist practices of Hanoi and the North, socialist practices in HCMC were less rigid. According to Associate Professor Hoang Ngoc Lan (HUA), the flexibility of the government in managing private business and retail here was due to South Vietnam still being influenced by the mercantile culture of US capitalism. It was also the most practical policy for the period.[6] While the country was struggling to recover after the war and the city was struggling economically, the 'underground' practice of private business offered immediate livelihoods to the population, reflecting the fact that socialist-style economics had not yet entered the vernacular of the former 'American Saigon'. Professor Lan further commented that the flourishing of *Hem* networks and the unregulated construction of *Hem*

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[4] Interview with Mr B and his family by author, 2017, 2018 & 2019.
[5] Interview with Mr H by author, 2018.
[6] Interview with Ass Prof Hoang Ngoc Lan by author, 2018.

houses and CC blocks were inevitable during this period of the city's urbanisation, especially as the economy of the country had been crippled by the war.

Ho Chi Minh City after *Doi Moi*: *Hem* Spaces and a Global City

In 1986, Vietnamese Communist Party introduced *Doi Mo*i (economic reform), with open-door policies on foreign investment and global markets, and decentralisation of the economy. Amongst other policies were the re-encouragement of private trade and family-based retail business, the reinstatement of private ownership of property, and the removal of the housing, property, and economic subsidy systems in HCMC (Doling, 2019, pp. 60-67). Changes to the city's built environment, including its *Hem* spaces, are now marked by private property development, new building construction, and house improvements and renovations. The practice of private business, as well as foreign market influences, were ingrained in the former Saigon during the US-supported period (1954-1875). However, the influences on Saigon from foreign markets mainly came from the USA and its allies. The dynamic of urban development and the return of private business after *Doi Moi* in HCMC brought influences from a wider range of global economies and foreign investors, for example, from Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Germany, Australia, etc.

Figure 1.29 (Left) *Hem* house designed by Japanese architecture firm Sanuki Daisuke (From Sanuki Daisuke Architects, http://www.sanukiar.com/). (Right) Office of the Japanese-Taiwanese architecture firm UnitO in a French-built row house in District 3 (Photographed by the author, 2018).

The sensibility of private business ingrained into the population of HCMC during the US-supported period includes those living in *Hem* areas. This sensibility brought an emerging bourgeoisie which had become wealthier thanks to the return of private business. With better finance, this population are willing to spend their money to improve their houses and raise their living standards (Thai Nguyen, 2017, p. 128). Shacks and low-rise houses in *Hem* areas were soon replaced by modern-style houses of

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multiple storeys, up to five or six levels. New construction and renovations are often based on the existing footprints of *Hem* houses. The concern to improve living standards and give the younger generation a better life is seen in the fact that locals are hiring professional architects and engineers to design their houses. They are also hiring *phong thuy* masters to plan the interior layouts and structural shapes of their houses.

However, not all citizens residing in the *Hem* can afford to renovate their houses. Some people I spoke to have been living in poor living conditions and are currently facing property disputes between family members. Several parts of their houses which have informally encroached on public space in the past decades are now run-down. Nevertheless, the house still provides spaces for the everyday working and living routines of the family. The contrasting images of squatter houses and tall buildings can also be commonly seen in almost every *Hem* in HCMC. The two detailed cases of Mrs V's and Ms H's houses in Chapter 4 illustrate this contrast.

Figure 1.30 Photomontage of *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street, District 3 (Produced by the author, 2018).

There are also cases of *Hem* residents relying on the open public *Hem* to operate their businesses, for example, food and beverage stalls, grocers, and other businesses selling daily commodities. This is a common typology, the Vietnamese shop-house, with family-based retail activities located at the ground level and housefront areas and private family quarters located at the back or on upper levels (Thai Nguyen, 2017, p. 170). Shop-house businesses often extend their retail activities to the public *Hem* by adding extra structures like canopies, signboards, vending carts, shop fittings, and decorations. The practice of private business in *Hem* is also characterised by street vendors who temporarily set up business at the front or doorstep areas of *Hem* houses. These vendors periodically relocate along *Hem* paths, prowling up and down the *Hem* searching for customers and squeezing through the narrow path full of local businesses and shop extensions. The settings of shop-house activities and street vendors

change constantly throughout the day, depending on the time and who is occupying the public spaces of the *Hem*. These everyday human activities meander through the quirky paths of *Hem* routes, together with the construction of new modern-style houses, dimpled with squatter houses in between them. In his book *On the Form and Soul of The City* (*Dang Hon Do Thi*), the architect Luu Trong Hai (2017, pp. 117-122), described the city's *Hem*:

> *In this City, there are thousands of Hem. I walked through these mazes and witness the erection of new, tall, modern houses. But these new houses do not segregate people from talking with each other. [Everyday life in] Hem reflects a strong sense of community. People living and working in Hem always take care of each other. [Shop-house] businesses allow the local community to take a glimpse into each other's life, knowing each other struggles, then sharing each other's stories.*

Figure 1.31 Everyday life along *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street (Sketched by the author, 2018).

Hem being significantly altered by construction by the emerging bourgeoisie has resulted in a heterogenous landscape of the new and the old, the renovated and the run-down, the high-rise and low-rise, the formal and informal. The concern of the city government, as suggested earlier in the Problem Statement section, is that *Hem* landscapes are chaotic and lack order, and thus require formal planning policies and regulations like those introduced by the Civilized and Modern City campaign and the *Hem* widening projects. The situation has intensified, with numerous new urban developments around HCMC, undertaken with foreign investment, which are favoured by the city's planning officials (Kim, 2016, pp. 23-24). Accordingly, the homogenous landscape of the Phu My Hung Town project is

held up as an exemplar which benchmarks the city's planning and development, endorsed by the Mayor, Mr Nguyen Thanh Phong (Manh Hoa, 2019).[7]

Figure 1.32 (Left) Phu My Hung Town (From Phu My Hung website, phumyhung.vn. (Right) Townhouses in Phu My Hung (Photographed by the author, 2017).

Phu My Hung Town was designed by the American architecture firm SOM (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill) in the early 2000s. The town comprises a number of mega-malls and high-rise residential buildings. Its landscape is also well known for its exclusive 'gated community' where half the population are foreigners. The orderly landscape of Phu My Hung is characterised by row houses with consistent setbacks from the street, whose design reflects a taste for American-style villas. Spacious streets and boulevards are regularly patrolled by Town security guards to stop illegal use of the streets and pavements, or spontaneous residential construction, from violating the landscape (Kim, 2016, pp. 23-24).

Mayor Phong has asserted that this homogenous landscape of Phu My Hung should be applied to further planning and redevelopment of the city's *Hem* expansion projects (Manh Hoa, 2019). Ideally, widened *Hem* and an orderly landscape would increase traffic circulation through these areas and decrease overcrowding and traffic jams in the main public streets, which are currently under severe pressure from the population of 12 million. Furthermore, Mayor Phong believes that the successful urban planning approaches learned from Phu My Hung should improve Ho Chi Minh City's image and give it megacity status.

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[7] Retrieved from https://www.sggp.org.vn/chu-tich-ubnd-tphcm-nguyen-thanh-phong-quan-7-phat-trien-thanh-quan-do-thi-kieu-mau-586192.html

Figure 1.33 Mayor Phong holds a briefing on the megacity model (From Manh Hoa, 2019).

Hem communities that have supported *Hem* expansion projects and been 'upgraded' as per the new standards receive a blue gate banner saying 'Civilised Neighbourhood' – *khu pho van hoa* (Gibert, 2016, p.13). This includes the public pathways between the American-built *chung cu* blocks, which are administratively categorised as *Hem*. Procedures for *Hem* expansion projects are executed according to Decision 88/2007/QĐ-UBND, authorised by the People's Committee of HCMC in 2008. This Decision applies to all the city's *Hem* and provides guidelines for local authorities to assess and categorise the physical characteristics of *Hem* spaces, such as their length and width. In Article 1- General Principles, the Decision states that *Hem* expansion projects aim to improve the living environment of the local community by, for example, ensuring fire safety and a hygienic environment. Outcomes of expansion projects should ensure that *Hem* landscapes reflect the urban development of a civilised and modern city (People's Committee of HCMC, 2008, Article 1, para. 2). *Hem* space is defined in categories in Article 2 – Definitions, and then is expanded according to Article 4 – Regulations on Planning Widths for *Hem* (Tables 1.2 and 1.3). It should be also noted that the Decision have been commonly referred as sole standards for local government to plan *Hem*'s development, and for local resident to commence their private constructions. There are no local codes, or regulations that navigate the private construction not to over-develop its premises that may compromise *Hem*'s width, such as the setback profiles rules from Australia's RESCode.

Figure 1.34 (Left) A 'Civilised Neighbourhood' banner at *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street, District 3. (Right) Nguyen Thien Thuat *chung cu* (Photographed by the author, 2017).

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Categories	Definition	Standardisation of *Hem* lengths	Minimum planning width	Remarks
Primary alleyway – *Hem Chinh*	*Hem* directly connecting public roads of more than 12-metre width and other *Hem.*	Regardless of the length	6 metres	Planning width can be readjusted with permission of the Chairman of the People's Committee of the local District, but may not be less than 4.5 m.
Secondary alleyway – *Hem Nhanh*	*Hem* that connect to public roads or derive from *Hem Chinh* or connect to other *Hem.*	Less than 25 m	3.5 m	Planning width can be increased up to 0.5 m extra if the density of the *Hem* is higher than 300 people/hectare or there are electric poles in *Hem* space.
		25 m – 50 m	4.0 m	
		50 m – 100 m	4.5 m	
Dead-end alleyway (cul-de-sac) – *Hem Cut*	*Hem* which only connect at one end to other *Hem* or public roads.	100 m – 200 m	5.0 m	N/A
		More than 200 m	6.0 m	N/A
Communal paths – *Loi di chung*	A dead-end providing an internal pathway for a few houses, formed by property location and segregation.	Regardless of the length	3.5 m	Minimum planning width can be smaller, but no less than 2.5m, to be determined by mutual agreement of local residents.

Table 1.2 Regulations and Standards for *Hem* Expansion (The People's Committee of HCMC, 2008, Article 2, para. 2-5) (Reproduced by the author, 2017).

Process	Description	Illustration
Stage 1	Boundary estimation, initial excavation, and placement of utility access hole.	
Stage 2	Household self-preparing renovations and the cutting back of their structure according to the *Hem* expansion width required.	
Stage 3	Renovating the *Hem* is carried out by companies appointed by the local government. The expansion is completed by re-tiling the *Hem* surface, installing a new sewage system and manholes, and increasing the *Hem* elevation to prevent flash flood.	

Table 1.3 Stages of expanding a *Hem* in Ward 13, Phu Nhuan District (From Gibert, 2016, p.18).

However, the pioneering research of Marie Gibert (2016, p. 11) suggests that only a small number of *Hem* out of the thousand existing have been expanded and renovated. Tran Thi Viet Ha, a lecturer at HUA who researches public use of the city's urban spaces, has revealed several challenges for the *Hem*

expansion projects.[8] Financially, not every district can plan and initiate *Hem* expansion projects. Furthermore, observations from my preliminary field trips indicated that even in the *Hem* which had been renovated and expanded according to official policies, the encroachment and informal business gradually come back. At *Hem* 469A/23 Huynh Van Banh Street, the *Hem* expansion campaign was initiated in 2008 (Gibert, 2016, pp. 15-18). Local housefronts were reclaimed by People's Committee officials to widen the *Hem*. During my visits in 2017 and 2018, I observed that a number of informal businesses and street vendors had returned to the public *Hem*. Spatial changes to local housefronts had also occurred, with the construction of shade canopies and shop extensions. These uses and alterations to public open *Hem* in 469A/23 seem to go against the expectations of an orderly and 'civilised' image in the government's vision (Figure 1.34).
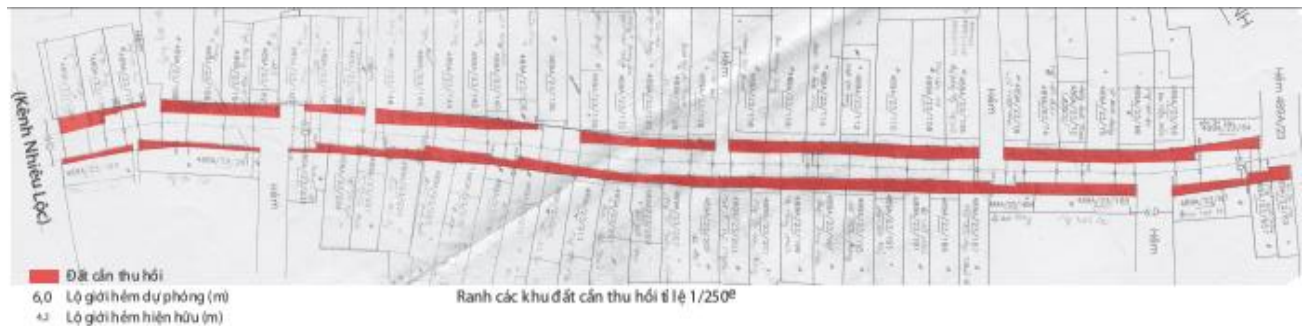
Figure 1.35 The red area indicates the privately occcupied land which was claimed by the People's Committee office for renovation and widening (From Gibert, 2017, p.17).

What is not covered by the Decision is any allowance of physical space for local communities to host their daily social and economic activities, which are key to the urban life of HCMC. Dr Ha continued that the use and adaptation of public open spaces in *Hem* areas is vital to local social, cultural, economic, and even belief systems, but that government planning guidelines such as Decision 88/2007/QĐ-UBND have not yet effectively engaged with or supported this urban culture.[9] The flexibility and mobility of small structural and spatial changes in *Hem* are critically responsive to the daily needs and routines of the local community and according to Dr Ha, who is himself a *Hem* resident, "We do not see the *Hem* path as a mere transportation corridor, at least from the local community perspective." Rigidly and immediately imposing eviction orders and new planning policies with little regard to community ways of life could cause tensions between the viewpoints of the government and the people, Dr Ha concluded. According to the work of urban geographer Marie Gilbert (2016, p. 19), tensions over the use of *Hem*

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[8] Interview with Dr. Tran Thi Viet Ha (Author, 2018).
[9] Interview with Dr Tran Thi Viet Ha (Author, 2019).

space between the government and local *Hem* communities have existed for decades. Community

resilience and resistance to the modernisation campaign has resulted in Ho Chi Minh City's built form

being labelled a 'halfway-megacity'. High-rise structures mix in with small narrow *Hem* leading to new,

modern buildings and houses, with squatter houses in between.

Figure 1.36 Local vendors and street businesses in *Hem* 469A/23 Huynh Van Banh Street (Photographed by the author, 2018).

This ongoing tension between the government and *Hem* community perspectives calls for better

consideration and understanding of the nature of usage and spatial alteration of public *Hem* spaces.

Such consideration should especially include how *Hem* are vital to the economic practices, beliefs, and

daily routines of communities in the context of struggles with a housing shortage and the poor structural

condition of local houses. To effectively research this ongoing tension, any investigation should move

beyond prejudgements of *Hem* landscapes based only on their physical appearance and should

particularly engage with the motivations for the uses and alterations of public *Hem* by studying the

realities and conditions which *Hem* residents face. In Chapter 2, I will provide several lines of

architectural theory to analyse and decode spatial change activities in *Hem* spaces and their meaning for

their occupants and communities. My case studies will also look at the real-life context of several *Hem*

around HCMC, their building and housing conditions, and the everyday routines of their residents.

As I have outlined in this section, the morphology of HCMC's *Hem* space is made up of multiple historical

layers. In the muddy and uninhabitable Prei Nokor, French colonisation demonstrated its power and

influence with the construction of Saigon, initially characterised by French-style public buildings and

villas. French Saigon became a melting pot of migrants from rural areas seeking economic opportunities,

but uncontrolled rapid migration led to the densification of several areas around Saigon city. These

areas were neglected and densification occurred via the unplanned, spontaneous development of

informal settlements with maze-like *Hem* networks. Saigon also attracted a Chinese diaspora who established their own town, Cho Lon, not too far from the city. To the Chinese ethnic community, *Hem* spaces and homes are where their communities can recall their villages, towns, culture, and traditions. Chinese influences were expressed in major buildings, urban layout, and everyday life practices so that the community could live and work comfortably in this foreign land. Local geomancy beliefs, *phong thuy*, have been visibly applied to many aspects of everyday urban life and architecture. Saigon's embrace of capitalist ideology from the USA and its allies was characterised by the mass construction of public housing called *chung cu*. This housing was built in areas devastated by the ongoing war where formal planning blended with remnant *Hem* houses and networks. As rapid migration continued during this period, more *Hem*-style densification happened in all districts of Saigon, turning Saigon into a 'huge slum'. As Vietnam entered the subsidy era and was now controlled by a socialist government, the city faced challenges in recovering from the war. Government management could not cope with the increasing population now informally occupying *Hem* space and the city blossomed with thousands of *Hem*. Recent changes to HCMC, like urban development and design visions geared to the megacity program, have cast the heterogenous landscapes of the city's *Hem* in a negative light from the perspective of municipal planning and development authorities.

This thesis will build upon this historical review to rationalise the choice of the later case studies. It will also provide some additional background information for the analysis of these case studies. To excavate how *Hem* spaces are significant to the economic and social ways of life and beliefs of their communities, each case study will closely examine different levels of the local built environment, including *Hem* paths and their planning and usage, which also ties into local working and living spaces such as housefronts, apartment buildings and their public corridors, and other domestic spaces and houses. This architectural study of local changes to *Hem* spaces will also consider residents' living circumstances to gain insight into these changes and local practices in *Hem* spaces. In Chapter 2, reviews of several spatial theories will help to form the conceptual framework of this thesis, providing several standpoints to examine spatial changes and spatial practices in *Hem* space, particularly the conceptual triad of Henri Lefebvre (1991). Relevant critical theories will also be grounded in Lefebvre's concepts to ensure my interpretation remains focused on the field of interior architectural design.

Figure 1.37 Public spaces in *Hem* 206 Tran Hung Dao Street being used as personal laundry space, and spaces for grocery's display (Sketched by the author, 2020)

1.5 Thesis Outline

Chapter 1 starts with an introduction to the key research aims and scope of this thesis. It also introduces the main hypothesis, in which Lefebvre's idea of 'spatial practice' is adapted to examine the architectural and spatial changes made by *Hem* residents to *Hem* spaces. This is followed by a brief description of my own lived experience of the *Hem* of HCMC, my visits to Nguyen Thien Thuat *chung cu*, and my personal exposure to *phong thuy* practice, all of which contributed to my motivation for undertaking this research 'journey'. Chapter 1 also states the main research problems and current research gaps. At the practical level, the built environment of *Hem* spaces and their local life are negatively viewed, or neglected, by modern urban planning and development agencies despite the city's *Hem* being its most populated areas. At a more theoretical level, Lefebvre's idea of spatial practice is often broadly interpreted and its concepts have not yet been included in architectural and design research. These research gaps and problems have produced the key research questions for the thesis, and thus define its significance. The last section of this chapter describes HCMC's urban context to frame the contextual basis of this thesis, as well as giving the rationale for selecting the case studies.

Chapter 2 is a literature review regarding how Lefebvre's concepts can be applied to the architectural study of the built environment. This will involve conceptually grounding Lefebvre's concept of spatial practice in several major spatial and architectural theories. The review will depict the two main aspects of spatial practice, physical characteristics and human activities. These two aspects then contribute to the analytical framework of the thesis. The review will also cover the urban practices of *Hem* spaces,

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including home-based business and *phong thuy* beliefs, which are key local factors driving spatial changes in urban spaces of HCMC.

Chapter 3 will cover thesis methodology and research methods. It will introduce the main conceptual framework, whose ideas were drawn from the conceptual grounding. This chapter will also explain research methods and procedures for collecting field data, such as sketching, photography, on-site documentation, and interviews with local residents. These research methods will be discussed and justified as necessary approaches to examining spatial changes and practices in *Hem* spaces, and to answering the research questions identified.

Chapter 4 will present the first case study of this thesis, examining *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street. This *Hem* exhibits typical characteristics – the built form, the use of public *Hem* space, and the daily routines at local housefronts – which are representative of *Hem* characteristics in HCMC. The investigation of spatial changes and practices in this case study will commence at the smallest urban scale, the domestic spaces and houses of several senior residents. The data collected and the findings will hopefully bring insight into the influence of everyday life on the built environment, architectural alterations, and usage of *Hem* spaces.

Chapter 5 will look at the architectural and spatial changes at one of the largest American-built apartment blocks, located at the heart of the *Hem* networks of District 3. The present-day built form of the apartment blocks and the local usage of apartment spaces closely resemble those of *Hem* spaces. It is hence worth examining local practices of structural, spatial, and architectural alteration, their motivations, and how they suit the needs of local residents. The investigative procedures of this chapter are similar to those of Chapter 4. It will begin with changes to the exterior structures of apartment blocks and local usage and adaptation of public spaces, and then look closely at structural changes to domestic units.

Chapter 6 will investigate how the local practice of *phong thuy* influences changes to and usage of *Hem* spaces in the Cho Lon area. This chapter will focus on the influence of *phong thuy* beliefs on *Hem* built environments at two levels. At the public and exterior level, it will examine the physical characteristics of houses located in the oldest *Hem* of Cho Lon, known as Hao Sy Phuong. At the domestic level, it will examine the interior spaces and domestic layout of a *phong thuy* believer's house. This examination will reveal how the physical characteristics of *Hem* built environment, together with the local belief in phong

thuy and their personal backgrounds, impact on spatial and architectural changes to *Hem* spaces, such as *Hem* landmarks and house designs.

Chapter 7 will discuss the findings from analysis of the data collected from the previous case study chapters. The contribution of this thesis, including to the current literature on spatial practice, is to give insight into the under-represented lived experience of *Hem* communities and their spatial practice. The thesis will end with a conclusion chapter (Chapter 8) presenting several design recommendations about ways to maintain *Hem* spatial practices in the face of rapid urban changes, as well as some research directions in the future.

Figure 1.38 A pop-up market at a demolition site in *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang Street (photographed by the author, 2017)

Chapter 2. Literature Reviews

2.1 Theoretical Basis: Understanding Space and Spatial Practices

Both structural change activities and the consequent *Hem* built-environment have been criticised as 'unsafe' and 'slum-like' and causing negative impact to Ho Chi Minh City's identity. As mentioned in the Problem Statement (Section 1.3), the informal changes to public *Hem* space made by local communities have resulted in the heterogeneous landscapes of *Hem*. However, *Hem* spatial changes reflect the unique perspective of the local community, physically adapting public open space for the convenience of their everyday living routines and activities. Tensions between government planning strategies and *Hem* residents' usage and alterations of public *Hem* space evoke ideas around the 'spatial dialectic', from *The Production of Space* by Henri Lefebvre (1991). This section reviews these ideas and their development by other theorists, to explain how this theory can conceptualise this research on *Hem* spaces.

To Lefebvre, space is a social product and it can be both abstract and physical, depending on the examined context (1991, pp. 26-27). Space can mean a thinking ground in one's mind or mental space (the works of philosophers, formulas of mathematicians, or the living routines of inhabitants), or a physical and observable place (a boundary defined by human movement and action, or buildings and public spaces designed by architects, planner, designers etc.) (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 27-29). Lefebvre asserted that the space-making process includes the role of the inhabitants and the space created by their daily routines and needs, which is usually downplayed and neglected by modern architectural practices (1991, p. 95). This conviction, together with his definition of social space, led Lefebvre to develop his conceptual triad comprising three spatial – *conceived space*, *perceived space* (or *spatial practice*), and *lived space* (1991, pp. 38-39). Each spatial mode represents, respectively, the standpoints of the professional creators, the occupants of space, and those inspired by the spatial activities of the others, such as painters and artists (Phuong, 2009, pp. 56-60).

Since Lefebvre's concept of space supports broad interpretation, the implications of the concept have been debated differently by scholars across several disciplines. Husik Ghulyan (2019, p. 4) proposes that Lefebvre's definitions of space and his conceptual triad not only link to the traditional fields of architecture, urban planning, urban sociology, and urban social movement, but also have possible application to political studies, theatre, economic management, literature, modern media theory, and art history (Ghulyan, 2019, p. 4; Watkins, 2005, pp. 209-215). According to the architectural historian Adrian Forty (2000, p. 271), the ambiguity and complexity of Lefebvre's concepts and explanations embrace the

phenomenological aspects of the space we live in, to "expose the nature of the relationship between the space produced [physically or mentally] by thought, and the [physical or mental] space within which thought happens."

Martin Heidegger wrote in *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* (1971, p. 152), from a phenomenological perspective, that physical spaces are obtuse locations if they do not meet the lived experience of the dwellers, for example, human emotions, dreams, and everyday aspirations. Philosopher Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984, p. 117), asserted that people's different reflections and understandings of space are based on their lives and professions. Designers and architects rely more on their professional knowledge, and less on their real-life lived experience, to construct and visualise urban spaces like streets, buildings, and houses. However, the users of these spaces – pedestrians and inhabitants – tend to make physical changes to spaces (de Certeau called them *tactics* [1984, p. xix]) so that they are closer to their everyday lives, social interactions, and routines (*walkers'* spaces) (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 91-93). Spatial reconstruction by *walkers* and their tactics sometimes go beyond obedience to the expectations and professional practices of designers and architects (de Certeau, 1984, p. 93). Urban studies researcher Joel Kotkin asserts that spatial practice, which is the ability of urban citizens to construct their own living and working spaces according to their lived experience, should be at the "centre of contemporary urban development plans" because "it is a validation of older and more venerable ideals of what city life should be about" (2016, p. 20).

Different perspectives and understandings of space and space-making are also due to the complexity of human experience and living activities. Geographer Yi Fu Tuan (1977, p. 102) believed that built environments, or *architectural spaces*, are constructed by social circulation, culture, and politics, which helps to clarify social roles and relations between the creators and the users. Building upon Heidegger's concepts, Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space* (1958, pp. 59-65), wrote that home spaces are virtually designed by the human emotion and memories of the occupants. He calls these *inhabited spaces.* The schema of the house is physically constructed by an architectural and design professional, an expert on *geometrical spaces* (Bachelard, 1958, pp. 60-62). Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes, in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945, p. 116), that *geometrical space* is an homogenous and isotropic spatiality created by 'outsiders', professional planners and architects (1945, p. 341). *Anthropological space* is space created by the lived experience and dreams of 'insiders', inhabitants and dwellers, which generate a sense of uniqueness about living spaces (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, pp. 340-345).

One theory that has been articulated and adopted in many spatial aspects of architectural and urban planning research is phenomenology. According to Tuan, the phenomenological approach functions to "seek for the consciousness of the space we live in" and "express the lived experience, that which they cannot express by themselves" (Tuan, 1977, pp. 6, 102-107).

Figure 2.1 Additional self-built structures have been attached to the façade of Block C of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat. These structures provide extra spaces, such as storage, garden, and pet spaces (Sketched by the author, 2019).

Unlike formal changes to *Hem* space, such as those associated with the expansion projects and with modern planning based on foreign-built urban projects, the spatial activities, routines, and lived experiences of *Hem* communities are under-represented in the spatial, planning, and architectural literature. Lefebvre's phenomenological approach to spatial examination is critical to conceptualise the objective of this thesis, understanding how everyday activities and routines, local social, cultural, and economic factors, and local belief systems like *phong thuy*, can influence the built environment of *Hem* spaces.

To navigate my review of Lefebvre's social space and spatial triad concepts, the following section will first look at how Lefebvre's ideas can be understood from an architectural perspective, which is also the objective of this research. This includes a detailed analysis of the spatial triad and its influence on the conceptual framework of this thesis. Lastly, the review generates a detailed hypothesis of the theoretical understanding of spatial practice in the context of *Hem* spaces. This will help me to ground the original hypothesis presented in the Introduction (Section 1.1). This review focuses on the interpretation of

Lefebvre's ideas for the built environment, including reviewing different modes of understanding spaces proposed by other theorists whose work provides a framework to conceptualise research on spatial practice in HCMC's *Hem* spaces and local communities.

Lefebvre's Spaces and the Built Environment

For Lefebvre, space is socially produced by the cultural life of societies (1991, p. 90). The architectural historian Adrian Forty (2000, p. 272) further articulated that the process of producing and creating space (both mental and physical spaces) is continuous as society develops. Based on Lefebvre's understanding, Forty further suggested that the professional practices of architectural design and urban planning should not view urban space as a 'frame' to 'pour' their knowledge and expertise into without considering the human experience of the space by the city's dwellers and inhabitants (2000, p. 272). In fact, urban spaces created by modern architectural design and planning practice are a serious concern for Lefebvre, and he argues that many professionally designed urban spaces fail to properly evoke the richness of the human lived experience of the very users for whom they are supposedly designed.

While reflecting on Lefebvre's concerns, I am reminded of the cafés along *Hem* 109 Nguyen Thien Thuat Street and my observations of their activities. *Hem* 109 Nguyen Thien Thuat Street is known for several cafés, notably Café Cheo Leo, which has been operating for more than 80 years. It is a favourite gathering spot for an older generation of Nguyen Thien Thuat's community to reminisce about living here. The most popular spot is at the front of the café where customers can enjoy the sunlight while watching people go by. For regular customers, the café is a private space for them to read the daily newspaper. The café is also a tourist spot for international travellers to catch a glimpse of everyday life activities. The *Hem* was formally expanded in the early 2010s and customers lost their favourite gathering spot at the front in the effort to increase the path width for automobile traffic. However, when I returned in 2017, I saw that the café had returned to its normal layout, with several customers seated on the public *Hem* path, shielded by the parking area next to them. The richness of *Hem* life seems to re-emerge in ingrained social patterns and behaviours which are resilient to structural changes like the *Hem* expansion and clearance by the local government. This phenomenon reinstates the use of public open *Hem* and provides a sense of community through daily human interaction, which reinforces Lefebvre's ideas about human richness in urban space.

Figure 2.2 (Left) Customers sitting at the front of Café Cheo Leo (Photographed by the author, 2017).

Lefebvre categorises the spatial production of architectural practice into two types: *architectural space* and *space of architects*. Adrian Forty comprehends the distinction between the two spaces as lying in the intentions of their professional creators (2000, p.272). *Architectural spaces* are professionally created to meet human requirements and lived experience. *Architectural spaces* are associated more with the users of the spaces feeling physically connected to a built environment which reflects their personal experience. On the other hand, *space of architects* is professionally created to meet the regulations, rules, and political visions of architects, urban planners, and designers. This is condemned by Lefebvre, in Forty's words, as "the manipulation of space effected by architects in their professional practice, and the discourse in which that activity takes place," which is anathema (Forty, 2000, p. 272; Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 137, 300). This is because *space of architects* tends to misapprehend the diversity of human experience, turning the animated human experience of *architectural space* into a homogenous space of singular vision or function, hence the tension between the two types of space. Lefebvre argues that modern architects and urban planners have regarded themselves as "being experts or ultimate authorities in matters relating to space" and yet what these people "fail to appreciate is that they are bending their demands (from below) to suit commands (from above)" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 95). As far as Lefebvre was concerned, all disciplines regarding their inhabitants are involved with spaces (Forty, 2000, p. 272; Lefebvre, 1991, p. 107).

Since the production of space is not the entitlement only of design professionals, Lefebvre develops an abstract basis for looking at the production of space free from all bias, in which space is equally shared by all disciplines. The spatial modes of his triad contribute to the conceptual model of this thesis and provide practical approaches to the development of the *Hem* case studies.

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Lefebvre's dialectical interpretation of space is constituted by three modes of spatial construction: *conceived space*, *perceived space,* and *lived space*. The following explanation is drawn from Lefebvre's brief introduction to his conceptual triad and his detailed definitions of the three types of space (1991, pp. 33, 38 & 39). *Conceived space* (or Representation of Space) is space formally created by professional practitioners such as architects, urban planners, social engineers, or scientists. The creators of *conceived space* are vested with the power and authority to decide what is lived, what is perceived, and what is conceived in their space. This is the dominant space in any society and it is governed by the bourgeoisie. *Perceived space* is socially embodied between daily realities (such as daily routines and habits) and urban realities (such as routes, traffic networks, 'private' life, and leisure). In another words, *perceived space* is the space of everyday life, allowing inhabitants to practice their lived routines, or what Lefebvre termed 'spatial practice'. Spatial practice does not necessarily follow the rules constituting *conceived space,* though it must have a certain degree of cohesiveness. *Lived space* (or Representational Space) is the space where social ideas and movements exist in one's state of mind and overlay the physical space, which is *lived* through its associated images and symbols. *Lived space* is created in the mind as mental space, by people such as artists, writers, and philosophers "who *describe* and aspire to do no more than *describe*." This space can only be passively experienced and action to alter this space only exists in one's imagination. *Lived space* overlays physical space and thus makes symbolic use of its object.

Conceived Space
Architectural models and drawings, planning maps, regulations.

The Production of Space

Perceived Space - or Spatial Practice
*Everyday day created by routines, habbits of inhabitants or users
Space of urban reality*

Lived Space
*Mental/Creative space in the mind of artists, theorist, painters, writers.
Also, the space created by meaning of social movements and ideologies*

Figure 2.3 The spatial triad of Henri Lefebvre, adapted from Lefebvre's definitions (Produced by the author, 2018).

Lefebvre's spatial dialogue on the modes of creation of space coincides with the spatial experience described by the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his study *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). He suggested that all stakeholders should be directly involved with the space-making process. The two spatial modes representing the space-making process are *geometrical space,* a homogenous and isotropic spatiality created by architects, and *anthropological space,* which is formed by intricate layers of human experience of people who live in *geometrical space* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, pp. 341-342). Philosopher Michel de Certeau pointed out that both *geometrical space* and *anthropological space* are essential elements of our everyday living spaces (1984, p. 118). To gain an empirical understanding of the two spatial modes, de Certeau recommends an examination of urban space from the phenomenological perspective by carefully observing human daily activities occurring in that space (1984, p. 117).

Geographical researcher Eden Kinkaid (2019, p. 183), proposes that the conceptual terms of both Lefebvre's and Merleau-Ponty's work help researchers to engage with a deeper, less-studied context, such as the phenomenology of everyday spatial practice. For instance, Chapter 6 examines how the local residents in the Chinatown *Hem* area of Cho Lon, physically change their living spaces by placing spiritual charms and performing daily rituals. The placement of these charms is derived from the ethnic background and traditions of the occupants, as applicable to the physical characteristics of the house and its environment. These spatial changes include things such as the alignment of entrance doors with the pathway of the *Hem.* In newly developed residential high-rise areas, the hanging of charms is denounced by property owners as *hu tuc* (backward ritual) and incongruous with ideas of modernity. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

Figure 2.4 (Left) Altars, charms, and spiritual talismans around an entrance door. (Right) A pair of chicken feet hung on the wall as a protective charm (Photographed by the author, 2018).

The notions of human experience and social and cultural values remain important parts of later interpretations by theorists influenced by Lefebvre's work. In the book *Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (1996, p. 29), the American geographer Edward Soja radically revised Lefevre's triad to examine how the built environment embraces the spatiality of human life. Soja's triad includes *first space*, functional physical space made of visible and measurable material. *Second space* is all about the feelings of the human being in *first space*. *Third space* intertwines the meanings of *first* and *second* space and helps social researchers understand the profound meaning of the built environment and the social norms embedded in the relationship between physical space and human lived experience.

Based on dialectical accounts of Lefebvre's and Soja's spaces, the theorist Homi K. Bhabha in his book *The Culture of Location* (1996) adapted these spatial meanings and developed his theory of cultural spaces, characterised by the notion of *hybridity* as key to the making of his cultural *third space.* The significance of his idea of 'in-between' cultural space, or *third space,* is as a space where two or more cultural agents are involved in the making of *hybrid* culture, a cultural sphere where the identities and meanings of space-makers can be traced back and new possibilities can also emerge (Bhabha, 1994, p. 20; Ashcroft et al., 2013, p. 71). Sociologist Kate Moles suggests that connecting the spatial concepts of Lefebvre, Soja, and Bhabha is not a simple pragmatic translation between these spatial modes, despite their ideas coinciding in some senses (2008, p. 1). For example, Lefebvre's *conceived*, *perceived*, and lived *space* can be interpreted as being the same as Soja's *first*, *second,* and *third space*, and Bhabha's *third space* is comparable to Lefebvre's *lived space* and Soja's *third space*. The main objective, according to Moles (2008, p. 3), is to provide an open-ended discussion which critically questions the social and cultural meanings of the spaces we live in.

According to sociologist Christian Fuchs, spatial practice is conceptually the most unclear and most overlooked spatial mode of Lefebvre's triad (2019, p. 145). Full understanding of spatial practice can only be gained by empirical evaluation, according to architect Dinh Quoc Phuong, because "*perceived space* (spatial practice) is often ignored by the profession, or nearly invisible in the professional practice of making urban space" (Phuong, 2009, p. 57).

The lack of empirical evaluation of the spaces of everyday urban life is the focus of concern of *The Power of Place* (1995) by urban historian Dolores Hayden. Hayden suggests that everyday urban life is, by its very nature, mundane and ordinary because social and political power is often not obvious (Hayden,

1995, p. 227). Urban demolition for new construction projects often brings new characteristics to urban spaces, but new buildings and designs can potentially disconnect from the history of the place if they disregard the existing everyday urban life of local communities and damage their sense of belonging (Hayden, 1997, pp. 227-230).

Lefebvre's standpoint – namely his theory of *conceived*, *perceived,* and *lived space* – is critical for this thesis' investigation of *Hem* spaces as in-between spaces which are formally regulated, controlled, and created by professionals and are also the spaces of everyday life activities. The similarities and differences between Lefebvre's work and the work of the other theorists reviewed in this section have reinforced my understanding and my framework for assessing different positions and perspectives in looking at the built environment of HCMC's *Hem* spaces. In the Introduction (section 1.1), I proposed a hypothesis that spatial practice in this thesis' context represents the practice of everyday routines and the social, cultural, and economic activities of *Hem* residents that architecturally and spatially influence the built environment of *Hem* spaces. I will extend this hypothesis further based on these reviews of Lefebvre's theories and his spatial triad.

The hypothesis is: The *space of architects* seems to represent *conceived space* and *architectural space* seems to represent *perceived space*. If *conceived space* is created from the formal practices of the architecture and urban planning professions, then planning policies and architectural drawings do wield the power to dictate the routines and daily activities of inhabitants, representing the *space of architects*. On the other hand, *perceived space* is constituted by the practice of daily routines in everyday life and embraces the complexity of the lived experiences of inhabitants and users, sharing intentions just as professionals creating *architectural spaces* do.

In the context of HCMC's *Hem*, the expansion projects and planning policies initiated by government offices or planning agencies to 'modernise' *Hem* seem to represent *conceived space* (and the *space of architects*), while the spatial changes to *Hem* made by local communities in accordance with the needs of daily life seem to represent *perceived space* (and *architectural space*). This hypothesis contributes to the conceptual framework of my thesis by setting out different positions from which spatial practice in *Hem* space can be investigated. In each of my case studies, I will look at both government planning policies and expansion/renovation proposals for that specific *Hem* area, and the spatial changes and everyday realities concurrently affecting the *Hem.* I will investigate how different perspectives on

conceived space and spatial practice can resolve the potential tensions between them in the real-life contexts of different *Hem* spaces.

The conceptual tensions between space created by professionals and space created by the lived realities and routines of inhabitants lead Lefebvre to explore and explain the misapprehensions existing between the two. His five explanations will be good benchmarks for this thesis to conceptually evaluate and provide discussion points for the case studies:

1. The space given to the architect is not neutral and has already been (socially) produced by the inhabitants;
2. Architects do not create space under conditions of 'pure freedom', but instead their creation process is both unconsciously and consciously based on their personal knowledge;
3. The practices of their profession, such as drawings and planning policies, can be an imposition of their power by turning (social) space into an abstraction and homogenising many aspects of lived experience/daily reality; so that
4. Modern architectural practice can reduce (social) space to visual images to exclusively serve political masters, and by doing so;
5. Modern architectural and urban planning practices are perpetuating the homogenisation of lived experience and uncovering the truth of (social) space (Forty, 2000, p. 274).

Eventually, Lefebvre drew the conclusion that architectural practice should go "in search of specialists of 'lived experience' and of the morphology of everyday life" (1992, p. 95), which are the dominant factors contributing to the meaning of Lefebvre's spatial practice (or *perceived space*). Yi Fu-Tuan (1977, p. 9) offers an abstract standpoint, the *experiential perspective,* for researchers to read, investigate, and study the built environment. According to Tuan, inhabitants organise and construct their space according to their biological needs and social relations, that is, people will thrive when they attach their emotions to physical structures such as their living spaces and houses. This is the way that inhabitants gain a deeper feeling for and understanding of their space (1977, pp. 9-13). Tuan further suggests, for an outsider who wants to research and study such spatial changes and transformation under the experiential perspective, they should look at the significant localities and architectural landmarks of the local spaces. For individual houses, that could be their entrances or their domestic interiors, and for larger spaces like community spaces, that could be gateways, traditional buildings, and landmarks in the neighbourhood (Tuan, 1977, p. 16). Tuan's ideas about examining local landmarks as a way to

understand their meanings for the inhabitants and local community will inspire my research on the *phong thuy* meanings of house orientations, building structures, and spiritual objects and their placement for the lived experience of house occupants and the local community of Cho Lon's *Hem* area.

Spatial practice denotes intricate layers of interrelationships between physical space and human activities. The philosopher asserted the importance of perceiving the city's everyday built form and spatial practice not only through the *voyeur's* eyes – a top-down perspective, but also through the eyes of those who live there, the *walkers* – a bottom-up perspective. The geographer Edward Relph devised two phenomenological perspectives to investigate the relationship between physical space and human experience, *insideness* and *outsideness* (1976, p. 49). To Relph, human space can only be understood, approached, and analysed from both perspectives of being 'inside' a space and place – where the person is involved in the space-making experience – and 'outside', where the person looks upon the spatial experience as a traveller, like an international tourist in HCMC. These modes are particularly useful for examining how human attitudes, aspirations, and emotions can influence the construction of spaces, as well as their meaning for both individual inhabitants and the community. Deploying an *insideness* mode, one can make empirical evaluations of the meaning of the space for individual inhabitants, such as the ways they use their domestic areas for living, or the significance of personal memories and emotions to the inhabitants (Relph, 1977, p. 56). Deploying an *outsideness* mode, one can grasp an overall picture of how a community can influence the structure of communal spaces/structure via their shared experiences, beliefs, or aspirations (Relph, 1977, p. 58). Both Tuan's and Relph's standpoints provide powerful perspectives to examine how local spiritual beliefs, in this case *phong thuy,* have influenced the landscape of *Hem* spaces in Cho Lon. It is a tradition for Cho Lon's population to use *phong thuy* for the design and construction of their houses, the planning of the *Hem*, and the orientation of public structures. Local residents use charms at various locations in and around their homes, providing protection against bad luck. Chapter 6 examines *Hem* landmarks, such as gates and communal altars, to investigate how *phong thuy* influences these landmarks and the meanings of the household decorations, renovations, and daily routines of individual residents and the *Hem* community.

In this section, I have reviewed how Lefebvre's concept can be viewed from an architectural perspective. I then link his architectural spaces with a dialectical account of space, mainly between *conceived* and *perceived space*. As my research aims to understand how local everyday routines architecturally transform public *Hem* spaces, my investigation will use Lefebvre's notions of conceived space and spatial practice to identify potential tensions between government planning policies and local perspectives on

Hem space in each case study. Research on the attitudes of *lived space* creators, such as painters, designers, and writers, to *Hem* space can lead to a better understanding of how it exists in their mental space. These understandings can potentially contribute to better practice of architectural preservation. With the objective of preservation and conservation, this thesis will examine what should be preserved and what redeveloped, via an examination of how everyday architecture works for *Hem* communities.
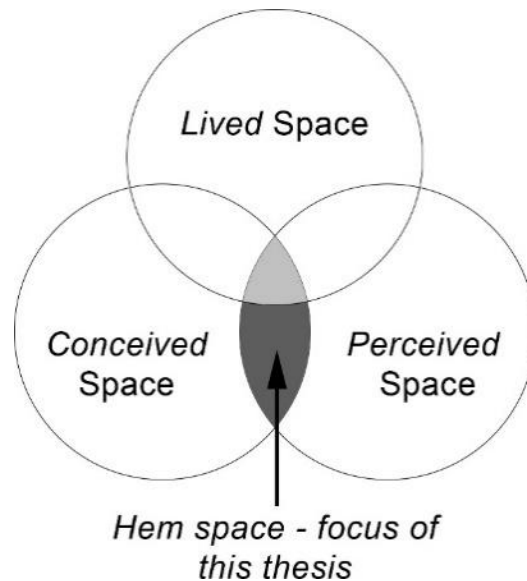
Figure 2.5 Diagram summarising Lefebvre's conceptual triad and focus of this thesis (Produced by the author, 2018)

Spatial Practice in the Architectural Design and Urban Planning Literature

The previous section reviewed Lefebvre's concept of spatial practice and relevant theories by several philosophers whose works have helped this thesis to better define the concept. Reviewing these theories is crucial for the thesis to explain its key hypothesis, which is that spatial practice conceptually represents the influence of the everyday routines and social, cultural, and economic activities of *Hem* residents on the architecture and built environment of *Hem* spaces.

In this section, I will focus on elaborating spatial practice as discussed in the urban planning, architecture, and design literature. The review in this section will further develop concepts mentioned in 2.1.1 in a more practical way regarding urban planning and architectural design, which is the focus of this thesis. More importantly, reviewing this literature will give me the tools and techniques to observe, describe, and analyse *Hem* spaces at specific case study sites, for example, mapping methods, visual analysis, and storytelling. This review will also give me some criteria for examining *Hem* spaces at specific sites.

Lefebvre coined the concept of spatial practice to evoke, advocate, and embrace the complexity of everyday urban spaces created by the lived routines of inhabitants, otherwise disregarded, neglected, and under-represented in *conceived space* (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 40). He wrote, "What is spatial practice under neocapitalism? It embodies a close association, within perceived space, between daily reality [everyday living activity, routines of inhabitants] and urban reality [the street, the house, the buildings, public spaces]" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 38). Therefore, spatial practice in this section will be grounded conceptually by reference to the following aspects of space: (1) Physical aspects of space, such as indoor, outdoor, the 'in-between', façades, building details, physical changes to these spaces; (2) Spatial practices involved with human activities in these physical spaces, for example, human movements and patterns, social gatherings, business, and trading. These two aspects of spatial practice will be grounded in a review of two urban structures described by the architectural theorist Christopher Alexander, the tree-like structure and the semi-lattice structure. These two structures further shape the examinations and analysis of later case studies at specific *Hem* sites, with special focus on the contributions of both.

Spatial practice and the physical aspect of space

One reason that Lefebvre devised different spatial modes for his conceptual triad, in my view, is to suggest that professional urban planners and architects should apply their knowledge to carefully observe spaces and the physical characteristics created by their everyday inhabitants.

In their book *Messy Urbanism, Understanding the "Other" Cities of Asia (*2016), urban planning academics Jefferey Hou and Manish Chalana argue that urban spaces that have been physically adapted and changed by everyday activities have added a 'messy' character to the urban spaces of Asian cities (pp. 3-11). This messiness is characteristic of the nature of the adaptation process. For example, construction and building activities are mostly unplanned and unregulated, and lack a formal architectural design process and construction support (Chalana and Hou, 2016, pp. 9-10). However, 'messy' spatial changes enable the community and neighbourhood to function effectively and efficiently, despite being in a high-density area with limited infrastructure (Chalana and Hou, 2016, p. 7). To gain an empirical understanding of the physical nature of these spaces, the authors write that professional designer should observe, question, engage, and look at construction in progress, including observing how the users of these spaces build and what spaces are being adapted for (Chalana and Hou, 2016, p. 4). In *Seeing the Better City*, urban researcher Charles Wolfe (2016, p. 30) states that this might be challenging because the local residents who make changes to these spaces might not have the consciousness necessary to explain to the researcher their physical adaptation process. For example,

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why do they change certain areas in front of their homes for daily routines? However, one method Wolfe suggests to 'cut through' is to imaginatively put these urban changes in other urban scales and contexts (2016, pp. 30-31). For example, will such physical changes at a smaller scale, say in housefront areas of small lanes, persist at a larger scale, say in housefront areas along public streets and boulevards?

Indeed, physical characteristics of the urban landscape, including the size, proportions, and geometry of buildings, are crucial factors in understanding the nature of urban space. These are pivotal elements in the work of the urban designer Jan Gehl, who developed the theory of 'human scale' (2010, p. 6), which holds that professional practice should consider these physical characteristics to develop urban spaces that will be meaningful for pedestrian activities and daily interactions, which are critical for the everyday life and routines of cities. He describes two types of architecture, 60 km/h architecture and 5 km/h architecture (Gehl, 2010, p. 6). The architecture of high-rises and highways with heavy traffic and private automobiles is 60 km/h architecture. This is usually designed with massive-scale architectural/planning models and drawings, and can only be studied from above and far away by looking at models or drawings. While these practices are ideal for massive housing estates, commercial buildings, and urban traffic networks, they often lack the spaces which accommodate the "ordinary life that occurs in our lives at the human-eye level" (Gehl, 2010, p. 44). These characteristics are found in 5 km/h architecture, which consists of small spaces/buildings providing a rich, detailed, and colourful streetscape with shopfronts, mercantile activities etc., which are ideal for everyday human activities (Gehl, 2010, pp. 44, 194). Gehl argues that "5 km/h architecture is based on a cornucopia of sensory impressions, spaces are small, building are close together and the combination of detail, faces, and activities contributes to the rich and intense sensory experience" (2010, p. 44). 5 km/h architecture promotes physical changes on a daily basis, which adds more colour and character than around the obtuse high-rises, which often lack the flexibility to make substantial changes of use (Gehl, 2010, p. 45). The best way to construct 5 km/h architecture, for Gehl, is to go out in the field and examine the physical characteristics of urban spaces, in conjunction with public life and human activities at eye-level (2010, p. 118).

Kevin Lynch examined the quality of urban images, or the liveable qualities of cities, by focusing on the physical conditions and characteristics of public spaces (1960, p. 14). Things that make an urban space distinctive and liveable are the scale of local buildings, lighting, and human-eye-level architectural details and textures that help the observer learn about the space they are entering (1960, p. 44). He then categorised five critical physical elements of urban spaces: paths, edges (housefronts, building

facades, or any spaces in-between the domestic and exterior), districts, nodes, and landmarks. Designing for a good city image should include not only these five elements, but also the ability for each element to interconnect and to "shift its type depending on the [living] circumstance" (Lynch, 1960, p. 48). For Lynch, these elements work as a cohesive unit and individual elements should not be isolated. He writes, "None of the elements are isolated in the real case [city]. Districts are structured with nodes, defined by edges, penetrated by paths, and sprinkled with landmarks" (1960, pp. 48-49). One good example of how Lynch's interconnected elements provide good urban space is the use of doorstep areas by the community of *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang. Houseowners along *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang street encroach onto the public open *Hem* by constructing various self-built structures in front of their houses, creating extra spaces to conduct their domestic activities in the public *Hem*. Housefronts are also temporarily occupied by street vendors selling everyday commodities to the local community. In many cases, housefronts are shared between houseowners and street vendors, who together make substantial changes to the area with, for example, shade canopies, shop signs, and footstools. These structures at local housefronts seem to add character to the public *Hem* and reflect the local perception that *Hem* space functions not only as a public pathway serving automobile traffic. In Chapter 4, I explore the spatial patterns of housefront usage that influence the everyday landscape of the *Hem* here.

Figure 2.6 Street vendors in *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang Street in the afternoon (Photographed by the author, 2018).

The architect Allan B. Jacobs (1985, pp. 31-36) recognised that physical characteristics of houses, shops, and streetscapes reveal much about their occupants and owners. These characteristics include the architectural styles, sizes, design (not necessarily professional, possibly self-designed), and condition of local buildings (Jacobs, 1985, pp. 31-36). These physical characteristics represent a "direct correlation between the size of building or unit and wealth of the occupant" and are "strong indicators of who an area was built for and who its present occupants are … [the] history of an area's development, including

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lifestyle values of the community, its economic structure overtime, and something about local regulations" (Jacobs, 1985, p. 33). *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street has changed significantly since the economic reforms of *Doi Moi* in 1986. Several residents have become wealthier due to the freedom to operate private businesses. Residents of this *Hem*, such as Mrs V and her family, have renovated their houses with more modern designs and reconstructed with taller buildings. These owners do not object to the informal occupation of the street by hawkers and vendors in front of their private property. They welcome these informal business activities and consider them to be part of the community. Chapter 4 examines how the use of public space by vendor activities has adapted to construction of new houses in *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street.

According to Kevin Lynch (1960, p. 29), a good investigation method for researchers and outsiders to cut through and understand the physical characteristics of urban spaces is to produce observational sketches focusing on the physical details of the urban landscape, for example, buildings' structural details and decorations. This allows the researcher to take their time and generate a comprehensive view of all these details and how they are physically connected to bigger landscapes, thus explaining their roles in constructing the examined cityscape (Lynch, 1960, pp. 29-32). This thesis adopts Lynch's method of observational sketching and includes it in all the case studies.

Spatial practice and human activities in spaces

Spatial practice also involves human activities, or Lefebvre's term 'daily reality', within a physical setting of space. In fact, both Lynch and Gehl stress that the role of the physical setting and the characteristics of urban spaces can provoke human interactions and activities (Gehl, 2010, p. 10; Lynch, 1960, pp. 76-77). Gehl asserts that a characteristic of quality of life in city spaces is the versatility and complexity of pedestrian activities, and the ability of inhabitants to conduct everyday activities like business, social gatherings, or public performances (2010, p. 19). The connections between small-scale buildings and spaces, and the intensity and closeness of pedestrian activities, can help us to visually decode the characteristics of inviting, warm, welcoming, and vibrant areas (Gehl, 2000, p.53). Otherwise, spaces that are out of proportion with the human scale (high-rises, huge plazas) "simply horrify us" (1960, p. 74) because they do not encourage everyday human social interactions. For Gehl, these spaces communicate "a sense of coldness, abandoned and formal" (2010, p. 53).

In fact, observing the human activities and physical settings of shop spaces within HCMC's *Hem* gives a keen sense of constant human presence. For example, many cafés in *Hem* do not have big signboards advertising them due to the narrowness of laneways. In some cases, like the café at House 46 of *Hem* 60

Ly Chinh Thang, there are no signboards at all. Despite the lack of significant structures to advertise establishments, one visual cue that signals their identity is the common set-out of row of low stools and tables in front of the shop, the overhanging shade canopies, and the customers sipping their coffee. What marks distinctions between cafés are the social skills of their owners. Many customers come to these coffee shops not only to gather, socialise, or simply drink coffee, but also to gossip with the owners. One famous café is the Café *Hem* Trinh, named after the late Vietnamese musician Trinh Cong Son. The café has a simple setting, comprising several plastic stools and tables lining the path of *Hem* 47 of Pham Ngoc Thach Street, but it has a very strong social position. For decades, many musicians, artists, designers, and architects have come here, not only to discuss the work of Trinh Cong Son, but also to hear tales of his life from the café owners, who were friends of his. Therefore, the 'social image' of the café owners has become an iconic characteristic of this café shop attracting both new and long-time customers.

Figure 2.7 (Left) Customers queuing at Café Vot at *Hem* 330 Phan Dinh Phung. (Right) Café *Hem* Trinh at *Hem* 47 Pham Ngoc Thach (Photographed by the author, 2018).

The exposure of human activities within the physical settings of urban spaces is described by Kevin Lynch as "urban transparency", denoting "the capacity to read and learn from the city in everyday life" (1960, p. 134). Academic Kim Dovey extrapolates this term in *Urban Design Thinking* (2016, p. 82). Urban spaces within cities that are less formally regulated or have a strong informal environment have higher transparency, meaning their appearance is more understandable. Public interactions, particularly the trading activities of street vendors and family-based retail, make up most of Dovey's definition of urban transparency. Dovey argued that this is because they (street vendors, family-based retail) do not have sufficient resources, in terms of design experience and construction materials, to properly set up their stalls and shops, and so they remain transparent (2016, pp. 82-83).

According to the architect Christopher Day (1999, p. 269), the everyday human activities found in family-based retail and workshops, the neighbours chatting in public spaces, are characteristics that bring cities alive. In particular, Day asserts that street life and public activities flourish in small-space settings (1999, p. 4). This is because small spaces like housefronts and building setbacks, can better physically adapt to trading requirements and interactions between shop owners and their customers than large developments of multi-storey housing can (1999, pp. 267-268). "All large developments stifle diversity," Day writes, but brand-new large housing developments will eventually change as the residents begin to settle in after decades of living there (1999, p. 267).

Figure 2.8 Shop signs and commercial activities at CC Nguyen Thien Thuat (Photographed by the author, 2016).

Doi Moi brought business opportunities not only for those living in *Hem* areas, but also for those in American-built apartment complexes (CC), like CC Nguyen Thien Thuat and CC Ngo Gia Tu. The structural frames of these CC have been physically adapted by many flat owners to run home-based workshop and retail activities. These physical adaptations occur in both domestic flats and public areas like balconies, shared corridors, and façades. Wandering around the housing blocks of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat, my personal experience was of a sense of liveability, reinforced by the shop signs that seem to encourage local community and commercial interactions between the blocks. Local architecture researcher Mel Schenck (2020, p. 240) suggests that the formal structure of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat, together with the physical adaptations made by the local community, facilitate much daily social interaction. In Chapter 5, I will look at CC Nguyen Thien Thuat in detail, examining its physical changes and adaptations to see how closely they resemble those in *Hem*.

According to the architect Christopher Day (1999, p. 4), everyday life activities and routines of inhabitants can strongly influence the design of homes, with physical changes and forms being the expression of their souls, giving a profound feeling (home attachment, holiness, awe) which is

nevertheless easily expressed. The landscape architect Clare Cooper (1995, p. 8) argued that the personalisation of homes is the best example of adaptation which reflects the everyday living routines of inhabitants, including their living and working habits and their emotions and memories about the space they dwell in. For Cooper, the process of personalising spaces is exemplified in the ways that inhabitants arrange their interior spaces, particularly the arrangement of moveable objects and furniture, because these are the "contents that help explain the inhabitant's psychology and consciousness about their home, thus, their statement about who they are" (1995, p. 9).

Figure 2.9 Red paper charms and pink tiled altars on housefronts in *Hem* Hao Sy Phuong (Photographed by the author, 2018).

Cooper's ideas about the personal statements of an inhabitant's home space can be seen in the practice of *phong thuy* and its application to designing and constructing houses in the historic *Hem* area of Cho Lon in District 5. At the fronts of houses in *Hem* Hao Sy Phuong, different types of paper charms and small altars are hung from or built into façades, for example, above door lintels at entrances. These charms and altars are also used for houseowners' daily routines of worship, or to commemorate important events in the household, for example, family marriages. Worship activities, *phong thuy* rituals, and structural altars and charms are tied together in important daily activities believed to bring good luck, wealth, happiness. They reflect a family's traditions and have been part of the cultural traditions of Cho Lon's populations for generations (Dinh Nguyen, 2018, p. 227). In Chapter 6, I examine how the practice of *phong thuy* rituals influences the spatial perceptions of *Hem* residents about their living spaces and the public paths of *Hem,* and I examine the interrelationship between these ritual activities and the physical characteristics of living spaces. In section 2.2, I review the key aspects and principles of *phong thuy*

practice, its rituals, the use of spiritual charms, and the *phong thuy* meanings of physical characteristics of living spaces.

Alexander's Urban Structure from A City is Not a Tree *and the Hem context*

In the previous sections, I reviewed the literature of several fields which discuss the complexity of urban spaces, grounded in the concept of 'spatial practices', to understand (1) the physical characteristics and aspects of space that require (2) the involvement of human activities in specific physical spaces. In fact, these reviews suggest there is a need to rethink how urban public spaces should and can support urban life from a more flexible point of view. Urban researcher Jane Jacobs (1961, pp. 270-276) was concerned that rigid planning policies, such as modern systematic planning and strict urban usage regulations, tend to oversimplify the human richness of the diverse patterns and local colour of everyday routines. She advocated the theory of 'eyes on the streets', suggesting that the role of architects and urban planners should be to provide designs, policies, and planning that reinstate the functions of urban space which encourage everyday human activities like socialising, commercial activities, religious gatherings etc. (Jacobs, 1961, p. 35). Jacobs believed that when street activities, either formal or informal, are mixed together, it brings a profound sense of welcoming liveliness, and that the number of people on the streets makes them safe spaces.

In his essay *The City is Not a Tree* (1965), the architect Christopher Alexander offered some theoretical standpoints to reform the hierarchical and systematic urban planning system – which has prominent characteristics of *conceived space* – and bring it closer to human space to reflect the intricate layers of lived experience, or 'spatial practice'.

Alexander defined two models for constructing urban space. A tree-like model is systematically applied by the professional practices of urban planners and architects, and a semi-lattice model represents the complex fabric of human life in urban spaces (Alexander, 1965, p. 15). Each model comprises multiple sets. Each set contain a collection of elements, physical receptacles, or structures and spaces of a city. The differences between the characteristics of the two models are the connections between sets and their internal elements. Where the tree-like model is a monotonous system only allowing smaller elements hierarchically connected to central elements which then continuously connect to upper central units, the semi-lattice model on the other hand is an open-ended system allowing opportunities for the elements of each set to overlap and interconnect regardless of their hierarchical position in the model (Alexander, 1965, pp. 14-16).

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Urban planning is best represented by the systematic tree-like model and spatial mapping of human interactions is best represented by the semi-lattice model. The planning model of the town of Columbia, Maryland exemplifies the tree-like model, according to Alexander (1965, p. 17). Urban development in Columbia focuses on its intensive expansion of public transportation. The key physical receptacles in development plans are houses, as the smallest units, which form into neighbourhoods which form clusters of five, which then form a village. Transportation joins these villages into a townscape. The urban system which Alexander believes better embraces living reality is the semi-lattice model. Key physical receptacle such as universities, colleges, bars, and shops are connected by in-between elements like sidewalks, routes, and shopfronts encouraging inhabitants to interact outside their working and living spaces. As people wait on the sidewalk to cross the street at a red traffic light, they look at the news rack outside the pharmacy on the corner. Some will briefly look at the paper, some will buy one while they wait (pp. 11-12). According to Alexander, this bottom-up examination can help professionals to design better human space.
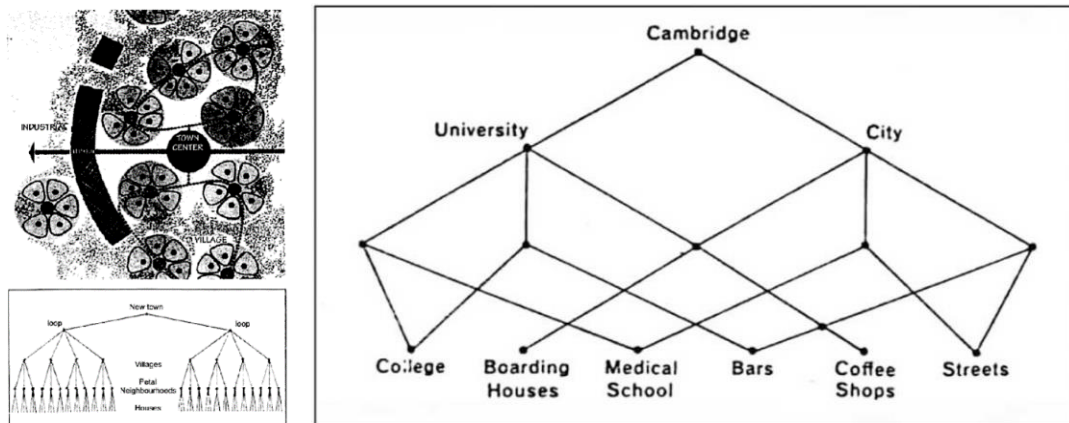
Figure 2.10 (Left) A tree-like planning model illustrating the City of Columbia, Maryland. (Right) A semi-lattice model representing daily urban activities (Collected from Alexander, 1965, pp.17-18).

According to both Alexander (1965, p. 27) and the human geographer Bin Jiang (2015, pp. 93-100), the limitation of the tree-like model is that it only includes certain physical receptacles (or urban spaces) to realise the corresponding systems. Physical spaces under the tree model have no social connections amongst themselves. The real systems, such as daily human activities, whose existence keeps the city alive do not appear as a unit in these tree-like models, are not acknowledged, and even worse, are not provided with any physical receptacles (1965, p. 26).

In section 1.4, I reviewed the procedures for *Hem* expansion projects under Decision 88/2007/ QĐ-UBND, which provides guidelines for local authorities to assess and categorise the physical

characteristics of *Hem* spaces, and to ensure fire safety and hygienic environments for the community after the expansion is complete. What is obviously not mentioned or covered in the Decision is an allowance of physical space for the local community to host their daily social and economic activities, which are key to the urban life of HCMC and its spatial practice. A small-scale example of how local residents and vendors work and interact in front of a house in *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang, in the case study in Chapter 4, reflects the multi-usage of housefronts. In Figure 2.10, I use Alexander's semi-lattice model to visualise the spatial structure of the shared activities of street vendors and house owners in doorstep areas. At each intersection point in the model, human activities emerge. Chapter 4 will describe how local *Hem* spaces such as house frontages and building setbacks change rapidly throughout the day, and how these changes denote strong human-space relationships.
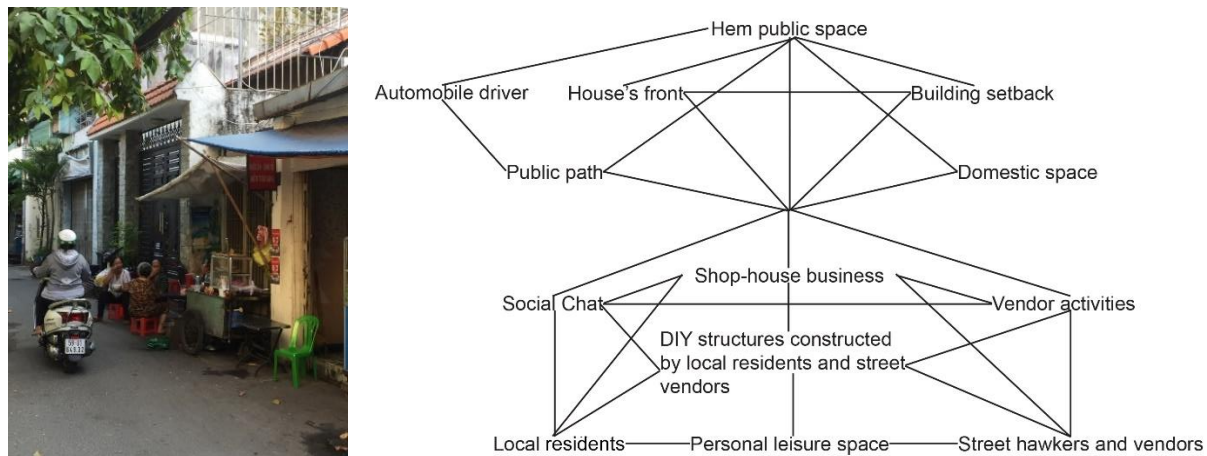
Figure 2.11 (Left) Neighbours chat at a housefront in *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang. (Right) A semi-lattice model represents observed human activities in space (Photographed and illustrated by the author, 2019).

Therefore, I would like to propose a linkage between the hypotheses of Lefebvre's spaces and Alexander's structures. Alexander's tree-like model seems to represent the construction of *conceived space*, and his semi-lattice structure seems to represent the construction of *perceived space*. The following diagram visualises my adaptation of Alexander and Lefebvre's work to conceptually frame the relationship between physical structures, everyday life activities, and spaces in the *Hem* context. This visualised hypothesis will be my key analytical framework for collecting and analysing the data from my case studies.
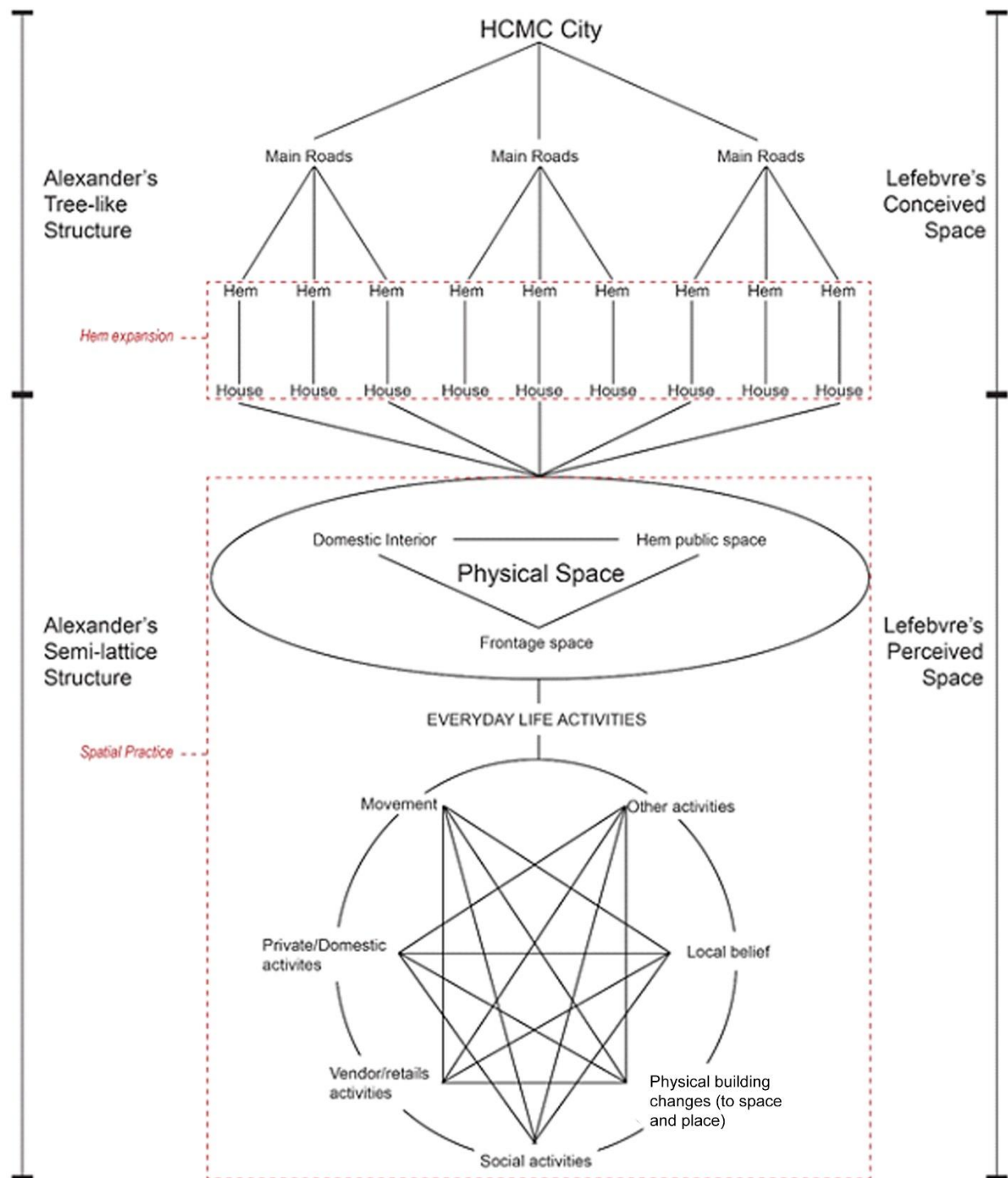
Figure 2.12 An analytical framework: adaptation of Alexander's structures and Lefebvre's spaces to the *Hem* context (Produced by the author, 2018).

According to Decision 88/2007/ QĐ-UBND, any informal adaptations or activities in public *Hem* spaces will be cleared out to prevent traffic obstruction. More spacious *Hem* will then become an appropriate

urban element in the Civilised and Modern City campaign of HCMC. However, it seems that local residents do not see *Hem* as a singular urban element like the government does. Daily activities and informal architectural changes can be seen scattered throughout *Hem* space. Therefore, it might be safe to say that *Hem* communities have a *perceived Hem* space far different to the *conceived* space of the *Hem* expansion process. The physical aspects of local changes in *Hem* space are perhaps represented by the physical receptacles mentioned by Alexander. The receptacle of *Hem* space is very elastic and responsive to various aspects of life. The analytical framework in Figure 2.12 opens several questions for our investigation of spatial practice in *Hem* space. What are the local architectural changes characterising *Hem* spatial practice? Moreover, to what extent are the spatial practices of *perceived space* able to exist within the frame provided by *conceived space* in the *Hem* context?

This requires my investigation of a real-world context and the recording of the phenomenology of everyday living routines occurring at specific sites. In fact, in each case study for my research on HCMC's *Hem,* I began with observation of how public spaces were being physically used, transformed, adapted, and negotiated at different times of day. The lived experience of all local residents begins in the interiors of their houses, their domestic spaces, so I recorded their interior space and their living routines, which in turn allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of how the locals live and work and how their beliefs influence spatial practice at the different levels of the public *Hem* and their domestic areas. Consequently, each case study will include detailed examination of living routines in homes. I shall elaborate on this in the Methodology section of Chapter 3.

It is also important to analyse urban practice with a focus on architectural and spatial changes in the urban context of HCMC's *Hem* areas. The next section will further ground several reviews by reference to two urban practices in *Hem* space: (1) everyday home-based businesses; and (2) the spiritual practices and beliefs of *phong thuy*. I will look at these urban practices with an immediate focus on their contributions to, and implications for, the architectural/environmental design of HCMC's *Hem* spaces.

2.2 Urban Practice in *Hem* Spaces of HCMC

Home-based business and the morphology of *Hem* space

Home-based business is perhaps the most common and traditional aspect of everyday life in HCMC. The term 'home-based business' is used in this thesis to describe commercial and business activities run by local residents in their own homes. According to the architect Ha Minh Hai Thai (2019, p. 927), home businesses in Western cities and in Asian cities have similarities and differences. They share the same

significant difficulties, like lack of space, either for living or working. The differences in the practice of home business lie in the solutions to their difficulties. In the Western context, the business owner tends to renovate and expand the working and living space within their property, such as using the attic or a detached shed as office space. In developing cities in Asia, including HCMC and Hanoi in Vietnam, home-based retail tends to spill over into public space, notably housefront areas (Ha Thai et al., 2019, p. 297). Sometimes the doorstep area of a business or house is casually 'leased' to other businesses, such as street hawkers or vendors. This private use of public spaces in *Hem* inevitably leads to structural alterations, beginning with domestic spaces and then moving outwards to housefronts.

Figure 2.13 (Left) A breakfast venue has set up tables and stools along the *Hem* path of 53 Cao Thang Street for its customers. (Right) Grocery stores along *Hem* 104 Bui Vien Street (Photographed by the author, 2017).

The local historian Vu Hong Lien has suggested that, prior to French colonisation in 1858, local residents made their livings from selling hand-crafted buckets, oil lamps, and other general household items from their thatched houses (Vu, 2013, p. 27). Historians Nguyen Thanh Loi and Nguyen Duc Hiep have also suggested that home-based business was booming from the late 18th to early 19th centuries (Hiep Nguyen, 2016a, p. 139; Loi, 2015, pp. 85-87). According to Kim (2015, pp. 43-53), the boom was due to the endorsement by the French colonisers of residents constructing shop-houses. The convenience of living and working in one place, with spatial layouts fitting well into the vernacular architecture of tube-shaped houses, was the main reason for such endorsement (Kim, 2015, p. 48).
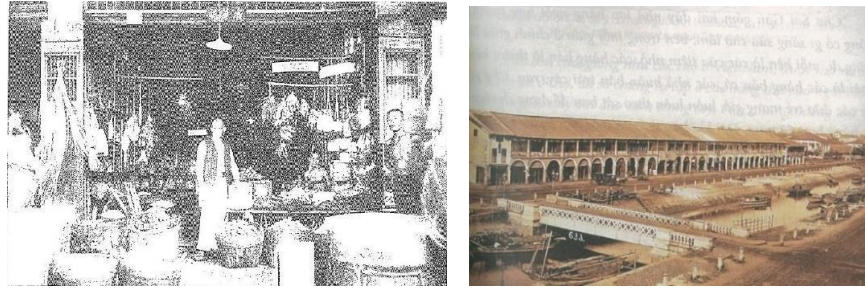
Figure 2.14 (Left) Grocery store in 1931 with goods displayed in front and living space at the back, located in Cho Lon (Loi, 2015, p.85). (Right) Row houses built by the French with shops located at ground level and residential space located on the second level (Hiep, 2016a, p.139).

The spatial layouts of home-based business included ground-floor frontage for commercial activities, with the rear quarters and upper levels as private spaces. The densification of the city's population led to the construction of these tube-shaped houses characterised by narrow fronts, deep lengths, and multiple levels, which allowed business owners to segment their houses and cater for both business and living activities spatially. Home businesses could be found in almost all housing typologies, including detached houses and row houses (Hiep, 2016a, p. 139; Loi, 2015, pp. 85-87). This practice was an essential part of the urban experience that was accepted by both the French colonial government and the later American-supported government which continuously adopted by a large margin of present-day city's populations. (Drummond, 2000, p.2382; Bao Nguyen, 2016, p.17; Thai, 2017, pp.73-74).

Figure 2.15 (Left) Grocery stores displaying their merchandise at their open fronts in the *Hem* tourist area of Bui Vien. (Right) A very tall house with its ground floor used as a beauty salon in *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street (Photographed by the author, 2018).

Home-based businesses can also be found in the American-built *chung cu*. To make a living in their private flats, *chung cu* residents construct mezzanine levels in their internal space, to separate their small-scale commercial activities (beverage shops, groceries, restaurants, cafés etc.) on the ground level from their private living quarters on the mezzanine level. During the Socialist subsidy period (1975-

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1986), although private business was strictly controlled, many residents living in *chung cu* still operated home-based businesses in their apartments. Present-day changes to *chung cu* architecture are significant because these once monotonous facades have been changed by home-based businesses. The changes, including structures added to both exterior and interior spaces of flats, have been made by local residents to accommodate home-based business activities.

Figure 2.16 (Left) A ground-level flat in block A of *chung cu* Nguyen Thien Thuat used as a parking station. (Right) Façade variations (Photographed and sketched by the author, 2016).

In fact, most private businesses in HCMC households went 'underground' during the subsidy period, despite government efforts to restrain them (MacLean, 2008, p. 290). *Doi Moi* brought changes to the city's economic system. Internal changes to accommodate underground home-based businesses began to spill over into the public open spaces of *Hem* so as to gain exposure to the local pedestrian clientele. Household challenges, including the shortage of domestic space, meant they now seized neglected opportunities to expand their businesses informally.

In my interview with the architect Dr Hoanh Tran of HTAP architects,[10] who researches contemporary responses to urban super-density, he described the informal construction done by local business as *ad hoc* architecture. This is because not every household has enough money to access engineering or architectural design or proper construction materials. Therefore, according to Dr Hoanh, they 'advance' in the sense that the diversity of these structures is a reflection of local creativity and adaptability in tackling spatial and economic limitations with little government support. Structural changes and adaptations of home spaces are also made to expose home-based businesses, workshops, and retail activities to public circulation, and to gain more opportunities for making income. Government agendas,

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[10] Interviewed by the author, 2018, 2019.

such as those aiming to clean up or demolish structures supporting local family-based retail and business activities, will face strong resistance from business-owners, Dr. Hoanh concluded.

Chapter 2 of *A History of Messiness, '*Order and Resilience on the Sidewalks of Ho Chi Minh City' by Annette Kim (Chalana and Hou, 2016, p. 24) explores the term 'messiness' through the practices of retail activities along the pavements of HCMC. The 'messy' pavements are socially linked to temporary vendors and street hawkers making use of public spaces to earn their livings. Government visions of a modern city, including an orderly landscape of the city's pavements without informal usage, have led to several 'clean-up campaigns', however, officials have faced the strong resilience of people gradually coming back to informally occupy pavement areas. This resilience is deemed to be 'messy' from the government's perspective. Kim's discussions of unexplored histories of the City have covered formal and informal uses of pavement areas, and he argues that 'messy' pavements are in fact an urban tradition stimulating the vibrant economic and social life of the city (Chalana and Hou, 2016, pp. 24-36). Kim states that it is the unresolved tension between the government vision and the everyday usage by people of the pavement which creates the 'urban messy', so understanding the human experience on HCMC's pavements might assist planning (Chalana and Hou, 2016, p. 36).

Figure 2.17 (Left) Unnamed café at house number 46. (Right) The layout of the café (Photographed and produced by the author, 2017 & 2018).

In the urban life of HCMC *Hem* spaces, the informal use of public spaces by home-based businesses is historically an essential part of the city's experience. At the present day, they are neglected in the municipal perspective, leading to a conflict between the modern vision of the government and the financial contribution of home-based retail activities to local livelihoods (Truitt, 2008, p. 15; Kim, 2012, p. 235; Drummond, 2000, p. 2387; Waibel et al., 2007, p. 65; Givental, 2013, p. 43; Lloyd, 2003, p. 357; Earl, 2010, p. 115). It should be noted that the architectural aspects of home-based business are resilient

and adaptable to different urban typologies. Home-based businesses not only continually change at different times of day in *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang Street (Chapter 4), they also appear in American-built CC (Chapter 5), where businesses from *chung cu* join with other local businesses in nearby *Hem.* Many structural changes and building additions recorded in CC spaces are results of physical spaces (domestic flats, shared corridors, landing areas, pathways between blocks etc.) being adapted to family-based retail activities. I will look in detail at CC spatial transformations in Chapter 5.

Ideas of spatial theories from section 2.1.1 will provide me with practical approaches for later examinations of home-based business. Not only will I look, record, and study how the phenomenology of home-based business occurs in my case study *Hem,* including spatial transformations and physical adaptations of existing structures to accommodate home-based retail activities (spatial practice), I will also look at local planning regulations, maps, and proposals for 'upgrading' the *Hem* (*conceived space*). The analysis will involve comparing how local spatial practices have been carried out in conjunction with the government's *conceived space* in *Hem.* Furthermore, Dovey's ideas of urban transparency in section 2.1.2 will help me to examine how physical characteristics of *Hem* spaces and home-based retail activities are integrated into *Hem* landscapes, thus creating a sense of exposure of home-based businesses and their ongoing practices.

The Architectural Practice of *Phong Thuy*

The aim and objective of this review is to excavate how aspects of *phong thuy* practices penetrate the urban and architectural characteristic of Cho Lon and are widely appreciated by the majority of Ho Chi Minh City's population, including the government of HCMC, which once rejected them because they were deemed to be impractical and superstitious. The strict Socialist government of Vietnam before *Doi Moi* (1975-1986) viewed *phong thuy* as a hindrance to urban development, leading its practice to go underground (Phuong Dinh, 2009, p. 203). According to Phuong Dinh, *phong thuy* practices are resilient because their guidelines empower users' greater understanding of selecting sites for human settlement (2009, p. 207). It helps the user to design spaces and places according to their *phong thuy* needs but with firm reference to the characteristics of sites.

It is not the objective of this review to differentiate *feng shui* from *phong thuy*, nor define which is the dominant practice of the Chinese-Vietnamese population in Cho Lon. Dinh Nguyen (2018, pp. 150-227) suggests that *feng shui* and *phong thuy* are very similar, and that Chinese people have appreciated both practices. The imprints of *phong thuy* practice can be observed in the architectural design and orientation of Cho Lon's assembly halls, *hoi quan*, which were built more than a century ago (Doling,

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2019, pp. 42-43). The majority of *hoi quan* were spatially divided into three major compartments – the front hall (*tien dien*), the middle hall (*trung dien*), and the main hall (*chanh dien*). In each compartment, there are architectural details which act as spiritual features accentuating *phong thuy* beliefs. For example, at *hoi quan* Tue Thanh (built in 1760), there are two shrines located at *tien dien* dedicated to the Door God (*mon quan vuong ta*) and the Earth God (*tho dia cong*), who safeguard the *hoi quan*. There is a 4.5-metre-high door panel acting as a protective screen (*binh phong*) because bad energy is believed to travel in straight lines (Them, 1996, pp. 435-450; Doling, 2019, p. 533). *Chanh dien* is considered to be the most holy space within *hoi quan*, where statutes of deities are worshiped by local communities, including those in the *Hem* area of Cho Lon.

Figure 2.18 (Left) *Binh phong* door panels. (Right) A shrine to the Chinese sea goddess Mazu in the *chanh dien* area (Photographed by the author, 2018).

The belief in *phong thuy* by local communities, including those living in *Hem* areas, is expressed in their everyday living activities and routines. As mentioned in section 1.4, each of the *Hem* areas in Cho Lon was built by a group sharing the same ethnic background, dialect, trading expertise, culture, and religious beliefs. These communities tend to go to the same *hoi quan* for worship activities and prayers for good luck, health, and an auspicious life. Worship activities and rituals, for instance burning joss paper and lighting incense, often take place in *trung dien* and *chanh dien* areas of *hoi quan*. The majority of residents living in *Hem* Hao Sy Phuong believe in Bao Zheng, a politician of the Chinese Song Dynasty (10th century), as their local deity and he is worshipped at *hoi quan* Ha Chuong. The community have even constructed several altars within their *Hem* to conduct daily worship activities there. These rituals are discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

Since *Doi Moi* in 1986, *phong thuy* practice has become more socially accepted in a more flexible Vietnamese society, including by the government (Phuong Dinh, 2009, p. 204). In fact, *phong thuy* practices have become a growing concern for recent government construction/renovation and large-scale property development. In 2017, the People's Committee of HCMC commissioned the American architectural firm Gensler to renovate the office of HCMC's People's Council (Tien Long, 2018).[11] The design proposed new buildings centred in the complex, with the original French-built blocks in front retained, facing the Saigon River. Vice-Chairman of HCMC's Architectural Association, architect Khuong Van Muoi, applauded the design for its *phong thuy* features reflecting an auspicious setting with *tien an, hau cham, minh duong,* meaning lower front, higher back, and water sources in front (Tien Long, 2018).

Figure 2.19 New design for the HCMC People's Council building (From Tien Long, 2018).

However, the *phong thuy* practices of residents living in historic *Hem* areas of Cho Lon have not received adequate consideration from official urban planning and (re)development programs. In my discussion with *phong thuy* expert Master Thanh, he suggested that the practice of *phong thuy* was in a 'grey' area.[12] Master Thanh advised that his practice, including *phong thuy* consultation for architectural designs/renovations for house-owners, home buyers, even architects and interior designers, is generally accepted by local officials. However, when *phong thuy* believers expose to government planning and urban

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[11] Retrieved from https://tuoitre.vn/tru-so-ubnd-tp-hcm-va-so-phan-dinh-thuong-tho-y-kien-trai-chieu-20180422102427169.htm
[12] Interview with Master Thanh by author, 2018.

project authorities their *phong thuy* concerns about negative impacts on their properties, these concerns are often rejected and downplayed, Master Thanh advised.

Figure 2.20 (Left) Master Thanh and clients. (Right) Master Thanh's business card (Photographed and collected by the author, 2018).

Many *phong thuy* rituals are deemed to be 'impractical and not civilised', for example, burning joss paper and lighting incense in front of homes as offerings to local deities and ghosts (Phuong Tran, 2013, p. 80). The solution has been to impose regulations to limit ritual activities, which means *phong thuy* rituals are no longer the same as they used to be. Obviously, this will impact on the way *phong thuy* believers feel about their homes, including those living in the *Hem.* In the following sections I will look at *phong thuy* practice and its implications, focusing on the physical built environment and human activities. Specifically, the review will look at key aspects of: (1) general concepts of *phong thuy* and its role; (2) *phong thuy* tools for site evaluation and architectural design; (3) the uses of *phong thuy* charms and talismans; and (4) *phong thuy* ritual practices.

General concepts of phong thuy and its role

As mentioned earlier, *phong thuy* contains similarities, and is derived from Chinese *feng shui* (Phuong and Grove, 2010, p. 5). A more comprehensive explanation of *feng shui* can be found in the book *What is Feng-Shui* (1997) by Evelin Lip. In brief, *feng shui* means 'wind' and 'water' respectively, and it seeks a harmonious site to place human-made structures aligned with the spiritual aspects of the locality (Lip, 1997, p. 11). The urban anthropologist Knapp (1999, p. 29) suggested that this ranges from the urban planning of a town or city to specific locations for palaces, temples, markets, houses, and graves. The Australian architect Derham Groves (2011, pp. 55-58) further explains about *feng-shui* that this geomancy practice helps to identify the *qi* (the energy or the breath of nature) flowing through the selected site. *Feng shui* masters and practitioners find sites with good *sheng qi* (positive energy or vital vapour) that brings good luck, health, and wealth to occupants, while avoiding *sha qi* (negative energy

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or noxious vapour) that brings bad luck, illness, and accidents to occupants (Groves, 2011, p. 56). Groves further asserts that *feng shui* is an architectural approach to improving the human experience of living spaces (2011, pp. 56-61).

Figure 2.21 Feng *shui* charms placed at the entrance door of a gift shop in Chinatown, Melbourne (Photographed by the author, 2020).

According to the Vietnamese historian Dao Duy Anh (1938, p. 341), the practice of *phong thuy* involves selecting auspicious sites for citadels, cities, houses, and graveyards. It is also associated with the reading of landform characteristics, shapes of structures, and domestic objects. Dao Duy Anh continued that there are two fundamental spiritual domains in *phong thuy* principles (1938, p. 341). *Duong co* (positive place or the mortal realm) are sites associated with everyday life, like domestic spaces within houses, buildings, or citadels. *Am phan* (negative place or the immortal realm) are sites associated with death, like tombs, graveyards, and locations of family altars within houses. The historian Phan Ke Binh (1913, p. 223) asserted that Vietnamese believers in *phong thuy* are more concerned about *duong co* because it relates to living routines, while *am phan* (e.g. the placement of ancestors' graves) is usually managed by hiring geomancers. Both *am phan* and *duong co* require careful selection of the best *phong thuy* site, to gain good fortune and wealth for occupants (Phan, 1913, p. 224).

Phong thuy practices to address the quality of *duong co* and *am phan* for occupants are vital in the process of selecting living circumstance for family members. If graves and family altars are placed at good *am phan* sites, this is believed to bring good fortune to the living occupants. Conversely, a family's troubles – like a member having a terminal illness – are often blamed on placement of graves or family

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altars on bad *phong thuy* sites (Phuong Dinh, 2009, p. 197). People often turn to *phong thuy* masters to double-check whether their troubles are caused by the bad *phong thuy* of their homes or the graves of their ancestors (Them, 1996, p. 434).

For cultural studies researcher Tran Ngoc Them (1996, pp. 433-437), *phong thuy* practice is about harmoniously balancing the *duong co* and *am phan* related to the construction site. Concern for the best *phong thuy* should be equally divided between the appropriate construction of structures and buildings to produce good *am phan* and *duong co*. This means that occupants focus not only on family altars and graveyards, but also on the structures of their houses (Them, 1996, p. 434). *Phong* (wind) is dynamic and constantly active and thus deemed to be *duong* (positive), while *thuy* (water) is still and shapeless and thus deemed to be *am* (negative). An imbalance between these two factors will cause problems (Them, 1996, p. 434). If the openings of the house (doors and windows) are made without consideration of its surroundings, heavy winds will disrupt the domestic spaces. If there are no openings, the domestic spaces will overheat. The lack of *thuy* will lead to drought, but too much will lead to floods. *Binh phong* (protective screens) should be logistically placed to best harvest the directions of the wind. According to Them, *Phong thuy* is a pragmatic architectural approach to making living and working spaces balanced, that is, well ventilated with enough humidity for comfortable living (Them, 1996, p. 436).

Phong thuy tools for site evaluation and architectural design

There are two main methods to assess the good or bad *phong thuy* qualities of a building site. According to the architect Dinh Quoc Phuong (2009, p. 197), the first method involves depicting the landform characteristics and the shape of the site. Ideally, a good *feng shui* site has a hill or mountain at the back – *hau chan* – to protect against intrusive spirits, a lower front – *tien an* – with waterbodies (lakes, rivers) – *minh duong* – to attract good fortune (Them, 1996, p. 436). Furthermore, if the landform of the site resembles the shape of a celestial being, with a mountain shaped like a dragon in the East and a lower hill shaped like a tiger in the West, the site will be considered to have the most auspicious *phong thuy* qualities.

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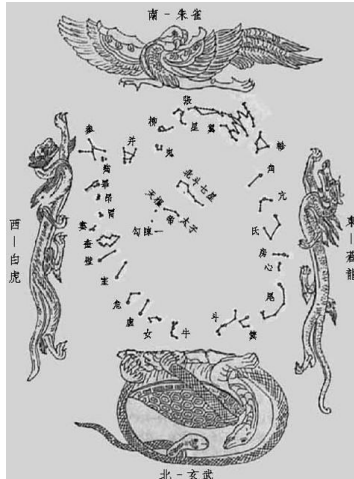
Figure 2.22 Celestial animals of *phong thuy* (From Phuong Dinh, 2009, p.196).

The second method is using a *phong thuy* compass to assess the *phong thuy* quality of the site. According to Them, this second method is commonly adopted by city dwellers because they are more concerned about the orientation of the property (Them, 1996, p. 434). The compass comprises several mandatory principles, including the eight trigrams (*Khảm, Cấn, Chấn, Tốn, Ly, Khôn, Đoài, Càn*), *âm* and *dương* (negative and positive), and the five elements (wood, fire, earth, metal, and water) (Phuong, 2009, p. 196). Geomancers then consider the dates of birth of the site's occupants to further determine the appropriate shapes and orientations of structures.
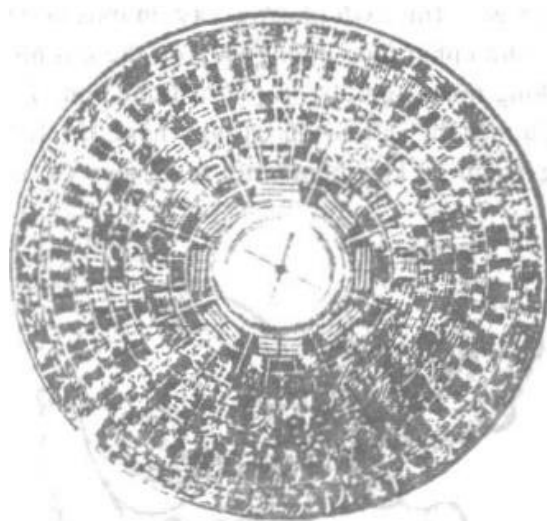
Figure 2.23 A *phong thuy* compass (Them, 1996, p.436).

Another *phong thuy* tool is the *Lo Ban* ruler (*thuoc lo ban*) used by carpenters and builders to construct structural frames and furniture for houses. There are three versions of the *lo ban* ruler to measure objects and structures regarding *am phan* and *duong co*. The *am phan* ruler (38.8 cm) is used to

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measure furniture and structures for death, such as graveyards, tombs, altars, or shrines. The *duong trach* ruler (42.9 cm) is used to measure building frames, structural details, and furniture regarding *duong co*, for domestic spaces and houses. The *thong thuy* ruler (52.2 cm) is used to measure the openings of structures, such as doorways, entrances, and windows. On each ruler, auspicious signs and ominous signs are located at different measurements so that builders can locate the measurements of furniture or structures at auspicious signs while avoiding ominous signs. Doing so correctly will bless the house's occupants with fame, fortune, health, a happy family, and divine blessings, while the opposite will curse the occupants' lives.

Figure 2.24 (Left) A *lo ban* ruler. (Right) A group of builders using a *lo ban* ruler and *phong thuy* compass to measure the kitchen island in my design project for a residential house (Collected and photographed by the author, 2017).

Phong thuy charms and talismans

Figure 2.25 Feng-*shui* charms (Knapp, 2019, p. 53).

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Not every houseowner can find a site with suitable *phong thuy*, and spiritual charms are often deployed to solve this predicament. They can be used to attract positive energy, prevent bad energy, balance the flow of all energy, or retain positive energy. They can be small structures, such as shrines, protective screens (*binh phong*), strips of paper, tablets, or small statues. Even domestic tools, such as scissors, a pan, or a fan can be used as *phong thuy* charms. The most common charm is a *bat quai* mirror, an octagonal piece with the eight trigrams carved into it which normally hangs above the lintel of the entrance door.

According to the *Phong Thuy Encyclopedia* by Thieu Vi Hoa (2009, p. 277), charms should be placed according to the setting of the house to ensure their potency. The potency of *phong thuy* charms and objects is based on their symbolic meanings, and also the *phong thuy* meanings of the spaces where they are placed. For example, Hoa (2009, p. 280) suggests flowers like the narcissus can bring good business opportunities to houseowners, because the name of narcissus in Vietnamese means 'fortune'. Flowers represent the 'wood' element and, if raised in ceramic pots which represent the 'earth' element, they can be potent charms for business owners who are seeking good fortune. However, a pot of narcissus should only be placed near a door entrance or next to a staircase, avoiding kitchen areas or balconies. This is because these areas might not be ideal for nourishing these fragile flowers, for instance, heat from the stove or strong winds flowing through the balcony areas will damage or blow the flowers off (Hoa, 2009, p. 290). Dead plants or flowers will bring bad *phong thuy* to the house occupants, because it is generally believed that wandering ghosts and evil spirit dwell there (Hoa, 2009, p. 290). Therefore, the placement of charms should be carefully considered, together with the orientation of the house and the physical characteristics of the surrounding area, such as neighbouring houses and buildings.

Figure 2.26 A pot of narcissus with leaves pointing outward from the house symbolically represents the courage to capture business opportunities (From Hoa, 2009, p.280).

Not every *phong thuy* believer will attribute the same symbolic meanings to charms, due to their own interpretations and living circumstances and their house's orientations and interior layouts. For instance, charms hung at the door lintels of local houses in *Hem* Hao Sy Phuong range diversely through different domestic objects. Even a bunch of herbs or a pair of chicken legs can be used as a *phong thuy* charm. Since the deployment of charms is spiritually related to changes in real-life circumstances for *phong thuy* believers, changes to different charms may occur as real-life issues are resolved. Subsequently, this might impact the physical settings of the homes of *phong thuy* believers because they might require further renovations, decorations, or a redesign. In Chapter 6, I will look more at the details of the use of *phong thuy* charms and their meanings to local believers.

Phong thuy ritual practices

Various kinds of *phong thuy* charms and objects require daily care. For example, if plants are used by *phong thuy* believers as charms, they should water and take care of them and avoid them dying, or they will be dwelled in by evil spirits. The provision of constant care to spiritual charms, objects, or structures, has been termed 'ritual practice' by the cultural researcher Huynh Ngoc Trang (2013, p. 8). According to his book *Enquiries on Common and Household Rituals,* ritual practice is best seen as believers performing worship activities, commonly the lighting of incense and burning of joss papers as offerings to the gods (Trang, 2013, pp. 28-30). The cultural researcher Tran Hanh Minh Phuong (2017, pp. 63-78) suggested that these practices of worship have a particular historical character as a cultural tendency of the Vietnamese that has been influenced by the *feng shui* practices of China. Altars and shrines placed within the home, or built into its façade, are often viewed as an abode for deities coming to observe and evaluate the locals' attitude to worship (Trang, 2013, p. 30). Both Trang and Phuong suggest that the motivations to worship deities range from ambitious desires – like gaining fortune and being successful in business, or becoming an important figure in society (a dignitary, scholar, doctor etc.) – right down to the basic needs of everyday life like overcoming illness, being blessed with peace in life, and so on (Phuong Tran, 2017, p. 80; Trang, 2013, pp. 6-8). If the community lives together, families have more sympathy for each other's spiritual needs or concerns if the needs and concerns are associated with specific spaces, places, or buildings within the community's area (Phuong Tran, 2017, pp.63-83).

According to Phuong Dinh (2009, pp. 199-207), even though *phong thuy* principles are complex and require daily attention, the spiritual system is commonly appreciated by many houseowners because it helps occupants to live and work comfortably in their spaces, and subsequently helps them to better understand their spaces. Phuong Dinh and Groves (2010, p. 17) further suggest that the practice of

phong thuy can achieve Relph's 'insideness', the level where one uses personal emotions, memories, and lived experience to make sense of one's space. Tuan's idea of experiential perspectives, in which human emotions are embedded in physical spaces, also describes the role of *phong thuy* practices, particularly the evaluation process with *phong thuy* tools, to identify key physical characteristics of domestic spaces and public spaces, so that occupants can integrate their symbolic meanings to achieve personal needs and desires. These ideas will further inspire my study of *phong thuy* in *Hem* spaces in Chapter 6. Furthermore, I will discuss *phong thuy* as a way to maintain group identity based on the local communal appreciation of this spiritual belief. The analysis and recordings of *phong thuy* practice, for example the use of charms and ritual practices, will locate my understanding of *phong thuy* spatial practices as part of spatial improvement, guiding the thesis one step closer to answering the question of the roles of spiritual factors, ritual practices, and local belief systems in the process of understanding and improving space.

Figure 2.27 A local monk performing a home ritual to improve the *phong thuy* aspects of Ms's. P.G house – to be disclosed in Chapter 6 (photographed by the author, 2019)

Chapter 3. Research Methodology and Methods

3.1 Methodology

In the Introduction, I discussed the continuing challenge of redeveloping Ho Chi Minh City's *Hem* spaces and the debate about public use of *Hem* open space. Tensions exist between the ways local *Hem* residents perceive their areas and the government's vision of modernising *Hem* space to reflect global standards in urban infrastructure. At the practical level, this can be observed in the resilience and persistence of the local ways of using the public open *Hem*, characterised by self-built structures and *ad hoc* 'architecture'. I also reviewed the contextual background of HCMC's urban development with special focus on its *Hem* morphology. The review aims to build understanding for the rationale of this thesis' case studies, as well as providing contextual information for them.

There are two levels of theoretical thinking that define the methodological approach taken to this investigation of spatial change and (social) practice in the *Hem* areas of HCMC. The first is the philosophical theories of Henri Lefebvre regarding spatial practice. The review of Lefebvre's ideas is then conceptually grounded in the works of philosophers who further developed his concepts, such as Michel de Certeau, Edward Soja, and Homi K. Babha, and in the works of theorists who shared similar perspectives, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Yi-fu Tuan, and Edward Relph. The review aims to resolve the broad meaning of spatial practice, focusing on key aspects of architectural and interior design disciplines. The second level of theoretical thinking is focused on architectural design theories regarding the understanding of two key aspects of spatial practice – physical characteristics and human activities – to critically examine the interrelationship between everyday human activities and the built environment and to analyse how *Hem* residents physically change *Hem* space in response to the everyday needs of their lived experience. At the same time, the review helps to define the key hypothesis of my thesis, that spatial practice represents the human activities of *Hem* residents and their architectural and spatial influence on the built environment of the *Hem*. This methodological approach also shows how my key research questions can be conceptualised and empirically examined via the case studies.

After an examination of the city's urban context and the key theoretical standpoints, how can we 'visualise' the ongoing debate about public use and spatial changes of HCMC's *Hem* spaces? The theory of social space in Lefebvre's ideas of *perceived space* and *conceived space* and Alexander's theories of urban structure, comprising semi-lattice and tree-like models, offer a philosophical 'visualisation' by

which spatial practice in *Hem* space can be investigated and assessed. Municipal perspectives, strategies, and visions of a 'modern and civilised' HCMC, including *Hem* expansion projects, conceptually represent *conceived space*. Everyday life with architectural changes and local use of *Hem* public space in response to community and individual daily routines, on the other hand, represents *perceived space*. Local architectural changes are one dimension of *perceived space*. This proposal will form the main conceptual framework of my thesis and will be explained in detail in section 3.2.

To what extent do local factors of the urban context of HCMC contribute to the making of spatial changes in *Hem* built environments? The review of two key aspects of urban practice, home-based business and *phong thuy* beliefs, in section 2.2 supports the idea that these practices are part of the way of life, both historically and today, of HCMC and its *Hem* areas.

As this research looks at changes to physical space in response to the requirements of the local *Hem* community from the phenomenological perspective, it employs qualitative research. The advantage of this approach to architectural design research, as explained by Fross et al. (2015, p. 1631), is that it provides: (1) empirical evaluation of the efficient use of space; (2) justification of design decisions which are otherwise overlooked or neglected; and (3) future implications for self-improvement and better design decisions. From the literature review of Chapter 2, it appears that research inspired by spatial practice uses a bottom-up approach that closely resembles de Certeau's *walker* mode and his notion of *tactics* (1984, pp. xix, 93), and suggests that there is a need to take an 'in-between' path to investigate real-life human experience, and to design it in response to experience (Phuong Dinh, 2019, p.323).

Given that the process of urbanisation in HCMC has neglected the role of *Hem* space in the livelihoods of *Hem* residents – as stated in the Problem Statement, section 1.3 – empirical research in this thesis will be critical to investigate and acknowledge the contribution of the ongoing spatial changes and usage of *Hem* space in the everyday lives of *Hem* residents.

Some aspects of ethnographic study and case studies are adopted by this thesis as part of qualitative research. According to the architectural anthropology researcher Ray Lucas (2015, p. 165), the effectiveness of the ethnographic approach for studying architectural environmental design is that "ethnography allows researchers access to other people's lives – how they practice them and engage with their context… [because] Ethnography is about people, first and foremost, so any reference to context is always related to what it can tell you about the people who live there, or their interactions with that environment" (2016, p. 165). The case study method, particularly in studies of physical

environments and public life, has these advantages: (1) a focus on real-life contexts of a single or multiple case studies; (2) findings from case studies are exploratory, explanatory, descriptive, and; (3) their evidences are triangulated from multiple sources; (4) collected data are grounded in their context and hence cannot be manipulated; and (5) they provide an opportunity to generate theory (Wang, 2013, p. 419; Phuong, 2010, p. 8). Research approaches combining case study and some techniques from ethnography are highly applicable to this thesis, and have been adopted in scholarly works in the field of architectural design and planning, including: the study of pedestrianism in public space (Gehl, 2010); how informal building additions have been locally adopted by the residents of Hanoi's apartment buildings (Phuong, 2011); and the everyday use of HCMC's sidewalk by street vendors and local residents (Kim, 2012, 2015, 2016). I will explain this research approach further in Section 3.3.

Investigating selected *Hem* as case studies, from the phenomenological perspective, provides unique contrasts between HCMC's *Hem* to ground the thesis' conceptual framework to examine how spaces are 'officially' created by government ideology, renovation proposals, and expansion planning, as opposed to how *Hem* spaces are actually used by local residents. The investigation includes a description and firsthand narration of local daily routines which influence physical changes at different spatial levels of *Hem,* including domestic areas, house frontages, and public areas. These levels of examination have been determined by the review of urban practices in HCMC *Hem* space today (section 2.2) where the uses of and changes to public spaces are derived from many domestic needs, economic activities, and spiritual beliefs. The selection of case-study *Hem*, houses, and buildings for this thesis, and the data collection procedures, are explained later.

The discussion in the thesis is grounded in both the analysis of case studies and the theoretical ideas in Chapter 2, in the hope of generating several constructive recommendations for understanding how local aspects of spatial practice in *Hem* spaces positively contribute to the space-making progress of HCMC's *Hem*. These recommendations will put on hold any negative judgements of the spatial characteristics of *Hem* space and spatial changes to it (Chapter 4), will re-imagine *Hem* and *chung cu* spaces (Chapter 5), and acknowledge the *phong thuy* beliefs of *Hem* residents in the Cho Lon area (Chapter 6). Hence, the recommendations should practically assist decision-makers such as architects, urban planners, and governments to preserve key characteristics of *Hem* space as good space-making practices. The research will not try to define the legal roles of parties involved in the making of *Hem* space, but rather to bring some insight into spatial practice in *Hem* space, and the nature of spatial changes caused by various local needs.

3.2 Conceptual Framework

To gain a deeper understanding of the everyday life of *Hem* communities, their informal architectural practices, and the different attitudes of local authorities towards *Hem* space requires a conceptual framework for the research process. By Lefebvre's definitions, *conceived space* means space created by formal practices of professional architects and urban planners, while *perceived space* is created by the everyday life of the inhabitants, which do not necessarily follow the rules and regulations imposed by *conceived space*. Creating changes or physical adaptations of formal structures is termed 'spatial practice.' Lefebvre's 'spatial dialects' have formed the main body of my literature review. These ideas are then adapted for the thesis, informing inquiries into the making of *Hem* spaces from two perspectives, government planning visions and renovation projects in *Hem* space versus the changes to and uses of *Hem* spaces on a daily basis created by the everyday social, cultural, and economic activities of *Hem* residents. Although the city's government has introduced several planning and renovation projects (e.g. Decision 88/2007/QĐ-UBND, the Civilised and Modern City campaign) for *Hem* areas as ways to improve the living standards of residents, these government initiatives still disregard the role of *Hem* residents as key participants during the development of *Hem* spaces (Gibert, 2016, pp. 5-28; People's Committee of HCMC, 2007). This has led to my research question evoking the perspective of *perceived space*, which is currently neglected: What is the spatial/architectural role of *Hem* and the everyday life of *Hem* residents and communities in the making of urban structure?

The literature on the spatial theories of theorists and philosophers has provided me with perspectives and concepts to examine how different stakeholders 'conceive' or 'perceive' the changes to *Hem* spaces, and the literature on architectural, interior, and urban design and planning has offered specific frameworks for me to look at *Hem* spatial changes from a more professional design and planning perspective. In detail, I focus on the architectural urban design literature by referring to the key aspects of spaces, including physical characteristics and human activities, which are analysed to better understand *Hem* spaces. These ingredients assist in the comprehension of data and analysis of the relationships between the built environment and human activities. Research questions emerge, including: What are the key factors that influence the making and transformation of *Hem* spaces? How have local residents physically adapted *Hem* spaces for everyday needs in different urban contexts? Why do cultural and economic factors, such as local belief systems and retail activities, play a significant role in spatial practices in *Hem*?

Understanding these two key qualities of space contributes to a revision of Alexander's urban models, the semi-lattice and tree-like models. A space may have different meanings to different stakeholders, hence tensions can emerge between these perspectives. What is important for urban researchers is to critically identify the characteristics of urban space that might bring significant contributions to the livelihoods of inhabitants. Alexander argued that successful unplanned cities tend to follow the semi-lattice structure. Alexander's urban models contribute to the conceptual framework of this thesis, in detail, the semi-lattice structure is hypothetically part of the creation process of *perceived space*, while the tree-like structure is hypothetically part of the creation process of *conceived space*. At the same time, Alexander's urban models will contribute to the practical methods and tools for collecting data, which will be explained later.
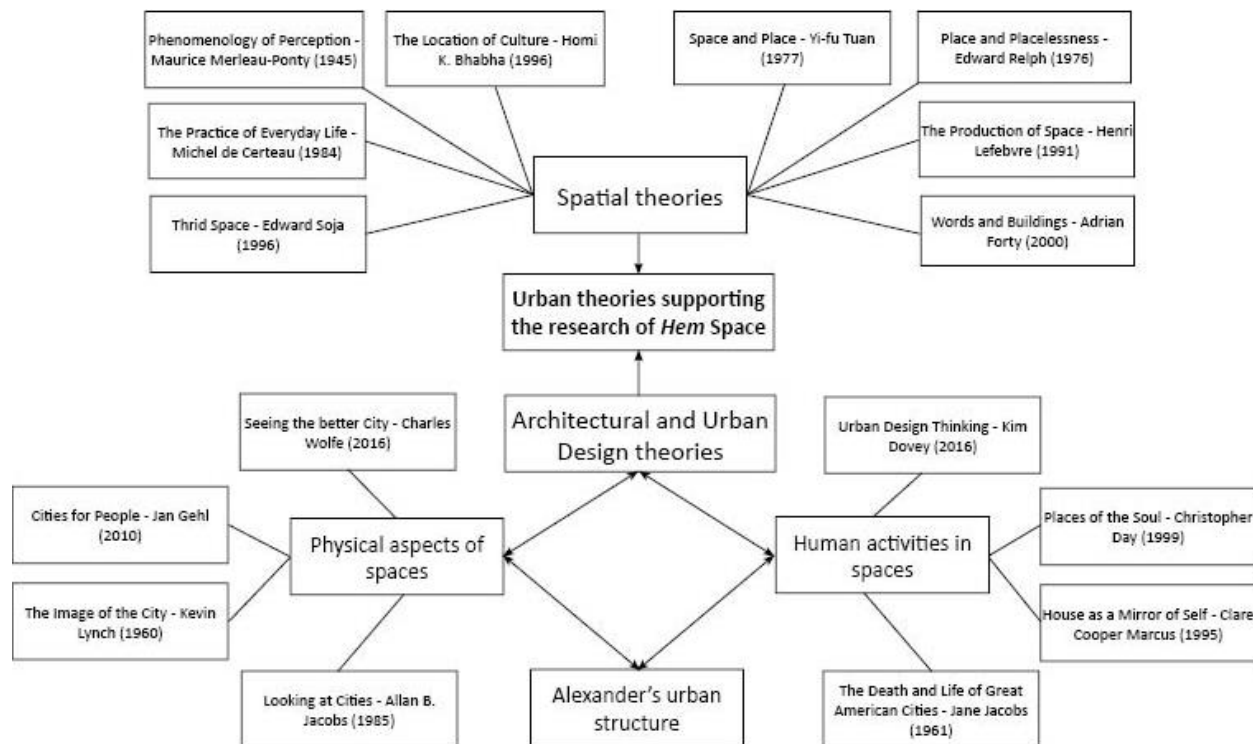
Figure 3.1 Diagram summary of key theories and ideas on urban space in general (Produced by the author, 2018).

The literature review about Vietnamese urban spaces provided me with a contextual background to locate this research on spatial changes in *Hem* spaces within the broader knowledge of Vietnamese urban spaces. This review will also help bring currency to past research on Vietnamese urban space in general. The figure below shows recent literature that has shaped the direction of this study of *Hem* space.

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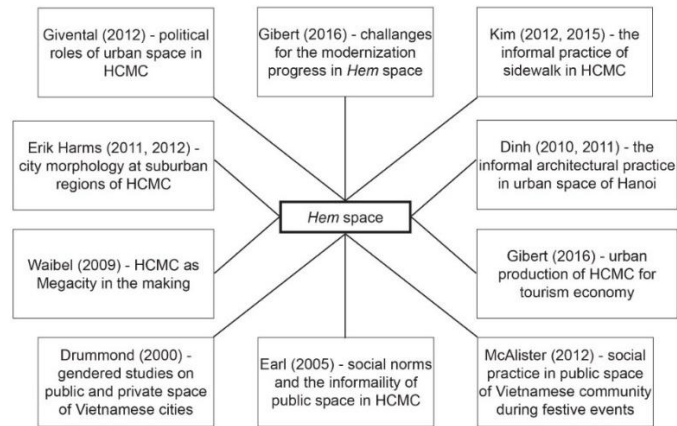
Figure 3.2 Diagram summary of recent literature relevant to the study of *Hem* space (Produced by the author, 2018).

The following diagram visualises the conceptual framework of this thesis.
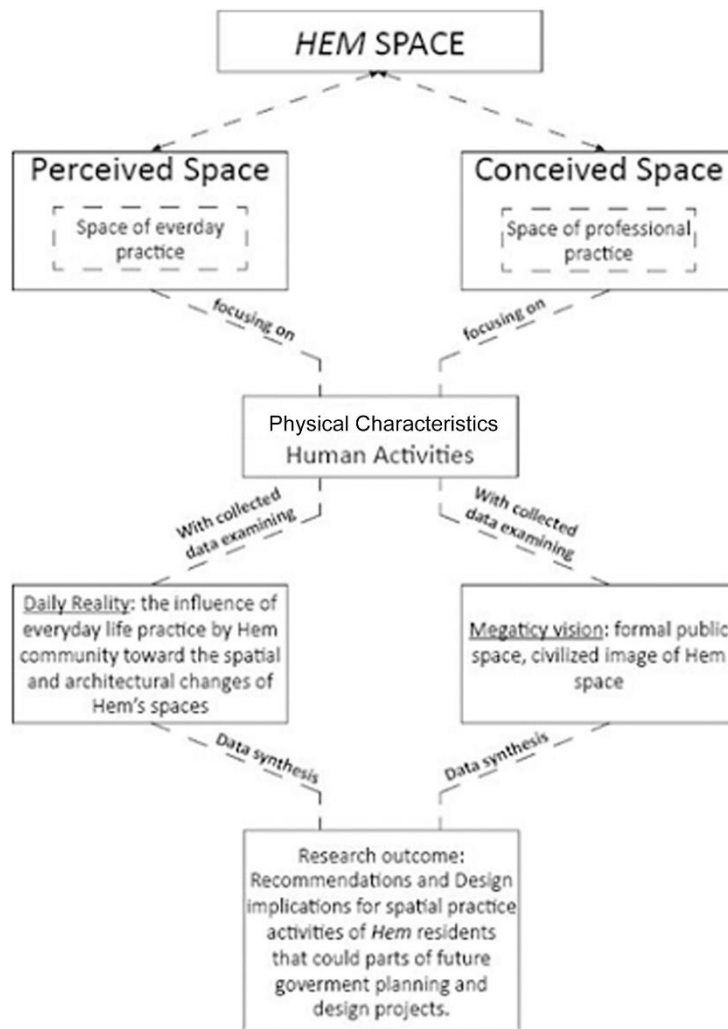
Figure 3.3 General conceptual framework of *Hem* research (produced by the author, 2018).

In brief, the conceptual framework engages with two levels of conceptual thinking. The theoretical level provides two key perspectives, the government planning perspective and the local residents' perspective, to examine the spatial changes and architectural environs of *Hem* space. Professional architecture and urban design offer substance, terms, and ideas through which specific aspects of *Hem* spaces (physical characteristics of space, human activities in space) can be analysed and focused upon to better understand the practice of spatial changes in *Hem*. From the literature review on urban practice in *Hem* space of HCMC, it seems there are two local key drivers that influence the spatial changes and architectural transformations of *Hem* areas, home-based business *and phong thuy* beliefs. While the government planning and renovation projects give some consideration to local drivers of practices in *Hem* communities, home-based business and *phong thuy* beliefs are yet to be formally acknowledged in the planning system. The local practices engendered by these local drivers, due to their flexibility and adaptability, are perhaps suitable means to enhance the liveability, economic success, and comfort of *Hem* communities, which could at the larger scale allow *Hem* space to re-emerge. This thesis will generate hypothetical discussions which demonstrate the positive contributions of the local practice of home-based business and *phong thuy* beliefs to *Hem* life and, most importantly, that these aspects have long been part of the urban life and traditions of HCMC and should receive adequate consideration in future urban development and planning.

3.3 Research Methods and Procedures

Preliminary Fieldwork

Preliminary fieldwork was carried out between late 2017 and early 2018. During this time, I made numerous on-site visits and observations of different *Hem* and apartment housing areas around HCMC, including *Hem* in other districts such as Districts 2, 4, 8, 10, Phu Nhuan, Go Vap, and Binh Thanh. The preliminary data collected from the case studies *Hem* were extremely helpful, not only in the development of the methodological approach including the proposed conceptual framework above, but also in exploration and collection of data. Informal exploration was also valuable as several local residents showed interest in the research and invited me to closely study their everyday life activities in the *Hem* built environment, as well as their domestic lives. These valuable data gave both depth and knowledge about the built environment in HCMC so that the scope and potential sites can be identified as case studies for the research.

Case Study Selections

While general rational for selecting three *Hem* as case studies are presented in Chapter 1, this section further explains why specific houses, flats, and spaces in each *Hem* are selected to be studied in more details. These case studies, each with a distinct historical, social and cultural context representing one impotant layer of the built environment in HCMC, form a rounded set of inquiry into the resilience of spactial practices.

The first case study, *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street in District 3, is located to the west of District 1. Both these districts are known as the most historic urban areas influenced by the French colonialism. The population density of District 3 is the highest in HCMC, with 39,905 people per square kilometre. *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang was selected as a case because it has characteristics typical of many HCMC *Hem* spaces, such as the public square near the *Hem* entrance used by local vendors as a market and food court, and the domestic activities frequently seen along the *Hem* path.

Like many other *Hem*, the built envirorment in *Hem* 60 has been changed significantly in the last few decades. Houses in *Hem* 60 now have different building heights ranging from two to eight or nine storeys. To have a better understanding of spatial practice in a domestic environment, Chapter 4 examines Mrs V's and Ms H's houses in details. Both Mrs V and Ms H have lived in *Hem* 60 for more than 50 years. They ran several family-based businesses at their houses, which were renovated in response to family and business needs. Detailed studies of these houses will be valuable because they provide insight into the architectural and spatial changes brought by various factors including living with extended families, change of family businesses, construction activities in their neighbourhood, and *Hem* widening programs by local government. Chapter 4 explores spatial practice in *Hem* 60 in details at neighbourhood and single building scales.

Figure 3.4 (Left) A house informally built in *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street, supported by beams attached to adjacent houses, providing accessibility to the neighbourhood and kitchen space for the family living in it. (Right) Ongoing construction of a ten-level building in *Hem* 60 (Photographed by the author, 2017).

I selected *chung cu* (CC) Nguyen Thien Thuat as my second detailed case study (see Chapter 5). It is one of the oldest and largest American-built housing complexes in HCMC. The public pathways between the CC blocks and the shared corridors leading to the flats, have been physically transformed by the construction of additional structures by CC residents. The spatial experience resulting from these structural modifications resembles that of the city's *Hem* spaces. Retail, business, and daily domestic activities occur informally in the public spaces of CC blocks, including the staircases, landing areas, shared corridors, and pathways between the blocks.

As explained in Chapter 1, home-based business also occurred in American-style CC's blocks around HCMC. Most flats in CC Nguyen Thien Thuat were renovated to accommodate these businesses and extended families. To have a better understanding of spatial practice at the scale of individual flats, Chapter 5 examines Mr N's and Mr B's flats in details. Both Mr N and Mr B have lived and run home-based businesses in this CC since the 1980s. Their flats were renovated to accommodate family and business needs. Detailed studies of these flats will be representative and valuable because they provide insight into the architectural and spatial changes that illustrate how some aspects of local spatial practice, such as family-based businesses, are introduced in an imported building typology that was not originally designed for them. Chapter 5 explores spatial practice in CC Nguyen Thien Thuat in details at apartment block and single apartment unit scales.

Figure 3.5 (Left) Building additions at Block C of *chung cu* Nguyen Thien Thuat. (Right) A woman has just finished hanging her laundry on the balcony, and is now doing her pedicure in the corridor (Sketched by the author, 2019).

In Chapter 6, I discuss the impact of *phong thuy* practice on spatial practice in HCMC's Chinatown (Cho Lon). *Hem* 206 Tran Hung Dao, locally known as Hao Sy Phuong, is selected to study in detail. The Vietnamese-Chinese population of *Cho Lon* are well-known for their unique architectural and spatial characteristics, which reflect spiritual beliefs and *phong thuy* practices. *Hem* Hao Sy Phuong, which is more than 100 years old, is one of some remaining Cho Lon *Hem* that have been able to preserve their original spatial characteristics and architecture even after layers of government changes.

The study of *phong thuy* practice requires in-depth investigation of how the lived experiences of residents are architecturally and spatially reflected in their neighbourhood, homes, housefronts, and the surrounding landscape. Most house owners in Cho Lon apply *phong thuy* to build and renovate their houses. This practice will continue as they live and do businesses in the houses.

In order to understand how *phong thuy* belief and related practices influence the architecture and interior spaces of local residences Mr C's and Ms P.G houses, both in Cho Lon*,* are selected for in-depth study. While Mr C mailly applies *phong thuy* practice to the building façade and exterior walls of his house, Ms P.G focuses her *phong thuy* practices on the interior spaces of her house. Studying the symbolic meanings of *phong thuy* practices in Hao Sy Phuong and these two houses provide an inclusive understanding of the architectural and spatial changes brought by intangible factors including personal and community identities and family histories and business experiences as well as expectation.

Figure 3.6 Different charms and offering altars are hung from houses or built at different locations around them: (Left) Entrance doors and lintels; (Middle) Load-bearing columns; (Right) Balconies (Photographed by the author, 2019).

Data Collection and Analysis

Approach to Research Data

This research uses architectural and design approach to the main source of data. This includes on-site observations of buildings and spaces, sketching, taking notes and photographs, measured drawings of buildings and spaces, and achival research. This thesis also adopts some aspects of ethnographic research to collect data on human activities and lived experiences in architectural spaces. According to Lucas (2016, p. 165), ethnographic approaches to architectural research involve researchers studying the lived experience of peoples, such as interviewees, in spaces through direct empirical observation. This allows immeasurable data regarding daily life human activites and experiences and stories embedded in physical structure to be exposed and collected.

This approach is applied to all the case studies for this thesis, and is solely focused on investigating the interrelationship between daily human activities and physical structures. The research studies how building structures (façades, awnings, housefronts, building setbacks, domestic spaces, public spaces etc.) serve aspects of daily life activities, how changes in daily activities influence the changes of structures, and the boundaries of these transformations. I also visited the case study sites at different times of day to observe how these physical changes and the human activities shift and evolve accordingly.

The phenomenological examination of human activities and physical changes in *Hem* space will be based on the firsthand observation and interpretation of data, where I will play multiple roles as a tourist, a local, and a researcher to find physical changes and details which are normally taken for granted. As a

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tourist, I travel through the *Hem* with fresh eyes, attempting to reveal different spatial characteristics and experiences in the case studies of several *Hem* and buildings. In fact, walking and wandering around urban spaces is one good way to capture a feeling and understanding of an area. My onsite investigation begins with some preliminary observation, which helps me to absorb the general atmosphere of the *Hem*.

I also use my local experience as a 'Saigonese', because I have lived in *Hem* and am familiar with the context, so when conversing with the local residents and vendors I can become an 'insider' as well. After they agreed to take part in my research, I asked my interviewees to suggest more local contact to recruit more participants. The pool of participants is based on my local knowledge and the knowledge of the earlier participants of the local areas as well as their willingness to allow me to study their homes. Because of the blurred boundaries between domestic and public space in the *Hem* built environment, it is worth looking at the finest grain for case studies, such as house interiors and apartment units. Details of criteria for interviewee selections will be explained in the following section.

Methods and Procedure of Data Collection and Analysis

Each case study starts with my personal recordings and impressions of the *Hem,* as a tourist. My onsite investigation begins with some preliminary sketches, photographs, and brief conversation with locals who are open to talking. Doing this also allowed me to initiate personal contact with those who might be willing to share their stories of the *Hem* area.

The following set of observations scrutinised my research subjects – the human activities and physical characteristics of *Hem* spaces. I focused my observations on local routines, business and retail activities, or worship activities in public *Hem* and, at the same time, I looked closely at building details, setbacks, extensions, decoration, and ornamentation. These onsite investigations done multiple times, allowing me to record and study how the locals use the spaces at different times of the day, along with their spatial changes. To record the data, I used the methods of sketching, photographs, measuring structures, taking notes, and conversation with locals. In brief, onsite observations were conducted to get a 'satellite' image of *Hem* environments. Sketches, photographs, taking notes etc. are then used to 'zoom in' on the research context at human eye-level with greater detail. I believe doing so will provide a more holistic and thorough image of *Hem* spaces. During my second set of observations, I was assisted

by some urban design students from Ho Chi Minh City Architectural University (UAH) . Their assistance saved time and, furthermore, provided me with more insight into the study.

Figure 3.7 Site documentation, sketches, and notes from field trips (Produced by the authorin collaboration with UAH students during annual fieldtrips, 2018 & 2019).

Although the data and documentation collected helped me to analyse the physical characteristic of *Hem* built environment at present day, historical photos and documentations were also useful to reveal the historical aspects of the selected *Hem*, CC complexes, and houses. These were collected from local museums and institutions, including Ho Chi Minh University Museum and the South Vietnamese Women's Museum. Several online archives and libraries also provided material, such as the Vietnam Center of the Open Library of Texas Technology University and the archives of the People's Committee Offices of the *Hem* areas.

Because this research requires looking at the government's planning perspective, I collected government proposals for development, expansion, renovation, planning documentation, and site maps for the *Hem* and CC areas of the case studies. This documentation was collected from government archives, like the HCMC People's Committee Office and the online planning archive maintained by the HCMC Department of Urban Planning and Architecture. This assists the examination of government regulations for public usage of urban spaces, and building and renovation activities in the *Hem* and CC in the case studies. These maps, plans, and documents are combined with the data from the empirical observations, to analyse the urban morphology of the case study *Hem*, including building heights, building functions (café, grocery, restaurant, office, residential, or multi-function), density of usage (how many people were there and the duration of their activities) by local vendors, home-based businesses, and other local routines in public spaces.

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The last set of observations focused on interior and domestic spaces, as well as interviews with local residents. The pool of potential interviewees was identified during the first and second observational fieldtrips, and then compiled into a list. The main criterion for selection was that participants should live and/or work in the *Hem* or CC of the selected case study area. Some participants are senior residents who have lived locally for a long time and have good knowledge on *Hem*. Finally, they must be willing to share their living and working experiences. The selected participants were then asked to discuss these experiences, along with the renovations and building activities carried out during their time in the house or flat. As Charles Wolfe suggests (2016, p. 30), it is a challenge for residents to immediately express and explain their thoughts about their living spaces, especially under formal conditions. Clare Cooper (1995, pp. 8-15) also suggested that accounts of lived experiences, particularly those regarding emotions, past memories, and spiritual aspects of spaces, should be gently promoted by researchers by allowing participants some time to reflect. Therefore, the interviews were structured with a set of open-ended questions and points for discussion which interviewees could freely respond to. I also asked interviewees for full consent to allow me to take photographs, notes, voice recordings, and have access to their private collections (family albums, living quarters, house documentation and contracts etc.). The purpose here was to focus on the relationships between domestic spaces, public spaces and lived expereicnes, and how these relationships are perceived by locals in their daily activities.

Figure 3.8 (Left) Mrs V and the author. (Middle) Mrs V introduced me to a local vendor in *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang. (Right) Mr B's father doing laundry at the front of his flat in *chung cu* Nguyen Thien Thuat (Photographed by the author, 2018).

To have an inclusive data on different aspects of spactial practice, this research also recruited some interviewees of different professions, including architects, planners, university lecturers in planning and architecture, local neighbourhood leaders, a *phong thuy* master, and an artist. They included urbanist Dr. Tran Thi Viet Ha and Associate Professor Hoang Ngoc Lan, who are currently teaching at UAH; architects Dr. Truong Thanh Hai and Dr. Hoanh Tran (HTAP architects); architect Nguyen Do Hong Quan; *phong thuy* Master Thanh; artist Richard Streitmatter-Tran (from Dia Critics); and photographer Cao An Du. Most of these inteviewees are local experts or have good knowledge about local urban and

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architecture issues in HCMC. Emails were sent to invite the participants to take part in the interviews. The interviews, again, were conducted in a semi-structured format and at the interviewee's preferred location, such as their office or home. The knowledge and information provided by these local experts gave some understandings of spatial practice in HCMC *Hem* spaces in a broader context, and their answers to my questionnaires and points for discussion brought currency to my investigation by illustrating the different ways in which *Hem* spaces and life are perceived by different professions.

Figure 3.9 (Left) Artist Richard Streitmatter-Tran working in his studio. (Right) Dr Hoanh Tran explaining his PhD thesis (Photographed by the author, 2018).

To protect the privacy of the participants, their names have been coded. Interviewees who are professional designers and academics agreed to have their names published in this thesis. No potential for conflict of interest was recorded between the investigator and the participants of this thesis.

In each of the case study, research data is collected, analysed and presented with reference to two main apsects of spactial practices as reviewed in the literature in Chapter 2: physical characteristics and human activities and experiences. These two aspects of spaces toghether factors that make them changed or unchanged are analysed and presented at different scales: *Hem*'s and *Hem*-style public spaces and neighbourhood; houses and flats in *Hem*; and interior spaces and building elements in *Hem*. (Table 3.1) The research data on spatial practices is analysed and presented in both textual and visual forms via hand sketches, photographs, architectural drawings, map and diagram analysis, and 3D modelling of spaces (Chapters 4, 5 and 6). Findings from the case studies as presented by using this method of analysis contribute to the understanding of the nature of changes to spaces in *Hem*. To address the research questions, these understandings of spatial practices at different scales of specific *Hem* spaces are synthsized and further dicusssed within the broader context of existing spatial theories as well as Vietnamese urban literature. (Chapter 7)

Scale of space to be analysed / Aspects of space to be analysed		Hem's public spaces/ neighbourhood	Houses/Flats in Hem	Interiors/ Building Elements in Hem	Influencing factors
Physical characteristics	Changed aspects	Hem's width. Laneway facades. Facades of apartment blocks. Types/sizes of building setbacks. Historical landmarks (gateways, public altar, etc.) in Cho Lon's Hem.	Everyday use of house's front Shop facades Exterior facades of flats Building height Phong thuy charms at house's facade	Interior layout of houses/shops Furniture arrangement Decorations/ Renovation for home-based business Interior layout of flats/shops Placement of indoor phong thuy charms	Building extensions Renovation of Hem Government planning policies Extended family Changes to property ownership Types of businesses Urban sprawl Personal identities of phong thuy believers
	Traditional/ Unchanged aspects	Hem's length. Fine urban grain (pattern of plots). Existence of building setback. Original structure of apartment blocks. The location of historical landmark in Cho Lon's Hem.	Building frame and footprints Shopfront width Sizes of flats Sizes of shared corridors in CC Locations of phong thuy charms, altars on building's façade	Location of space for home-based business Traditional types of phong thuy paper charms Location of indoor family altars	Continual of family/home-based business or small-scaled business Everyday routine of local residents Government regulations Family tradition and community identity Local belief in phong thuy
Human activities and experiences	Changed aspects	Types of vendor activities Types of daily social activities Types of retails on Hem spaces Local arrangement and negotiation in using Hem spaces for businesses	Types of home-based business and retail activities Types social activities at the shopfronts Renovation activities. Life/business experiences that impact phong thuy application	Indoor domestic activities Indoor business activities Personal, business experiences that impact phong thuy application	Changes of home-based businesses or ownership. Building extensions Renovation of Hem Government planning policies and regulations Living with extended families Personal belief in phong thuy
	Traditional/ Unchanged aspects	Shared use of public spaces for business and social activities Using public spaces for domestic purpose Local willingness to allow vendors to use house's fronts Phong thuy rituals of local communities at Hem's landmark sites	Home-based retail activities within a home or at house fronts. Using public spaces as extensions of home-based shops Phong thuy rituals/ceremonies in front of houses	Continuation of family-based business and domestic activities within one's home Mixed use of interior spaces for living and businesses. Phong thuy rituals/ceremonies inside houses/flats	Everyday routine of local residents Inherited family business and culture Personal and community lifestyle Family tradition and community identity Local belief in phong thuy

Table 3.1 Scales and aspects of Hem's spatial practice to be analysed in each of the case studies (Created by the author, 2021).

Chapter 4. Everyday Spaces of *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street

Figure 4.1 Plant pots placed along the walls of houses (Sketched by the author, 2018)

My acquaintance with *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street goes back to the early 2000s, when my family went weekly to a friend's house at the end of this *Hem*. Every trip around the City back then was on the back of my father's scooter. I was always curious and we often chatted about what I saw on the streets. When reminiscing about this *Hem*, the two features that remain vivid even today are how bumpy the scooter rides were, and the sound of woks frying in the street restaurants. Back then, the surface of *Hem* 60 was covered with bluestone and large pebbles. I would pause my curious chatter so that my father could retain concentration and balance the scooter. We rode there around 6:00 pm once a week, and *Hem* 60 was always packed with pedestrians. Our silence brought my attention to the sounds and sights of *Hem* 60. There were students who had just returned home from schools and were now engaged in various activities. Some played soccer together in the middle of the *Hem*, some lingered around the colourful toys hung all over the facades of local grocery stores. Housewives casually chatted with their neighbours on their doorsteps. Shouting from restaurants echoed into the streets. Packs of scooter riders honked their way through the tight squeeze of the bumpy *Hem*. I recall kids gathering around a local vendor who served Vietnamese-style pasta – *nui xao bo*, a favourite meal of students of all ages. What intrigued the kids, and me as well perhaps, was the sound made by the lady chef stir-

frying the beef and the pasta in her big black steel wok. To add colour to her performance, she usually flipped all the food out of the wok and into the air using before serving the customer.

Present-day observations of *Hem* 60 reveal that massive changes have occurred in *Hem* spaces. Street surfaces have been renovated, local shopfronts appear more neatly arranged, and modern-looking houses of more than 4 or 5 storeys have been built along the length of the *Hem*. However, local communities have been able to preserve their local lifestyles and the *Hem* ambience, characterised by local scenes like the busy traffic during after-work hours, the groceries store with their merchandise displayed on the façade, and the street vendors who transverse the length of the *Hem*. These changes and continuities bring me to the question of how the locals of *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street have been able to retain their lifestyles through all these years of changes.

This next section will start with my observation of everyday life in *Hem* 60, focusing on the use and spatial changes of *Hem* space by the local community. To gain a deeper understanding of these matters, I will interview some senior residents and business owners who have been living and working in this *Hem* for more than 40 years. I will also study the planning documentation of *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang in search of how far these daily changes have been conducted within the official framework.

4.1 A Day in *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street

Figure 4.2 An afternoon snapshot of *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street (Photographed by the author, 2018)

The early morning in the *Hem* is quiet and chilly. No shops have opened yet, except for a small automobile service located at the *Hem*'s entrance. The mechanic owner, a senior man in his fifties, is enthusiastically conversing with a nearby motorcycle taxi driver or *xe om*. Both of them have run their services throughout the night. The man has just finished a fruitful night with many customers, but his animated conversation with the driver betrays no tiredness. He boxes all his mechanical tools inside a small rusted steel basket then places them on top of his mobile air compressor, a common contraption for those who run these kinds of services. As he finishes packing, the owner bids farewell to the taxi driver and drags the air compressor with his tools on top back to his home in the middle of *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang. The rattling sound of the tools dragging along is the sign that the day has started in *Hem* 60.

Figure 4.3 (Left) The owner of the automobile service mending a puncture. (Right) His air compressor contraption (Sketched by the author, 2018).

It is 5:30 am now, and the daily life of the *Hem* is on the edge of awakening. The quietness of the *Hem* is now gently disturbed by the grinding sounds of locals opening their metal sliding doors. Residents are getting out their scooters to go to work or take their children to school. Several shops, such as the cafés and grocers, are also starting to open.

A few strides from the entrance of the *Hem* lies a small café at house 48. A group of regular customers is already gathering outside the café. As soon as the owner slides the steel gates open, everyone rushes to set up the café. The owner quickly arranges some plastic stools and foldable tables within the narrow interior, which is approximately 3 metres wide and 4 metres deep. Customers help to arrange the furniture outside the shop. Several low stools and tables are placed in front of the adjacent house, number 46. This house has a 1.5-metre setback from the café front. It seems the owner of the café and number 46 has been using this space as an extension for his business. While the owner and his customers are arranging the furniture, a woman on a scooter is exiting a narrow *Hem* between the café

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and number 46 which is only 1.2-metre wide. They pause their set-up so the woman can comfortably exit the narrow *Hem*.

After set-up is complete, customers sit in their familiar spots and chat with each other. The customers' motorcycles are parked in line right next to house number 44, which shields those sitting in front of house 46 from oncoming traffic. These are everyday routines for the customers. They enjoy each other's company while pleasantly slurping the Vietnamese coffee and observing the motorcycles slowly moving through the *Hem*. For those sitting alone inside the shop, the morning sunlight filtering through the awning canopy gives a peaceful and soothing feeling. The shop has no signs, but the aroma of the freshly ground coffee beans behind the counter and the gossiping of customers are telltale signs which attract passers-by, such as several motorcycle taxi drivers stoping for a quick coffee before work.

Figure 4.4 (Left) Coffee shop at house 46. (Right) Layout of the coffee shop (Produced and photographed by the author, 2018)

The *Hem* path becomes narrower after the cafés. There are lines of local vendors pushing their food stalls from the smaller *Hem* into the food court at the *Hem* entrance. Chairs, tables, and shop signs are piled up in the stalls and carefully delivered to their places. Ms H, a resident who has been living here since 1962, revealed that these vendors are not only locals from this *Hem*, but also from other nearby areas. Ms H's story will be discussed later in section 4.3. She added that the rattling noise caused by the dragging of their stalls is her daily 'alarm clock'. The preparations of local establishments like the shops and food vendors are the sign of a new day about to begin.
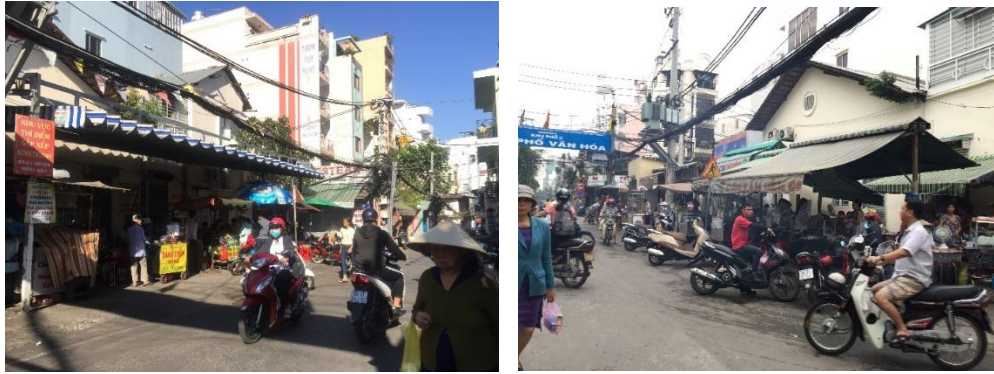
Figure 4.5 (Left) A busy morning at the food court. (Right) The food court before the *Hem* renovation (Photographed by the author, 2018, 2017).

By 7:00 am, the relaxed ambience of the morning shifts to a much busier and noisier scene. Breakfast vendors and restaurants along the *Hem,* as well as at the food court, have finished their preparations. It is getting noisier now because there is a traffic jam on Ly Chinh Thang Street, which is full of endless lines of automobiles honking. Some travellers from the street make a turn into the *Hem* and stop by the food court to have their breakfast.

The food court is spread over a rectangular area about 22 metres long and 10 metres deep. There is a big sunshade over the entire area, with retractable awning arms which extend up to 4 metres outward. This awning system has been renovated since my preliminary field trip in 2017 when I recorded the original structure. Each vendor back then used their own awning. The smoke from cooking blackened the canvas awnings, which were more than 20 years old.

There are at least eight food stalls on the date of observation, serving all kinds of food and drinks. Stalls are properly placed within their plot. The stalls are also the kitchen spaces for preparing dishes, featuring stoves with gas tanks and built-in woks or pans for cooking. Customers can eat in the sitting areas between the line of stalls and the storage spaces at the back. I observe customers of all backgrounds – some dressed in suits, some in workers' clothing, as well as students of all ages – sharing the tables. Customers sit randomly at the shared table areas. The ability of staff to quickly memorise customers' orders probably comes from decades of doing business here.
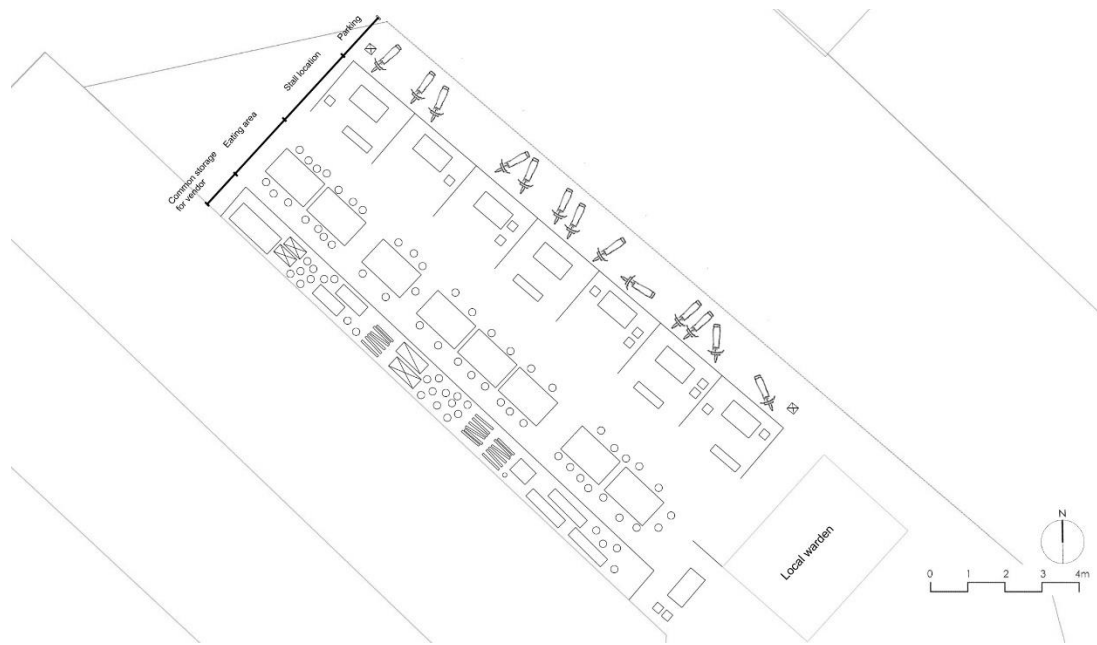
Figure 4.6 Layout of the food court (Produced by the author, 2019)

The hustle and bustle of the food court comes not only from the shouted conversations between staff, but also from customers shouting out their orders from the parking area in front of their stalls. Everyone is in a rush to order breakfast before going to work. A mother with her child sitting behind her on their scooter stopps by the steamed rice pancake stall for takeaway. The vendor quickly opens her cooking pot, tits thick steam escaping into the air with a pleasant aroma, a real treat for the kid! All of a sudden, a big truck carrying sand and blocks of cement, makes a turn from the street into the *Hem*. The construction materials are being delivered to the front of the café in front of house 46. Customers parked in front of the square, including the mother and her child, hastily tuck themselves in close to the stalls and make way for the big truck. The truck driver pokes his head out and checks the clearance. After the truck gets past the food court, business goes back to normal.

More customers are now drinking coffee at shop 46. Senior men whose shirts are still soaked with sweat from jogging are sitting in groups. One is talking about last night's soccer game, while his friend is raising his voice and trying to shift discussion to political topics. The chatting coffee drinkers attract several street vendors who park nearby. They are selling sticky rice (*xoi)* from baskets on the backs of their bicycles. Some customers order *xoi* while enjoying their coffee at the shop. Housewives are gathering and chatting with one of the vendors stationed at the doorstep of house 35. They are exchanging recipes and discussing the foods they are going to buy at Tan Dinh market, which is only a 10-minute walk from the *Hem*. Some shop-houses, such as the hair salon at number 66 and the perfume store at

number 64, are still closed. An old lady is opening the door at shop 67. She hangs shampoo and instant-coffee satchels on the gate for her grocery display. Groups of parents are dropping off their kids at a local kindergarten at number 71. Some are happy to see that their friends have already arrived, and others cry for their parents. The everyday life of *Hem* 60 begins with morning enthusiasm and the preparations of local vendors, each performing at a different tempo, the first brushstrokes of a much busier portrait to come.

Figure 4.7 *Hem* space is narrowed by café customers on the left, and breakfast food stalls on the right (Sketched by the author, 2018)

By 9:00 am, the *Hem* is fully awake. More groups of street vendors travelling on their motorcycles and bicycles with their merchandise at the back of the seat, have now arrived at their usual spots. These vendors are stationed all along the length of the *Hem* and in front of local houses. Opposite the food court, a man is spreading out his merchandise of towels and casual clothes made of various textiles in different colours. A man carries pots of flowers and trees, weighing at least 100 kilograms, on the back of his old bicycle. There are a few vendors selling fresh fish, meat, and vegetables in front of house number 11, displaying their produce on their bikes or in bowls on the ground. My observation of morning activities at the food court square and nearby area stimulate all my senses – the smell of freshly cooked food, the bustling sounds of interaction, and the colours of all these activities.

Figure 4.8 (Left) The fish hawker sits together with the vegetable hawker. The small blue sign above reads *Do not sit here*. Vehicles frequently enter and exit. (Right) Vendors selling snacks and plants in front of the food court (Photographed by the author, 2018)

The morning elders who were jogging have now returned. They stop by the group of vendors selling fish and vegetables in front of house 11. The fish hawker offers them her fish of the day, and her colleague the vegetable hawker offers herbs that would go best with the fish. You have to admire the bargaining skills and endurance of both parties! Due to their lengthy haggling, they soon attract the attention of curious bystanders. While serving customers, the vendors do not forget to chant their melodic tunes to advertise her products. Together with the ambience at the food court, the morning activities of *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street could make a newcomer see the whole area as one big market running the entire length of the *Hem*.

The *Hem* is also getting noisier because builders have started to work on construction next to house number 13. The building is halfway constructed with steel bars, and mesh covers the front of the building. The site is massive compared to its neighbour, more than 10 metres wide and 30 metres long. I ask one of the workers about the function and scale of the building. He curtly replies that the building is going to be 10 storeys high, with a basement. It will an office building with each level leased to local businesses and corporations. My curiosity has disturbed his work, and his scolding colleague rushes him back to work because construction is already behind schedule. The tall new modern office building seems to add another architectural layer to the *Hem* morphology, which is currently characterised by small-scale residential houses, shop-houses, and home businesses. Soon, a medium-to-large commercial building will join this scene.

Figure 4.9 (Left) Construction of the office building. (Right) Vendors at the demolition site prior to construction (Photographed by the author, 2018, 2017).

Before construction commenced, the building site offered flexible use for local informal business activities, unlike its present-day formal purpose. During my preliminary fieldtrip in 2017, I saw street vendors gathered there daily in the morning. They set up their stalls with stools and tables serving breakfast noodles, and vegetable vendors spread out baskets full of greens around the spacious yard. When construction of the building began in mid-June, the site was barricaded. The flexible and informal use of the site at different period reflects the mobility of street vendors who can quickly adapt to any available spaces regardless of site conditions. This further suggests that the local community also appreciates their presence offering affordable goods only a few minutes from their homes. Their support of these local street vendors helps to sustain their business within these unused spaces. In fact, this spatial adaptation phenomenon commonly happens in all *Hem* around HCMC. Perhaps the local government should deploy feasible management systems to encourage this spatial adaptation of unused spaces in *Hem* that and contribute to the livelihoods of both the local residents and the street vendors.

The owner of the grocery shop at number 36 is chatting with his senior friend about the construction site. It seems the dust from the construction site means he cannot display his fresh vegetables out the front. The shop looks old and requires some maintenance. The awning is half-broken and wired to the rusty roof of aluminium sheets. Underneath the awning is a cart framed with glass, displaying packs of cigarettes and snacks. The shop is completely camouflaged to the public eyes, but coming inside is quite amazing. Thousands of household items like cooking sauces, sugar bags, toys, bathroom essentials, snacks, drinks, and domestic utensils are squeezed together and chaotically hung on the crowded

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façade. They are hung wherever they fit, on door and window frames, vents, and water pipes. If a customer needs to purchase anything, they just tell the owner, as he is the only one who knows the exact locations of each item!

Figure 4.10 The grocery store when it is covered (Left) and exposed (Right) (Photographed by the author, 2018).

A couple of elders are sitting on plastic stools in front of house number 82. They are peeling some vegetables and gossiping about local affairs. I stop by the house next to them, in awe of its unique structural 'design'. The house has no footings on the ground, and its foundation is elevated approximately 2 metres above the ground and attached to the walls of houses number 80 and 82. This creates a narrow dark tunnel leading to the inner neighbourhood of the *Hem*. There is a small kitchen running across and below the length of the house. A man sitting outside is shouting to his wife who is cooking in the kitchen and warning her that a motorcycle is entering. These sights and verbal exchanges of *Hem* life occur regularly along the length of the *Hem*, both inside the houses and outside in the *Hem*.
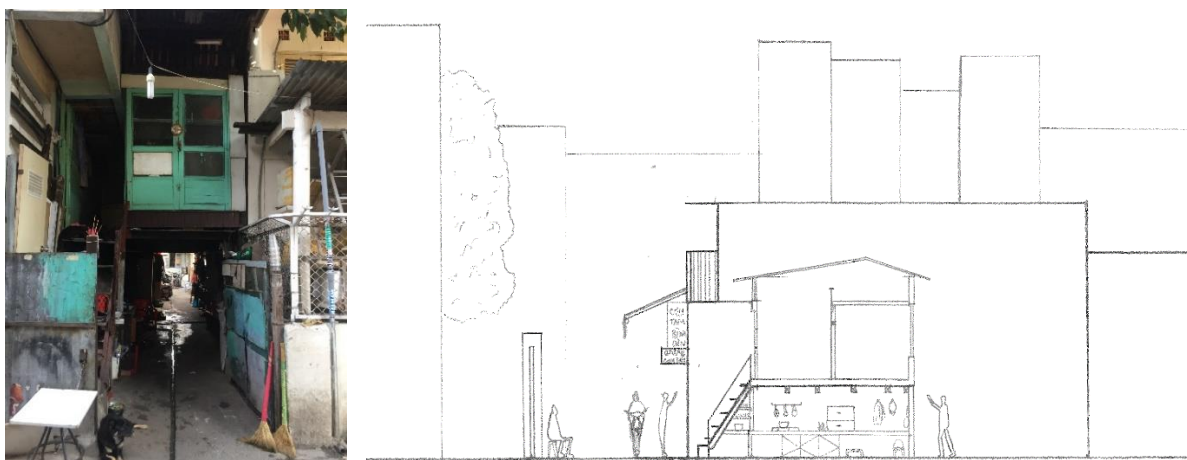
Figure 4.11 (Left) A narrow 'tunnel' acts as both as a kitchen for the house above and an entrance to the inner neighbourhood. (Right) a section through the house (Photographed and produced by the author, 2018)

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As the day reaches noontime, the bustling ambience of the morning *Hem* retreats to 'bubbles' like the food court and restaurants. Most of the vendors have gone elsewhere. Some new vendors have just arrived and are selling fruit in front of house 13 and sweet desserts opposite the food court. The food court is rearranging itself. Breakfast stalls are packing up and new vendors who are selling lunches arrive. They are displaying different kinds of food stored in aluminium trays where customers can pick their dishes just like ordering at Subway.

The customers now are the builders from the construction site next to house 13, their clothes still stained with paint and dirt. There are also taxi drivers, university students, and office workers on their lunch breaks. Regardless of their background, everyone happily shares the eating space with others. A middle-aged woman is selling lottery tickets and prowling about the food court, seeking buyers. Not many diners and vendors notice her presence and quite often, shake their head to her invitation to buy tickets. She quickly leaves the food court and continues further down the *Hem* in search of better luck.

Figure 4.12 The food court in the afternoon (Photographed by the author, 2018)

Other venues also selling lunch, such as house 82, are less packed with customers than the food court during this time, but the chatter of customers inside the restaurants can still be heard when strolling by. They could be less busy because their dining spaces are smaller than the food court. The dining space of house 82, which sells broken rice (*com tam*), is only 3.5 metres wide and 6 metres long. The kitchen space is located at the doorstep of the restaurant. The kitchen contains a massive grill bar, engulfed in red hot charcoal. A big standing electric fan is blowing smoke from the inside out into the public *Hem*. It is thick with the smell of pork chops, not pleasant if one stands too close! The chef appears to be the restaurant owner. She is on constant lookout for the pedestrians passing by who are intrigued by the smell while she flips the pork chops and takes orders from customers. Could this be her way of attracting customers, aside from preventing smoke building up inside?

A man who has just finished his meal asks the staff if they serve orange juice. The staff quickly run to the nearby smoothie stall, which is only a few steps from the restaurant. The smoothie stall owner takes the order and, as it happens, one of her customers wants some broken rice. They exchange each other's orders. Within moments, the smoothie stall owner brings the juice to the customer in the restaurant, and the restaurant staff give her the broken rice dish and a basket full of condiments in return. The customer from the smoothie shop sits on a low plastic stool, right next to the stall, situated in front of house 71. It is safe to say that *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street must have a strong sense of community because its businesses often share mutual services between each other.

Figure 4.13 The beverage shop with the owner, the lady in the red dress. A waiter from the restaurant, the man in the pink shirt, is bringing customers' plates back to the restaurant (Photographed by the author, 2018).

Figure 4.14 A section through the smoothie shop and the *Hem* (Produced by the author, 2017)

Lunchtime is over. Vendors in the food court and the restaurant venues are wrapping up. Builders who have finished their coffee at café 46 after lunch now resume their work. The hammering, grinding, and banging noises from the construction site echo through the quiet ambience of the *Hem*. The afternoon is also a time for several senior residents catching up with their neighbours or simply enjoying their own leisure time. The scorching heat keeps most activities under the shade canopies at doorstep areas. A senior is sitting half-dressed alone and quietly in front of house 63. He is a *flâneur* who is gazing at the passing motorcycles and pedestrian. The bougainvillea hedge climbing his neighbour's house's façade makes this a great spot. The owner of the rice vermicelli noodle (*bun mang*) stall at house 51 is chatting with an elder and a street hawker. They are talking about other residents of the *Hem*. A lady is sitting on a parked motorcycle in front of house 48, chatting to her sister about how her children are doing splendidly at school. Everyday life in *Hem* 60 is socially and economically linked to the local use of the *Hem*'s public spaces, particularly the doorstep areas. One can learn so much about *Hem* life – what goes on outside and inside, personal hurdles, and public affairs – by listening to casual chat and observing the uses of space by locals.

Figure 4.15 (Left) A senior man by himself. (Middle) A vendor joins in with locals chatting. (Right) Locals chatting in front of their home (Photographed by the author, 2018).

The *Hem* starts getting noisy again between 5:00 pm and 7:00 pm. Travellers from Ly Chinh Thang Street are escaping from the current traffic jam through *Hem* 60. Endless waves of motorcycles are rushing back and forth in the *Hem*. It is not easy for pedestrians to walk around the *Hem* at this hour. One must be very mindful of hazards in all directions and exercise all the senses when driving or walking through the *Hem*. Some local residents returning from work suddenly stop at their houses. Some travellers also stop by the fronts of shops, restaurants, and vendors in the food court to order takeaway. Extensions by vendors, as well as parking of vehicles in front of the shops and food court, make the *Hem* narrower and block drivers' lines of sight. While watching out for traffic in all directions, pedestrians could crash into

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the display space of local vendors. This is the peak time for automobile traffic. Pedestrian activities happen at a much slower and more cautious pace because of the automobile traffic.

Figure 4.16 (Left) Travellers from the main street exiting to Nhieu Loc canal through the *Hem*. (Right) Local vendors preparing their dinner stalls at the food court (Photographed by the author, 2018).

Primary school students are standing in front of house 62, some waiting for their parents to pick them up and some rushing to get snacks from the food court or nearby snack stalls. These students have been attending extra English tutorials at house 62. The classroom is locate at the ground level of the house, and is approximately 3 metres wide and more than 6 metres long, but packed with more than 20 students. Some students have to sit in the 3-metre square courtyard outside the classroom. The tutor uses a loudspeaker to ensure those sitting outside can hear her teaching properly. As the street gets noisier, the tutor increases the volume because today's session is about pronunciation. The teaching from house 62 seems to interfere with another class at house 60, right next door. The tutor at house 60 is teaching Vietnamese literature to high school students, casually interrupted by the loud pronunciation lesson of her colleague at house 62.
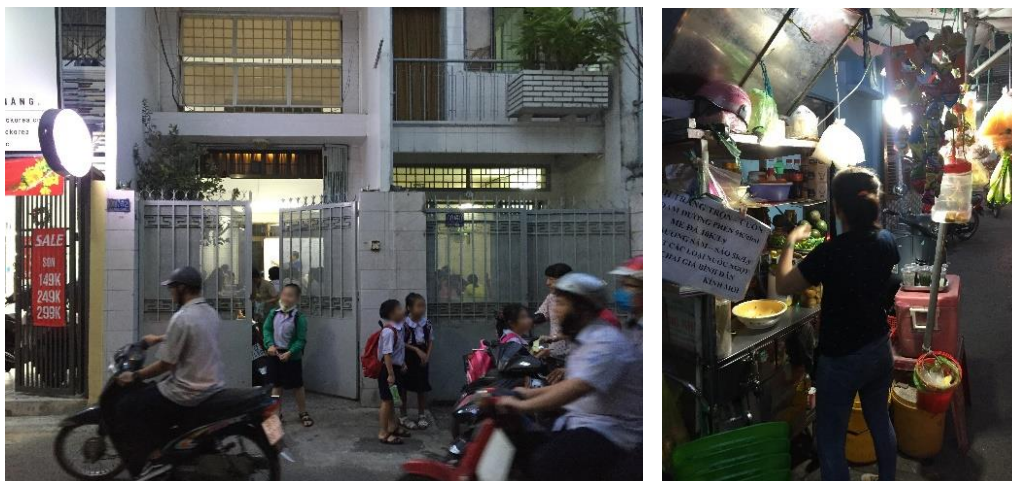
Figure 4.17 (Left) Students waiting for their parents to pick them up in front of house 62 on the left. (Right) A snack stall opposite to the house arrives right at the beginning of the tutorial in house 62 (Photographed by the author, 2018).

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The bustle of the *Hem* has lessened by 8:00 pm. Most of the residents have now returned home and finished their meals. Not much traffic travels through *Hem* at this time. Families are sitting outside of house 93 for a gathering. There are beers and some snacks on the plastic tables. At 10:00 pm, the street is almost empty and quiet. Most shops have closed and the locals have retreated to their homes. At the food court, there is only a stall serving sea snail as a late snack. The hairdresser at the salon in house 66 is drying the hair of her last customer. Several shops are closing down, and the chatter of the remaining staffs casually disrupts the quietness of the *Hem*. As the time reaches midnight, the *Hem* falls asleep. A lady cycles around the *Hem*, scavenging scraps off the street. After a quick scout up and down the *Hem*, she makes the turn into a smaller *Hem*.

Figure 4.18 The scavenger lady on her bike (Photographed by the author, 2018)

These narrations have now completed my record of the everyday life activities and spatial transformations of *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street. While these spatial activities are almost invisible in the street scene, the richness of daily life can only be observed by venturing into the *Hem*. Throughout my observations, I experienced the public space of the *Hem* as socially, culturally, and economically linked to the various usages of local domestic space and the 'in-between' doorstep areas. Flexible usage of these spaces is shared by various stakeholders, ranging from mobile activities like street vendors to stationary activities likeshops. These activities do not just enhance the liveability and character of *Hem* area, but also help establish a self-sustaining community which only the locals fully understand. The

local spatial systems, such as the shifting places and spaces between one vendor and another, is the result of the community here living and working together for decades. Therefore, it is not easy to replicate these everyday processes because they take time. Before executing any renovation plan, it is crucial that urban planners, architects, and designers alike should carefully observe and study how locals adapt the space of *Hem* areas as part of their livelihoods.

In the following section, I will look at the history of *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street to understand how the *Hem* was first formed. During my field trip, I have managed to interview several senior residents and vendors of the *Hem*. Also, I will analyse current practices in *Hem* space based on the morphology of *Hem*'s houses, including building height, commercial categories, and density of usage of public space. This analysis will lead to a better understanding of how the use of public space, the architectural adaptation to building setbacks, and other informal public spaces, contribute to the everyday life and businesss of the *Hem* community.

4.2 The making of *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street.

Hem 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street is at the edge of District 3 and is 220 metres long. The *Hem* is perpendicular to Ly Chinh Thang Street at one end and Hoang Sa Street, the Nhieu Loc canal's bank, at the other. It used to be part of Huynh Tinh Cua Street, which is across Ly Chinh Thang Street. The history of this area can be traced back to the French colonial era.

The densification progress of the *Hem* started from two sides, on one side the Nhieu Loc canal and on the other side the development of Ly Chinh Thang Street. During the French colonial era, this area was known as *Ben Tam Ngua*, or horse bathing area, so named because of the local establishments which formed along the bank of the Nhieu Loc canal, or Arroyo De L'Avalanche, which used the water to clean horses for merchants and riders. The horse bathing business then attracted other horse-related services such as farriery, grooming, cart and wheel making etc. (Nghia Le, 2018).[13] As their businesses were thriving between the late 19th century and mid-20th century, local owners began to settle permanently and built one or two-storey houses on the vacant land along the canal near their businesses.[14]

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[13] Retrieved from https://tuoitre.vn/di-nguoc-ve-nhung-cai-ten-cho-ba-hoa-xom-chieu-xom-cai-2018081909160219.htm
[14] Interviewed with Ms H and Mrs V by author, 2018
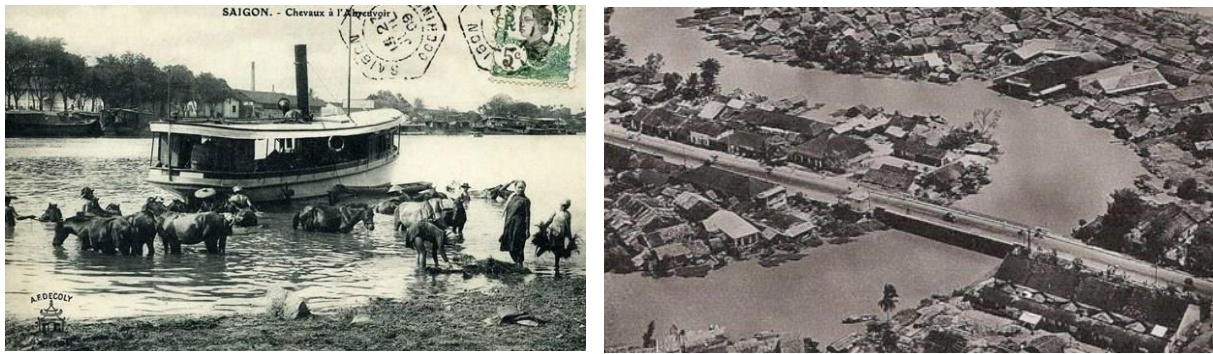
Figure 4.19 (Left) Ben Tam Ngua at Arroyo De L'Avalanche in the 19th century. (Right) low-rise houses along the Nhieu Loc Canal (Retrieved from http://khampha.vn/khoa-hoc-quan-su/lich-su-hinh-thanh-kenh-nhieu-loc-thi-nghe-c51a636903.html and http://2saigon.vn/net-xua-saigon/tim-lai-ben-tam-ngua-cua-sai-gon-xua.html).

According to the historian Tran Huu Quang, Ly Chinh Thang Street was a muddy trade route travelled by merchants' oxcarts (2016, p. 27). When the colonial government took over the City in the 1860s, the Coffyn planning scheme (1862) set out several standards for renovating the City's streets, including Rue de Avalanche the name of Ly Chinh Thang Street in 1865. It was expected that Rue de Avalanche would become a boulevard of 40-metre width for a tram track and spacious pavements on both sides featuring rows of trees. However, the colonial government could not execute according to their prescribed standards and the street is just 8 metres wide, including the 2-metre pavement (Quang, 2016, p. 27). The historian believed that one major cause was that the self-densification in form of laneways along the street had prevent any formal planning to be executed (Quang, 2016, p. 27).The street was further renamed several times as Rue Champagne (1920) and Yen Do (1955). Today's name Ly Chinh Thang was given in 1975 to honour a fallen soldier of the Vietnam War.

Figure 4.20 (Left) Section of Ly Chinh Thang Street, including *Hem* 60 (red mark) on a Saigon map of 1920. (Right) *Hem* 60 as recorded on a Saigon map of 1958 (From the Open Library of Texas Tech University, 2019).

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According to the local historian Tim Doling (2019, p. 344), the construction of Tan Dinh market in 1928 boosted the densification of the area. Tan Dinh market was commissioned by the Colonial government and designed and constructed by the Société d'Études et de Constructions (SIDEC) in 1926-1927 (Doling, 2019, p. 344). It was planned to be an improved and modern market, superior to the existing Ben Thanh market in District 1. The market attracted business investors to come and live and work in the area. They built houses and villas along Ly Chinh Thang Street.

Figure 4.21 Tan Dinh market in the 1930s (Doling, 2019, p.314)

The settlers along Ly Chinh Thang Street were traders and others from other districts of Saigon and nearby provinces of the City. Densification led to more construction of houses along Ly Chinh Thang Street and then gradually inward into the *Hem* area. The blocks for *Hem* houses were perpendicularly based on those of Ly Chinh Thang Street. However, the deeper one goes into the *Hem*, the quirkier the shapes are because the houses have informally encroached onto the *Hem* path without consulting any architect, engineer, or planner.[15] The building acitivites of these houses also involved with encourchment onto public land. These encourchment also occurred multiple times due to the increasing needs of accommodating additional members. Informal house-building activities and proprety encrouchment of different families have resulted with more *Hem* paths of different lenghts, shapes and widths. Ms H's house are one such case. The details of her house will be discussed in Section 4.3.

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[15] Interviewed with Mrs V by author, 2018
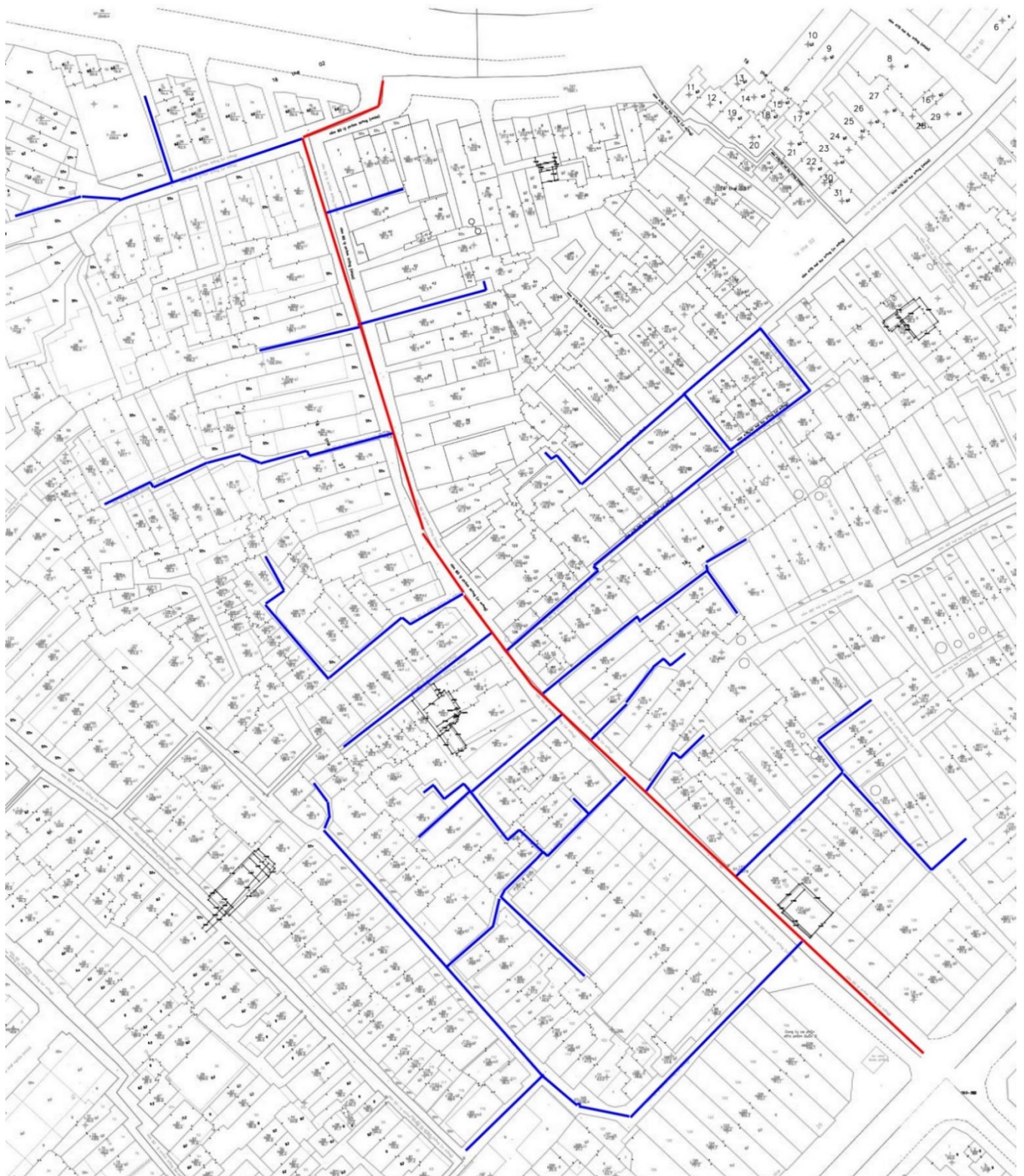
Figure 4.22 Site map illustrating the main artery (red line) and deeper branches (blue line) of *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang Street
(From the People's Committee of District 3, reproduced by the author, 2018)

Mrs V, a seneior resdient who have been living here since the 1960s, She recalls that houses in *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang were mostly low-rise, made of recycled materials like recycled metal sheets, recyled steel beams and columns, or old wooden planks. These materials were more affordable for household budgets than proper construction materials like brick, concrete, and steel frames. A few cases involved proper consultations with construction and planning services, for example, the previous owner of Mrs V's house, Mr Nhan Van Lanh, was a property developer who co-owned the other nine houses adjacent to Mrs V's. These houses were built in the late 1950s (Figure 4.23). The details of MrsV house will be discussed in Section 4.3.
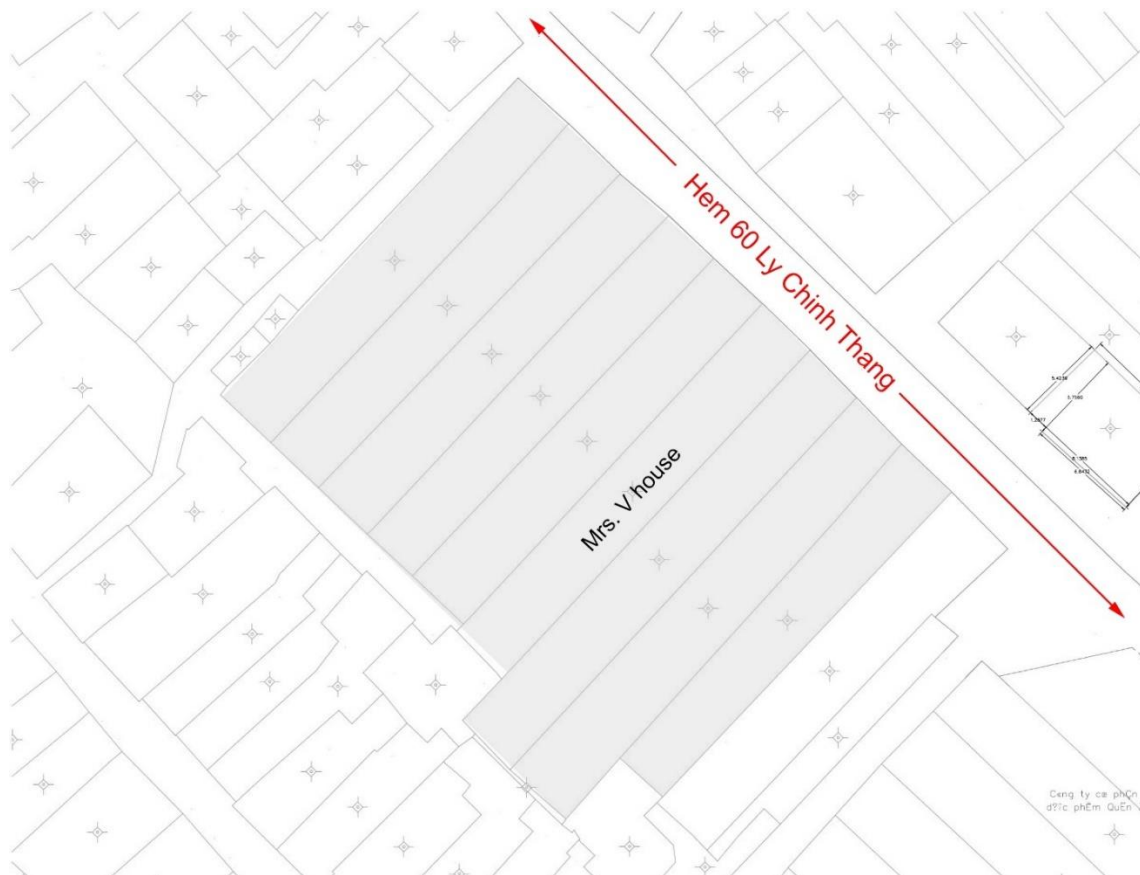
Figure 4.23 The properties of Mr Nhan Van Lanh (From the People's Committee of District 3 and reproduced by the author, 2019)

The fee to hire a kiosk in Tan Dinh Market was too high for several businesses owners who lived in *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang Street, so they informally established a pop-up market located at what is now the food court. This was revealed by Ms H.H, a local vendor who has been selling beverages in the food court here for more than 45 years. In the 1950s, a group of business owners and vendors from *Hem* 60, including Ms H.H's father, decided to open a self-regulated market without any rental fees. The site of

the market was a vacant plot of land and it attracted street vendors from nearby areas.[16] The market offered diverse range of cheap goods, ranging from from deli products to vegetables, seafood, and fruit whose business gathered on the daily basis.

Figure 4.24 (Left) Site map indicating the pop-up market within *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang (Right) and its distance with Tan Dinh market (From the People's Committee of District 3, reproduced by the author, 2018)

When Saigon entered the Socialist 1975, private business was banned and the government implemented a new economic policy which encouraged traders to join *hop tac xa*, cooperatives centrally managed by the state. A *hop tac xa* opened at house 60C, which is in front of the market.[17] It was previously owned by a Chinese-Vietnamese family who had fled to America after Vietnam Unification in 1975. However, not many traders would join the *hop tac xa* because they could not freely operate business like they used to. During the subsidy period, police regularly patrolled the area and scolded traders selling at the markets. Most traders would just temporarily close their stalls, and then right after the police left the market resumed as per usual. Furthermore, there was an underground practice by local traders of using their homes to run their businesses in, to stay hidden from the authorities. The grocery store at house 36 first opened in the 1970s and has maintained its business there ever since.

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[16] Interview with Mr H.H by the author, 2018
[17] Interview with Mrs V by the author, 2019

Figure 4.25 (Left) The one-story house with the red signboard is a former *hop tac xa.* (Right) The grocery shop at house 36 (Photographed by the author, 2019).

This brief study of *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang have revealed how the physicial charactersitic of the *Hem* pathways was formed by unregulated construction activities that essentially came from urban densification. However, these uncontrolled house-building activities, together with the informal usage of public *Hem* spaces, despite negatively criticized by local government, they seem to denote that these were the most immediate response to encounter several living issues, such as lack of living space and commercial activities, and inadequate planning support from the government in the past.

After *Doi Moi* in 1986, the government was more open to a free market, and private business could normally practice again (Doling, 2019, pp. 61-63). This including the traders at the pop-up market and those who were running at their homes. The access to new business opportunities has also helped residents to improve their finances, allowing them to renovate their houses using proper design and construction. Residential renovations particularly boomed in the 2010s. House owners added more storeys and renovated exterior and interior areas with proper construction materials. One thing that remained unchanged during these renovations was the existing footprint of their home. Furthermore, all building activities, such as renovation or construction based on the existing footprints, need to be officially lodged with and approved by the planning department of the People's Committee of District 3. This has both good and bad aspects. All construction and renovation will have to follow construction and planning regulations which ensure the safety of occupants. However, houses footprints encroaching on public areas will most likely be reclaimed by the government, because there is no formal documentation to support the owner's property rights. In such cases, residents often do not want to renovate their house for fear of losing land. Also, some families have ongoing disputes between their members about

their property rights, making the renovation of the house more challenging. I will discuss Ms H's house in Section 4.3 regarding this issue.

Figure 4.26 New residential renovation in front of the café (Photographed by the author, 2018)

Examining the planning documentation of the *Hem*, one can observe evidence of how densification has intertwined the Nhieu Loc canal with Ly Chinh Thang Street. Footprints of houses within the *Hem* were perpendicularly based with the footprints of houses allocated along the Nhieu Loc canal and Ly Chinh Thang Street. The different angle of the Nhieu Loc canal routes and Ly Chinh Thang Street have led to the *Hem* path on an angle (Figure 4.27).Mrs V revealed that residents would take up the vacant land behind their houses and expand their properties. These encroachments now cause numerous issues, such as who has the legal right over the property.

Figure 4.27 The densification of *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang at both sides (From the People's Committee of District 3, 2019)

In the early 2000s, the People's Committee of District 3 initiated several schemes to renovate *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street. The surface of the *Hem* path, which used to be bluestone and pebbles, is now asphalt. The government further installed several utility holes for drainage during the renovation. The T-junction where the broken rice shop at number 96 leads to the Nhieu Loc canal used to be a dead-end, blocked by several houses, which were then demolished to connect traffic between Ly Chinh Thang street and Hoang Sa Street, along the the canal bank.
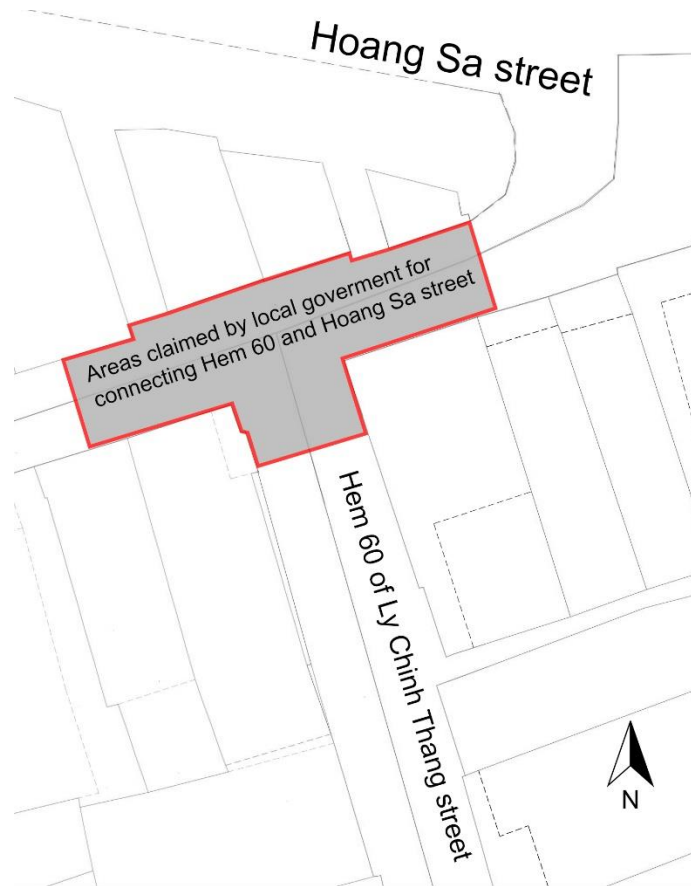
Figure 4.28 The T-junction (Produced by the author, 2019)

According to the planning map of the *Hem* provided to me by Mr T.B, an officer working for the People's Committee of District 3, a new standard of *Hem* width was set as minimum 20 metres (Figure 4.29). The planning map also indicates that any private construction built within the new *Hem* width should be demolished. However, my observations suggested that many houses of *Hem* 60 still have their residential structures encroaching onto public areas. The actual *Hem* width has been tapered down to 6 metres at its entrance from Ly Chinh Thang Street and down to 4 metres toward the T-junction. I also noticed that the majority of these houses used their encroached space as courtyards for parking, gardens, and sometimes gatherings, with only temporary built structures, mostly for shading.

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Figure 4.29 The green lines indicate the minimum width of *Hem*, the blue lines represent the legal building lines (From the People's Committee of District 3, 2018).

I enquired regarding this matter with Mr H.H, the son of Mrs V, who is currently working as a lawyer at a local firm.[18] The compensation rate paid when the government reclaims private premises to widen the *Hem* is still lower than the current market value, so people only construct temporary structures in case of forced eviction, when the demolition cost will be much lower. The following section will specifically focus on analyizing the key aspects of spatial practices that contribute to the built enviroment of *Hem* 60

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[18] Interviews with Mr. H.H, 2018 & 2019.

Ly Chinh Thang: the physical characteristic (building height, building styles, house's front structures) and the everyday local routines, activities and usage at the public's *Hem* (home-based retail, street vendor, socializing, etc.)

The Physical and Architectural Charactersitic of *Hem* Spaces

Figure 4.30 Photomontage of *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street, District 3 (Produced by the author, 2018)

At present day, the maximum height of the local buildings reach to 8-storey high. These new construction are by locals who have prospered under *Doi Moi* and can now afford to add additional levels to their existing houses. Details of the building heights can be found in Table 4.1 below. The housing typology of *Hem* 60 is a mix of various styles and shapes. Most houses are tube-shaped, with narrow width and deep length. Renovations of tube-shaped houses are done by stacking new levels onto existing footprints, as a way to compensate for the narrow width. Other houses, like those at numbers 11 and 70, are villa-style shielded by tall gates and high walls which block all views of their domestic spaces. The architectural styles of these houses do not follow any universal pattern and are intertwined between modernism and contemporary, with some borrowed elements from French and traditional Vietnamese architecture.

Figure 4.31 (Left) A two-storey house built before 1960. (Right) A five-storey house with a stylish metal mesh running vertically up its façade (Photographed by the author, 2018).
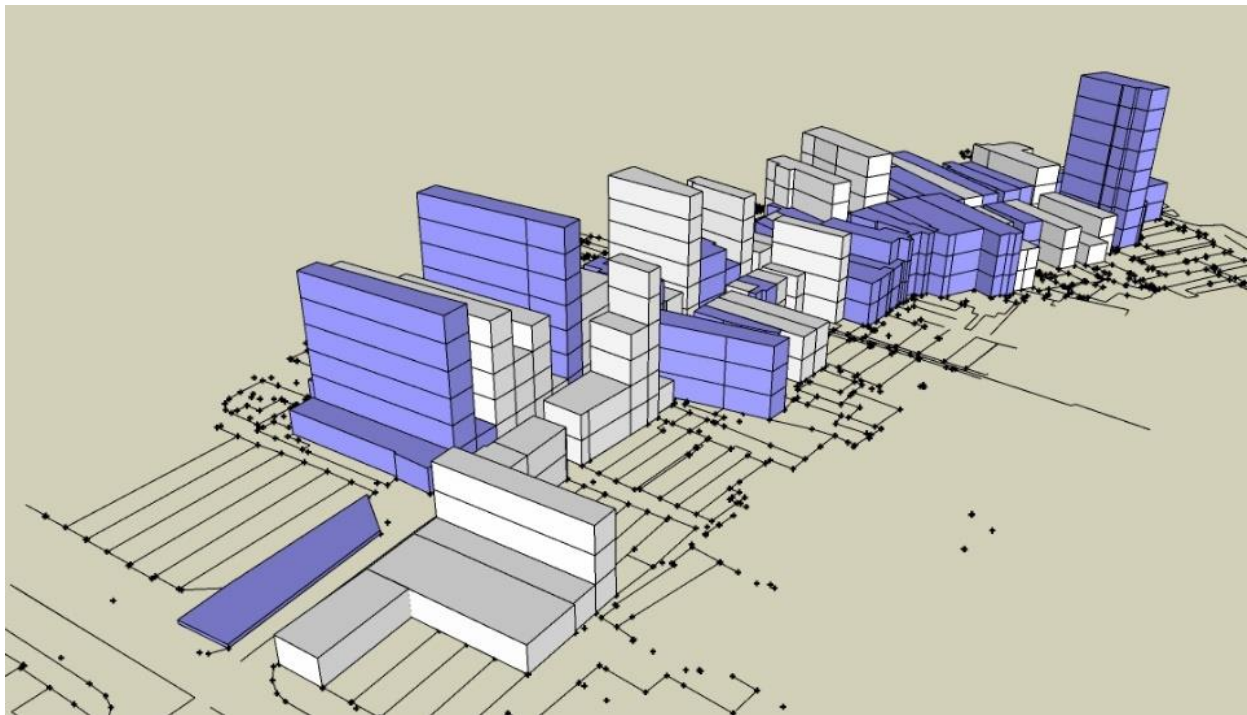
Figure 4.32 3D model of *Hem* houses (Produced by the authorwith collaboration with UAH students, 2019)

Building Height	Number
One-storey	7
Two-storey	38
Three-storey	11
Four-storey	6
Five-storey	3
Six-storey	3
Seven-Storey	1
Eight-storey	1

Table 4.1 Building heights of the *Hem* houses

Figure 4.33 The hair salon at number 36 (Photographed by the author, 2017)

This diversity of architectural styles also results from multiple ownership of houses over the decades. For instance, the hair salon at number 36 (Figure 4.33) has had three different owners since it was first built in the 1950s. The original owner built a two-storey house in the 1950s. It was later purchased by the second owner, who added two levels. The current owner, Ms D, purchased it in the early 2000s. Ms D has renovated the interior to fit the needs of her family and her business, including retrofitting the former living room on the ground floor as a hair salon. The first and second levels were expanded into balcony areas to increase interior space. The new façade of the extensions was clad with brown bricks and French-style architraves. The four-level house is now home to a family of seven members, with its ground floor serving as a hair salon.

While a mixture of low- and tall-houses could be viewed as the lack of planning management – on one perspective, it could also be seen as the residents are now attempting to self-improve their own homes, thus, modernizing the *Hem* accoridngly to the resident's living experience,finance, and practice of family-based business. Henceforth, spatial practice that spatially adapt/improve based on local house's footprints in the *Hem* that leading to architecturally change the *Hem* built environment, seem to represent the lifestyle after *Doi Moi* – an increasing in standard of living in lieu with the emergence of private trades and business. The following section will examine how do these phsycial transformation and characterisitic of *Hem* built environment have been adapted to exercise different local routines, such as family- and home-based retail. The examination would also include the business activities of street vendor who temporally occupied along the public *Hem*'s path. Together, the examination will reveal how do these human activities have been contributed to the liveability, vibrancy, and the colour of *Hem* landscape from the human-eye level.

Human Activities and Density of Spatial Usage

Currently, there are 96 houses in the *Hem*. Seventy-one of those are shop-houses, and the rest are residential houses. The home-based business ranges diversely with 10 restaurants, 6 grocery stores, 6 beverage shops (including 4 café shops, 2 smoothie shops), 3 hair salons. The rest are educational facilities, construction cooperation, a small ice-making facility, a perfume store, a cake shop and a kindergarten. These businesses often 'privately' employed the public space of the *Hem* in dealing with their lack of domestic space. For example, the café shop at number 46, as I described earlier. Furthermore, the interiors of these businesses being exposed to public view serves to advertise them and attract more customers. The public use of *Hem* space is not only characterised by the extension of activities from shop-house domestic spaces, but also by street vendors. The public use of *Hem*'s space,

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including the hosue's front, doorstep and building setback areas, also characterised by the extended activities of their customers sitting in the public path of *Hem*'s spaces. The spatial practice of exposing activities from home-based business encourage everyday human interaction bewteen the owners and customers all across the *Hem* path, therefore, add give a distinctiveness to the *Hem* chararacterized by the ongoing private usage of the public *Hem*'s spaces.

Figure 4.34 Map indicate different home-based business in *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang (Produced by the author, 2019)

In addtional, street vendor who frequently exchanging their spots throughout the entire days, also add up the livability and everyday human encounters along the public *Hem*. A sample of street vendor activities nearby the food court – one of the busiest area throughout the entire days, will assist in illustrating the mobility of the street vendors.

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Figure 4.35 Map indicates business activities of street vendors throughout the days (Produced by the author, 2019)

What allowing these vendor activities are the exposed everyday rouitnes of local houseowners in *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang. Most of the vendors come from other areas and do not live at *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang. These vendors carefully observe the daily routines of house owners and business to gain acceptance for their business at the house's front areas. They also observe each other period, then filling in the spot when others depart.
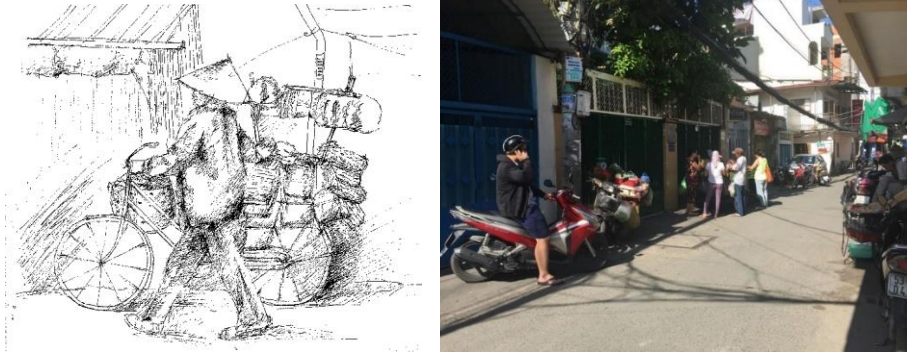
Figure 4.36 (Left) A street vendor and her bicycle (Right) Mr C.H.I (the man in white shirt and cap) detached his cart and attending the customers nearby his scooter (Photographed and sketched by the author, 2018)

A brief talk with Mr C.H.I a local vendor selling seasonal fruits in front of Mrs V's house reveal his approach adapting his vendor's spaces toward the local activities, routines, and spaces within *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang. He has been running the vendor business for more than 30 years since migrating to Saigon in the 1990s from Ben Tre province. His vendor comprises of a detachable cart containing at least 100kg of fruit, and a motorbike. First he replaced the pervious vendors who take off around 12:00 pm. He then asked the Mrs V for permissions to continue station there. He also carefully learn the routines of Mrs V's family, then move to a nearby spot whenever she needs to use her house's front for a communal activity – which will be covered in the following section. Mrs V expressed that Mr C.H.I respect for her daily routines have granted his permission to set up the business here. Also, Mr C.H.I always provides discount to the vistors of Mrs V's home, which make them enjoying their visits. Therefore, both Mr C.H.I and Mrs V have reached to this agreement because of the mutual benefit which generated by their everyday negotiatons.

Spatial practice that create the symbiotic relationships between local business owners, residents, and vendors illustrate the urban tradition of home-based business and vendor activites, which have been apreciated and practiced for decades. The exposure of human activities, including everyday living activities and retailing, allow different stakeholders to learn each other business's nature, hence, support both the ongoing practice of home-based business and vendor activities.

The public spaces of the *Hem* is not exclusively used for adapting to home-based business activities of local resdients and vendors. Local children also enjoy playing sports with their friends or families in front of the home, such as badminton, kicking shuttlecock, or even soccer. One thing seem to temporally pause all activities within *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang is the incomming oversize automobile. For example, as an ambulance making its way through the *Hem*, all activities of local residents and vendors retreat back into the home, or the inner laneway area to avoid collision. This illusrate that fast-pace and oversize

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traffic seem to deter human-based activities taking place along *Hem* path, such as the home-based retails, vendor, and other daily leisure routines. Goverment planning development should then balancing the amount and scale of the automobile travelling through the *Hem* without detering these everyday activities, including home-based business, vendor, and leisure activities.

Figure 4.37 An ambulance squeezing through the narrow *Hem*'s path (Right) Playing shuttlecock (Photographed by the author, 2018)

4.3 Houses in *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street

This section will investigate in detail the interrelationship between domestic space and public space by studying the spatial organisation and architectural transformation of several examples of local houses. The investigation was initiated with one-on-one interviews with some local residents. I asked my interviewees if I could study in-depth the interior spaces and architectural features of their houses. I would like to sincerely thank Mrs V, Ms H, and their families for their willingness and patience during the interviews. Mrs V, who not only shared her knowledge of the *Hem* but also had her son, Mr HH, accompany me around the networks of *Hem* 60. Mrs V also recommended me to her dear neighbour, Ms H, who has been living here since 1962, and she agreed to take part in the interviews.

Figure 4.38 The author and Mrs V (Photographed by the author, 2018)

This was a challenging task because many house owners in *Hem* 60 are very protective of their private life and information. When the locals saw me photograph their façades or their activities in front of their houses, many of them glared at me. According to my experiences, there are two main reasons for locals being cautious about outsiders like me. Firstly, most households have encroached outside their legal boundaries, as noted above. They are afraid that information about their houses could be exposed to local officials, which can lead to enforced eviction. Secondly, some households are in dispute with their neighbours. Both Mrs V and Ms H expressed during our interviews that they usually face disputes with their neighbours over domestic activities or even land ownership, in Ms H's case. In-depth study of their houses will hopefully provide insight into how the daily negotiations between domestic spaces and *Hem* spaces have assisted their living and working here.

Mrs V - house of generations

Mrs V house of 60/9 Ly Chinh Thang reflects the changes of past decades, including several renovations associated with the changes of the family home-based business specializing in clothes manufacturing. Detail study of Mrs V's house would include the physcial changes to the house in response to the change of the family's living experience. They including when Mrs V first move in and ran her clothing business, and aftershe retired. The study would provide insight of how the spatial practice of *Hem*'s home-based business can influence the structural changes and building renovations of *Hem*'s house. Furthermore, the case of Mrs V's house will be a representative study showing the contribution of home-based business toward the livelihood of the community, as well as personal living experience.

Mrs V's house at 60/9 Ly Chinh Thang reflects the changes of past decades. The house used to run a medium-size clothing factory with more than 20 employees, specialising in children's wear. At the moment, several interior spaces have been renovated as a communal worship space where more than 50 Buddhist followers gather weekly. Mrs V and her family moved several times before settling permanently in this house. They first moved from Binh Chanh district into the *Hem* in the early 1960s and resided in a one-storey house at 60/55G. As the family needs expanded, Mrs V moved to a two-storey house at 60/55C, home to 7 family members, including Mrs V, her late husband, and their five children. In 1990, she purchased the three-storey house at 60/9 from its previous owner, Mr Nhan Van

Lanh, who also owned the adjacent houses at number 60/5, 60/7, 60/11, 60/13 and 60/15 (Figure 4.23).

Figure 4.39 Drawings and property ownership documents for Mrs V's house in the *So Dien Tho* (Land Registration Book) issued in 1959 by The Ministry of Land Registration and Reform of The Republic of Vietnam (Provided by Mrs V, 2018).

The address of the present-day house has changed several times since the house was first built in 1959. The initial address was 93 Huynh Tinh Cua Street. A length of approximately 20 metres of the *Hem* from its entrance was once part of Huynh Tinh Cua Street, which runs across Ly Chinh Thang Street. In 2002, the People's Committee of District 3 relocated this part of the *Hem* to the administrative area of Ly Chinh Thang Street and Mrs V's house was renamed number 60/9 Ly Chinh Thang Street.

Mrs V's house is a typical tube-house with interior spaces organised along the length of the property. According to the house documentation, it is 26.5 metres in length and 4 metres in width. The layout of Mrs V's house is divided into three main quarters – the front quarter, the middle quarter with a staircase running between levels, and the back quarter. Three of her children have moved out and live elsewhere. The house is now home for Mrs V, Ms H.I the fourth daughter, and Mr H.U the second son. Most of the family members are away during the day at work, leaving Mrs V at home with a maid, Ms M, who looks after the house. The member's private living quarters and their contribution to the home renovation will be explained shortly.

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Figure 4.40 Layout of 60/9 Ly Chinh Thang Street in 1991 (People's Committee of District 3, provided by Mrs V, 2018)

Mrs V and her family used to run a medium-scale clothing factory at home, producing a famous local brand named *Susu,* between the 1990s and the 2010s when Mrs V decided to retire. Her tailoring experience was developed after 20 years working as a tailor specialising in the traditional Vietnamese dress *ao dai*. Mrs V said that *ao dai* is one of the most challenging garments to make and took her decades to master. All those years tailoring *ao dai* provided enough money and confidence to open her clothing factory at home. Susu Clothing, her brand, specialised in children's clothes. As Vietnam opened up to the world after *Doi Moi*, the demand for improvement of family living standards, including for children, led Mrs V to bring international standards into the local children's clothing industry when the market had not yet understood the demand. The cost of hiring a manufacturing venue was expensive back then and all viable venues were located in the suburban areas. Mrs V decided to renovate her home into a clothing factory and combine the family's living spaces with manufacturing spaces. Mrs V's late husband helped to manage the business, while also working as a mechanic at a nearby automobile workshop on Ly Chinh Thang Street.

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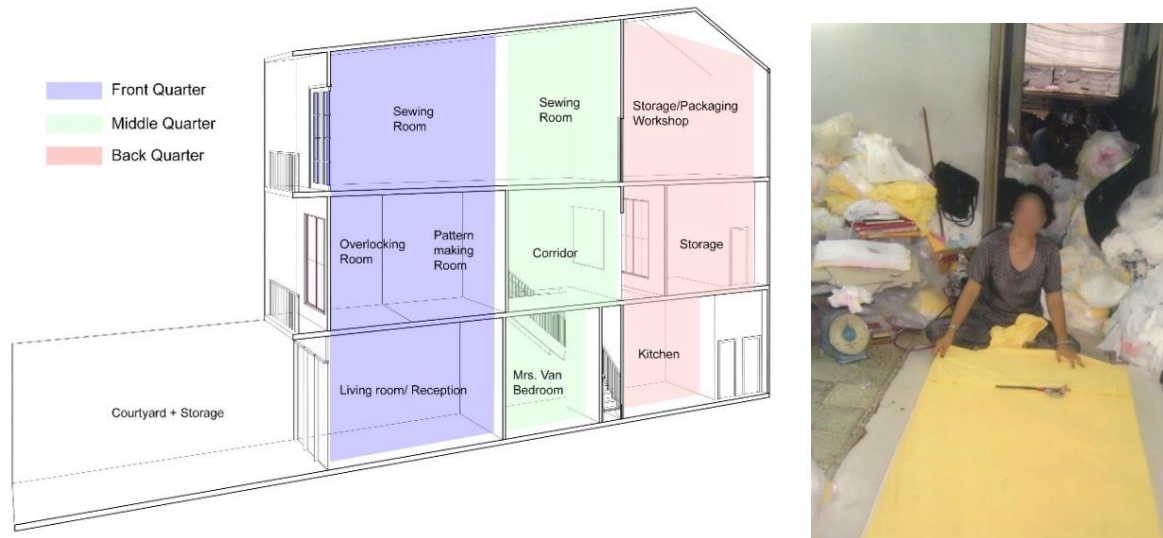
Figure 4.41 (Left) Sectional perspective of Mrs V's house as a home-based clothing manufacture. (Right) Mrs V's employee in the pattern making room, taken in 1998 (Produced by the author, 2019, photo provided by Ms H.I)

It was an ideal solution to host the factory in the house, because it was located at the heart of the City. Mrs V made daily trips to nearby Tan Dinh Market to source clothing textiles and materials. Different parts of the house were renovated to suit the work flow of her business and, at the same time, the private lives of the eight-member family. There was a total of about 20 tailors working around the clock. A review of the house's layout in the past will help us understand how Mrs V used her interior spaces.

To easily manage both the logistics of the tailoring and taking care of the family, Mrs V decided the ground floor level would be her living and working spaces, including the present-day living room as a reception area located in the front quarter, followed by Mrs V's private room in the middle quarter and the kitchen/dining room in the back quarter. Several features of the ground floor still remain at the present day with little change, including the black and white 200 x 200mm polished cement tiles to resist scratching by her employees transporting materials upstairs, the hand-crafted wooden sofas and bookshelves of Mrs V's favourite place to relax after work, and the flower-patterned ventilation holes between the rooms to exhaust cooking smoke from the kitchen.

Figure 4.42 (Left) The living room at the present day. (Right) A corridor leads to Mrs V's room on the left and the kitchen at the end of the corridor (Photographed by the author, 2018).

The second and third levels were vital spaces for Mrs V's factory. Rooms were functionally divided to best accommodate the workflow. The back quarter of the second level was used as storage for cloth and most of the time it spilt over into the corridor in the middle quarter. Mrs V remembered the corridor was a bit challenging for her visitors due to the big rolls of cloth which usually lined both sides, narrowing the 2-metre wide corridor even more. This corridor led to the pattern making room, where big sheets of various cloths were cut into the parts of garments, such as sleeves, bodices, or backs. The room was 3 metres long and there were two 2 x 1 metre cutting tables.

Garment parts were then transferred to the next room for overlocking. There were at least five Juki overlocking machines and several Singer sewing machines, in case any quick stitching jobs were required. After all the preparations were finished, the overlocked garment parts were taken to the sewing rooms located in the front and middle quarters of the third level. Mrs V described this as one of the busiest spaces, where more than 15 employees occupied their sewing stations. The back quarter of level three was used as extra storage and a packaging workshop where all the final products would be sealed, bagged, and branded before going down to the living room at ground level for distribution to shops. Mrs V said that, during those times, clothes and their parts were scattered everywhere on the floors of all levels. Mrs V described the house as always filled with machine sounds on constant loop, characterised by the throbbing rattle and whirring noise coming from the motors of the overlockers and sewing machines.

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Figure 4.43 Mrs V's employee in the overlocking room, taken in 1998 (Provided by Mrs V, 2018)

Figure 4.44 The remaining machines at Mrs V's (Photographed by the author, 2018)

Mrs V's factory and business were always working under massive demand from the market and prospered for more than 20 years. In fact, any household which already owned a Singer sewing machine during the closed-market period or a few years after *Doi Moi* would have been considered as being wealthy. Mrs V purchased at least 30 industrial-grade sewing machines from Singer and Juki. During the interview, I am not just amazed by her knowledge of the clothing industry, but also by her gentle humility when I praise her business success. Many of her former employees also came from *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street. Those who had no tailoring skills or related background, but wished to follow this career, would be trained by Mrs V. Many locals from the *Hem* whom I interviewed spoke highly of Mrs V's kindness and generosity and enthusiastically shared their personal stories of how they met her. This reflects the fact that successful family-based businesses not only bring economic gains for their owners, but also livelihoods for the local community.

Figure 4.45 (Left) Mrs V's employees gathered in the courtyard and living room area for an annual party in 2010. (Right) The courtyard at the present day (Provided by Mrs V and photographed by the author, 2018).

In the early 2000s, a big change in Mrs V's business occurred. Her husband passed away and Mrs V wished to retire. However, she still wanted to keep her long-established business so she decided to transfer the ownership to her third daughter, Ms H.E. The house's title was still in Mrs V name and her work table located in the living room continued being used by Ms H.E, who made use of the Internet to collect various styles from around the world and enrich Mrs V's existing collection of clothes.

The business quickly caught up with the global trends of the children's fashion industry, as well as the surge of consumerism in HCMC after *Doi Moi* in 1986. However, the factory reached its maximum capacity and could not expand to any other venues. New employees were asked to tailor at their own houses and ship their finished products to Mrs V's house for final packaging.

In 2010, the departure of Ms H.E to settle in Australia with Mrs V's retirement, brought a new layer of changes to the house. I will further examine the physical changes to Mrs V's interior spaces to not only explain how they functionally and spatially adapted to Mrs V's new lifestyle, but also to reveal their impacts on the public space of *Hem* and on different stakeholders, such as her neighbours and local goverment.

Figure 4.46 The communal worship space (Photographed by the author, 2018)

After Ms H.E closed down the business, Mrs V lived by herself for a brief time. Mr H.U, the second son, and Ms H.I, the fourth daughter and her son, moved back into the house with Mrs V. The names registered in the household documentation, *so ho khau*, now include Mrs V, Mr H.U, Ms H.I, and her son. Each family members took parts in the home renovation progress. Different parts of the houses have been re-constructed, and decorated to accommodate the lifestyles and routines of each members.

The private quarters of each member were divided as follow. Mrs V remained at her previous bedroom, locating at the ground level. Ms H.I and her son occupy the former storage room, located in the back quarter of the second level. Mr H.U occupy the former packaging room, located in the back quarter of the third level. He also privately constructed an additional level directly above his quarter. This construction was not included in the house's floor plan and had caused several hurdles between family members, which will be explained later.
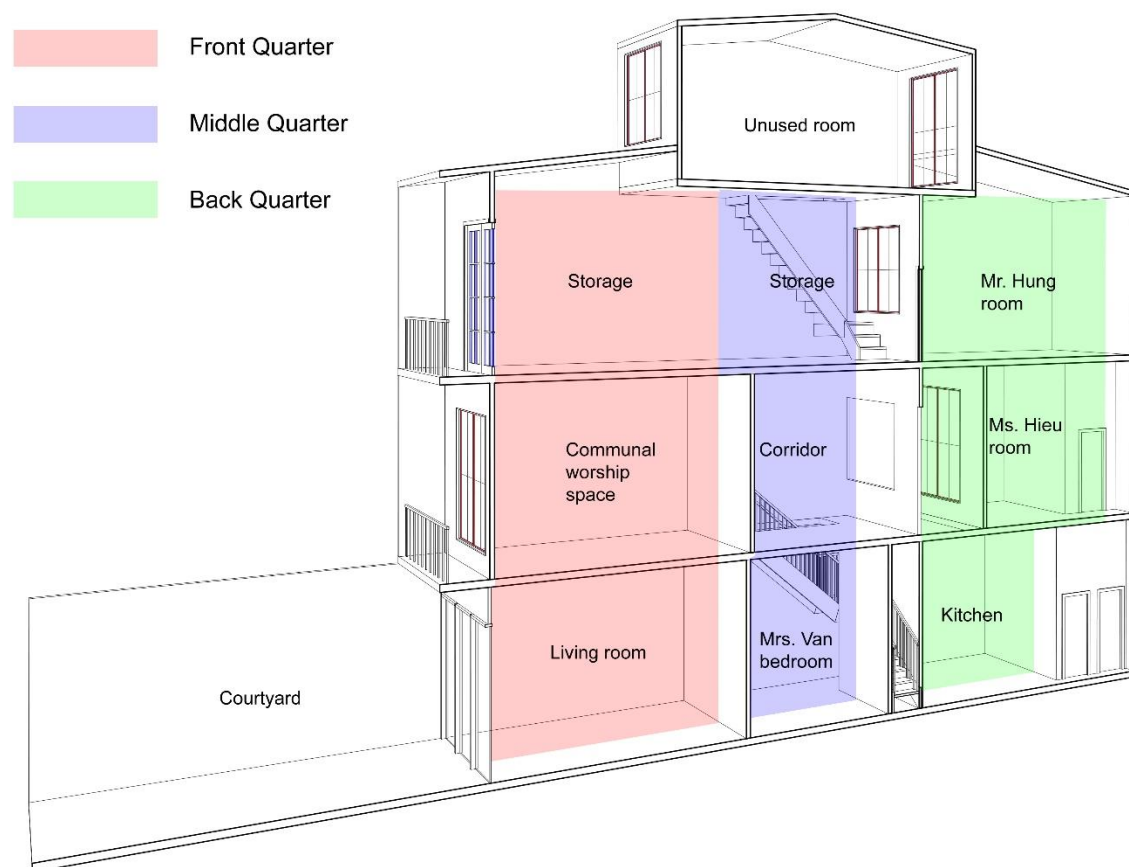
Figure 4.47 Sectional perspective of the house at present day (Produced by the author, 2019)

At the same time Mrs V's children moved back, she decided to open a communal worship space, or *dao trang,* for her and her friends who are followers of Buddhism. The front quarter of the second level, which used to be separated by a wall, was further extended by demolishing the wall. During the renovations, Mr H.H, the youngest son, helped out with design, construction, and legal documentation.

The communal worship space is 8 metres in length and elegantly designed with an attractive lighting fit-out. The floor is polished granite tile. Wallpapers of a light brown colour were imported from Korea and cover both sides of the walls. Pictures of the Buddha and the saints hang on the walls, highlighted by the ceiling spotlights. A two-step podium at the back of the room acts as the altar for worship and offerings. On the highest steps are three grand statues of the Buddha, which are two metres high and weigh at least 300 kilograms each. Offerings to the Buddha, such as flowers, fruit, and incenses, are neatly arranged along the lower steps. A family altar is located to the left of the podium. On the right, there are instruments to be played during ceremonies, including drums, a bronze bell, and a wooden bell.

Figure 4.48 (Left) The three statues of the Buddha. (Right) The small family altar (Photographed by the author, 2018).

Speakers have been installed into the newly built plaster ceiling to ensure that everyone can hear the chanting. Three air conditioners are installed across the length of the ceiling. During ceremonies, attendees sit on cushions in rows along the length of the room. There are at least 40 attendees in the room. I visited ceremonies several times and observed at least 10 attendees sitting outside in the corridor each time. Mrs V wished her communal worship space to provoke a sense of holiness and comfort for attendees. All design and construction was based on verbal descriptions by Mrs V and Mr HG given to the builders. Her strong beliefs and Buddhist roots and her successful career mean that she now wishes to offer something back to the local Buddhist community. However, this has caused internal

conflict between family members, because Ms H.I and her son are Catholic, and neighbourhood conflict due to the large gatherings.

Figure 4.49 The worship space and corridor during a ceremony (Photographed by the author, 2018)

Both the living room and courtyard on the ground level are used for attendees' parking. These rooms are always filled with scooters and bicycles handled by a local valet employed by Mrs V. Attendees do not go home immediately after the ceremony, but linger to chat outside the house gate even though the valet has readied their vehicles. This causes traffic jams for those travelling through the *Hem*, because the house is located near the *Hem* entrance. Mrs V told me that the neighbours have threatened to report this issue as a 'public disturbance' to local officials. However, Mrs V is afraid that rushing attendees to leave might make them uncomfortable and discourage them from attending ceremonies at her house but, on the other hand, the neighbours have been friends of the family for years. Mrs V does not have any solution which can cut both ways, and so she decided to let things go on as they had. For months, the neighbours repeatedly pressed Mrs V to resolve the issue but, after a while, they came to accept the gatherings as a fact.

Figure 4.50 Scooters being moved into the living room by Mrs V's parking valet (Photographed by the author, 2018)

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These worship activities also cause tension with family members. Ms H.I and her son cannot conduct their daily activities during the ceremony because their room is opposite the *dao trang*. Ms H.I decided to make the room self-sufficient for her and her son. The room is packed with numerous household items and appliances, and measures 5 metres long with a 1.5 x 2 metre toilet area. A queen-size bed is located in the middle of the room, leaving a narrow pathway to the toilet. Opposite the toilet, there is a medium-size fridge with a microwave on top. The queen-size bed is for the son, while Ms H.I sleeps on a 1-metre wide couch-like bed. Ms H,I built a corner table for her son to study at, where there are piles of textbooks and knick-knacks randomly scattered.

Figure 4.51 Ms H.I's room (Photographed by the author, 2019)

The *dao trang* ceremony occurs weekly on Sunday, which is the only day Ms H.I can be at home. She feels cramped in her room because she does not go out into the corridor, afraid of interrupting the ceremony and being met with stern faces. Furthermore, both the corridor and the worship space are considered sacred spaces during ceremonies and all attendees are required to be dressed in brown robes to enter. This included me when I photographed a ceremony.

Figure 4.52 View into Ms H.I's room from the corridor (Photographed by the author, 2018)

After Ms H.I gave me a tour around the house, I noticed there was an abandoned fourth level that did not appear in the property documentation. Ms H.I revealed that it was constructed separately by Mr H.G

after he moved in. It is an attic of about 6-metre length and 2.3-metre height. The floor slab is made of metal sheets. The floor is covered in thick layers of dust and it has not ever been used since its construction, Ms H.I said. This is because they were afraid it would be revealed to local officials.

Figure 4.53 The empty attic level above Mr H.G's room (Photographed by the author, 2018)

Mr H.U initial plan was to renovate the house roof to fix a leak in his living quarters. He notified Mr H.H, who is in charge of the house's renovation, about the issue and then arranged his own builder team separately. The existence of the room first surfaced when Mr H.H noticed that the renovation took longer than he expected. When he inspected, the room was already halfway constructed. Mr H.U's fourth level has caused some internal conflict between the members of Mrs V's family. More tension was added by local officials when they came to inspect. Luckily, Mr H.H was able to manage this complication thanks to his local networks. He had to rush Mr H.U's team quickly build the room within a week in order to avoid any further inspections.

The spatial and architectural practices and changes in Mrs V's house are typical of HCMC's everyday built environment. These changes reflect the social and economic changes in circumstances of the locals, and are deeply rooted within the layers of the everyday life practices of individual members of households. Furthermore, these changes are self-managed by a local network that helps to nourish the social, cultural, and economic spheres. It is a challanging task for urban designers, architects, and policy-makers to renovate *Hem* space because they face strong resistance from *Hem* locals. The resistence can be experienced via the informal building and construction activities, which have been practiced in *Hem* for decades. However, one major step toward a solution would be stakeholders with the power to conceive *Hem*'s space making a careful bottom-up study to identify the space-making practices of the locals. Feasible solutions and policies might surface if stakeholders involved at all levels participated in collaboration and discussion.

Ms H's house

There are many cases where house owners in *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street have encroached onto the public *Hem* to informally expand their private premises. These encroachments, together with informal building extension and construction, have been creating complication of property rights as they lack of formal records to include these areas as private premise.

Today, these houses face government pressure to reclaim encroached property, causing strong resistance from house owners. The resistance is not only because of the fear of losing their property, but also because of disputes over legal ownerships between family members who will receive compensation. This section will look at the home and life of Ms H, whose struggles reflect these factors. It will also investigate the spatial usage and changes inside of Ms H's house to reveal how interior structural construction and extension activities might impact the physical characterstic of the public *Hem*, such as the pathway of *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang Street. The detail study of this house, including the family's lived experience and the related construction activities, would provide a paradigm representing how residential construction acitivities have been effecting the urban morphology, physical charactersitc and the overal formation of *Hem* network in HCMC.

Ms H's house is located at number 60/16/5. She was formerly a tailor in Mrs V's business. Ms H's parents purchased the house in 1962 from the previous owner, who also constructed the adjacent row of three one-storey houses back then. Ms H's house has encroached several times, and some parts of her house were reclaimed by the local government to expand the *Hem*. It is now the home of Ms H and her family of seven. It currently suffers from deteroration due to a dispute about property ownership between family members.

This single-level house originally provides home for Ms H's family of eight: her parents and Ms H's siblings. The original footprints of the house was about 14 metres in length and 2.8 metres in width. The first extension occurred in the 1980s when the family faced the increasing needs from the extended family of her brothers. The family decided to informally extend the properties toward the empty land to the North-West and behind the home. However, some parts of the land have been 'claimed' by her adjacent neighbours via their own informal extension. The remained empty lands were those behind her neighbour, that is to the left of Ms H's house. The resulted footprint after the encrouching progress was of zig-zag shape. The family then construct structures ontop of these encroached footprints which were used for extra bedrooms, kitchen, toilet and storage spaces.

Figure 4.54 The encroached area of Ms H's house (Produced by the author, 2019)

None of these changes or constructions by Ms H and her neighbours involved consulting any architectural, engineering, or planning professionals, she revealed. Most of the construction was carried out at the night to avoid government patrol. In the early 2000s, the government decided to expand the *Hem* behind her home to provide access into the inner area of *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang. The reclaimed area located at her former kitchen which blocked the pathway of nowsaday *Hem* 60/22. Local government asked Ms H to demolish this kitchen area. In return, they would compensate the reclaimed properties. However, the expansion have led to several issues that continously impact the structural conditions of the house and the living of Ms H's family at the present day. These issues and challenges will be coverd shortly.

Ms H further suggested that informal expansion like this had been done at almost every house in the *Hem* and the government management system could not catch up with these construction activities. These building activities result in lack of proper documentation to justify the private property of house owners, and often lead to years of issues with the government. Informal encrouchment and construction activities of Ms H have been resulting in the peculiar shape of *Hem*'s path that might not reflect the government vision of a modern City, however, they were immediate solutions in response with housing shortage issues. Especially, when the country still lack of finance for urban development

due to the recovery after the Vietnam War during the strict Socialist period (1975-1985). The following paragraphs will look at the present-day condition of the house and living experience of Ms H's family.

Figure 4.55 Floor-plan of Ms H's house: (1) Workshop for Ms H and living room; (2) Working and sleeping space for Ms H's children; (3) Ms H's room; (4) Kitchen and bathroom (Produced by the author, 2019).

At the present day, Ms H's house comprises three sections and is situated on a quirky plot of zigzag shape. The house provides living and working space for seven people, including Ms H and her husband, three of their children, and two of Ms H's sisters. The front section is 14 metres long and 2.8 metres wide. It is further divided into two smaller rooms by an 80 mm brick wall, with the front room measuring 8 metres long and the back room measuring 4 metres long. Ms H uses the room to accommodate her tailor workshop. There are a sewing machine and an overlock machine placed on long tables and tucked to the right of the room. Furniture in the front rooms – cabinets, desks, and wardrobes – are all old and damaged. The living room is also used for family dinners. There is a foldable plastic table and stools for dining stored underneath Ms H's bed.. Knick-knacks and items like sauce bottles, glasses, bowls, and small appliances cannott find a space and are lying exposed all over the place.

Figure 4.56 (Left) Ms H's living room (Right) A small family altar is attached to the 80mm brick wall (Photographed by the author, 2018)

The back room is occupied by the middle son and the third daughter. The room is only 4 metres wide and 3 metres long and crowded with items thrown on wardrobes and cabinets. Domestic items and furniture are in different styles, old and new. Some of the cabinets were gifts from her neighbours, or collected from the streets, Ms H said. She cannot fit any beds into this cramped space, so her children have to sleep on sedge-mats. Both the front and back room have the same wooden panel ceilings, which have been severely damaged by mildew and leaking rainwater.

Figure 4.57 Views of the children's room (Photographed by the author, 2018)

The middle section of the house is built in an L-shape and is currently occupied by Ms H and her husband. An old queen-size bed with rotten legs is where they usually sleep. The roof of Ms H's quarters is 4 metres high and made of corrugated steel sheets. There is no insulating layer between the roof and the room. The rusty metal roof has caused numerous leaks into her living quarters, and Ms H has to use plastic bowls placed on the floor to catch the drips from the roof when it is raining. Ms H and her family have a habit of storing both necessary and unnecessary items piled up around the house. She explained

hesitantly that the family's budget is currently tight, and she hopes they can make some good use of these things in the future.

Figure 4.58 (Left) Ms H's quarters. (Right) Bowls being used to catch leaks from the roof (Photographed by the author, 2018).

The last section of the house is 3.2 metres wide and 3.8 metres long and used for kitchen space and two toilets. The floor in this section is made of bare concrete recessed down 300 millimetres from the floor level of the other sections. Condiments, spices, and cooking utensils are placed or hung wherever there is space. Ms H has had to use several plastic banners given by her neighbour to prevent the roof leaking because the holes in the roof are so big. Ms H hesitated to take me to her kitchen space for these reasons. As I entered the kitchen, the floor was still awash with water from last night's rain. The frequent flooding of the kitchen has caused the area to become very humid and vulnerable to pest infestation. Ms H expressed her struggles shyly. "I think the kitchen is one of the worst areas in the house. It is smelly, humid, and not ideal for cooking at all. I just purchased a cassette gas stove and use it for cooking in the living room instead of here."

Figure 4.59 (Left) The kitchen space. (Right) exposed wires around the light switch for the kitchen (Photographed by the author, 2018).

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When Ms H walked me to the back of her house and explained her kitchen space, I realised how severe the kitchen's condition was. The roof of corrugated steel sheets is all rusted and covered with mould, dust, and moss. In fact, all most every part of the house requires renovation with proper architectural consultation. As I discussed these issues, Ms H opened up about all the hurdles she has faced over the past years.

Figure 4.60 (Left) The roof of the kitchen; (Right) The door connecting the kitchen area with *Hem* 60/22 (Photographed by the author, 2018)

After the demolition was complete, the government also increased the new *Hem* level to install a new sewage system, which further increased the height difference between the public path of the *Hem* and the domestic area. This caused a recession of 300 millimetres between the *Hem* level and the domestic level. This gap allows rainwater from the *Hem* to flow into her kitchen area and pool there, which continuously deteriorting the structures of this area.

Figure 4.61 (Left) Ms H explaining her former kitchen area (Right) small concrete prevents the overflown rainwater (Photographed by the author, 2018)

In addition, Ms H is currently in a land ownership dispute with her sisters, which has delayed the house renovation's progress. Her oldest sister has demanded a fifty-percent share of the house's value. Ms H

said she has five sisters, and they have suggested that the value should be equally split among them. Ms H does not want to sell the house because it is home to her family. The dispute has been dragging on for years, and she is struggling to find an appropriate approach to convince the other sisters. If her sister managed to take over the ownership, Ms H's family might have to move out and any renovation would be in vain. Lastly, several parts of the property are still in the process of getting formal approval from the local government. Any renovations, construction, or building activities would not be permitted in these areas, and would mostly likely be terminated.

Ms H was hesitant when I asked to photograph her house because she was embarrassed about all these hurdles and the disputes within her family. The hesitation of other members of the local community who reluctantly allowed me to photograph may have had the same basis. Houses with deteriorating structures, such as the grocery store at number 36, face similar issues, Ms H revealed. These 'in-between' circumstances often include internal and external disputes with local government and between family members. Since the government does not have policies to support or mediate these situations, residents such as Ms H live day by day with little knowledge of any solutions for their challenges.

Like in many other *Hem* around HCMC, self-expansion has occurred 'underground' here over the past decades. These practices and changes to HCMC's *Hem* are caused by lack of domestic space and the increasing everyday needs of local households. The majority of *Hem* locals face these issues. Architects, urban planners, and designers alike have faced strong resistance from *Hem* locals, such as in the case of Ms H's house, because there are layers of complicated issues. They involve not just ownership rights, but also inheritance laws and property laws. One way to resolve the disputes between locals and officials is to carefully observe their living spaces before making judgements. Doing so will allow the investigator to be more open-minded to everyday local concerns and difficulties. Every design and renovation of *Hem* space should be centred on that kind of 'bottom-up' understanding, a foundation for governments and policymakers at all levels to develop feasible policies to solve ownership disputes and preserve the characteristics of public *Hem* space without detracting from the lived experience of the local community.

The everyday built environment of *Hem* is characterised not only by the housefront culture of home-based businesses, the street vendors, and the related activities frequently occurring in front of local houses, but also by the extended structures created for these activities. These spatial changes and uses of housefront space have been used and adapted by different local stakeholders living in *Hem* 60,

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including local houseowners and residents living away from the main artery, as well as vendors and stall owners who come from other areas. What is unique about these spatial adaptations of local housefronts for business purposes, as compared to those in other urban spaces of HCMC like pavement and housefront areas of main public streets, is that they create an intimate atmosphere which is experienced from the footpath of the narrow *Hem*. These home-based businesses, for daily income or continuing a family tradition, seem to encourage everyday human encouters that are socially, culturally, physically, and economically closer to local everyday needs and community livelihoods.

It should also be noted that changes in the business activities and lives of house owners will influence physical changes and adaptations, both domestically and outside the home, which consequently, influence the overall landscape of the *Hem*. Changes in property ownership, for example, bring new architectural tastes and decorations, hence the changing landscape of the *Hem*. The practice of home-based business also influences house renovation and (re)construction to spatially rearrange and adapt to the combined living and working lives of residents. Together, these changes not only characterise the atmospheric *Hem* landscape with different-looking house façades and front areas, but also with different buidling heights, contrary to the kind of of modern planning which favours homogenous looks and consistent heights of buildings. It should be understood that the physical characteristics of *Hem* landscapes continously change in accordance with local business activities, including home-based business, housefront retail, and street vendors. It is thus important for architects, urban planners, and designers to use design thinking to balance homogeneity and the modern city vision set out by HCMC's government against the characteristics of *Hem* landscapes which contribute positively to local liveability and economic prosperity. These professionals should begin to observe the *Hem* characteristics that create and encourage home-based businesses and everyday human encounters, such as *Hem* width, physical characteristics of housefronts, and building setbacks.
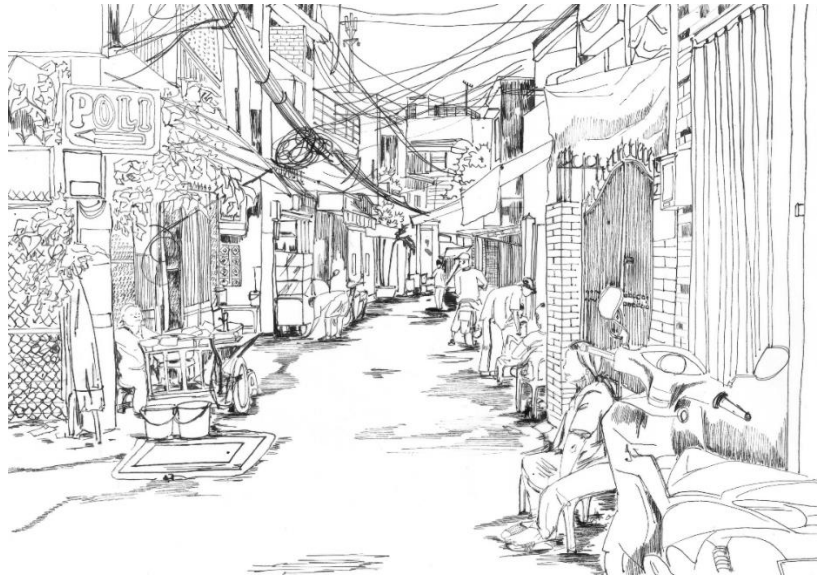
Figure 4.62 Everyday life at the housefronts of *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang (Sketched by the author, 2020)

Furthermore, these observations should also consider problems like those affecting Ms H's house, in order to effectively improve and upgrade the *Hem*. Like in many other *Hem* around HCMC, self-expansion and property encroachment constitute much of the urban grain of the built environment. Due to the lack of proper architectural and engineering involvement, these alterations do not meet government building standards. The local government *Hem* expansion project behind Ms H's kitchen space has caused continous deterioration of her house's structural condition. Any plans to renovate, develop, and expand *Hem* widths should empirically consider the condition of local houses, such as their footprints, structures, and domestic layouts, to come up with an effective design that makes a positive contribution to the living and working lives of house owners.

Lastly, local government should deploy feasible policies to address domestic issues like inheritance and property rights disputes, as they have been obstacles to the process of house improvement and renovation. While it is not an easy task for local government to swiftly resolve these issues, open-minded approaches like detailed observation, as in my approach to Ms H's house, could encourage these residents to discuss their issues, stories, and difficulties. This would boost cooperation between residents and with government agencies, who both wish to overcome these challenges.

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Chapter 5. '*Hem*-style' Spaces in Nguyen Thien Thuat Apartment Blocks

Figure 5.1 Between Blocks D and E (Sketched by the author, 2018)

My preliminary research on the Nguyen Thien Thuat apartment blocks began in 2016 for my Honours thesis. Wandering around the blocks have enabled me to study the richness, vibrancy, and colour of local activities. Spaces and structures which seem unusable and obtuse are architecturally, socially, and spatially adapted to match local lifestyles. To some extent, the present-day spatial characteristics of Nguyen Thien Thuat apartment blocks are similar to the *Hem* typology, including local extensions of domestic activities into public areas and the *ad hoc* physical changes accommodating these activities.

Historically, Ho Chi Minh City's apartment blocks, or *chung cu* (CC), such as Nguyen Thien Thuat, Thanh Da, and Ngo Gia Tu, represent an important layer of the city's fabric. According to the Department of Construction of HCMC, there were almost 480 CC built before 1975 that are still in use at present. Twenty-one of them were built during French colonisation and more than 400 were built during the American period, mostly in the late 1960s and early 1970s. CC Nguyen Thien Thuat is one of the largest American-built housing complexes which is still fully functional today. However, the original structures of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat have changed significantly.

This chapter will investigate the spatial and architectural transformation of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat and how such transformation brings the built environment of this foreign-built housing closer to the general urban texture of HCMC, particularly the *Hem* areas. The investigation will focus on the present-day physical condition of CC blocks characterised by local structural changes and informal building activities. It will also focus on the local usage of these structural changes and how they support everyday life and local business activities. The examination will be followed by a review of the complex's history and the present-day planning and renovation strategies of the local government. To get a better understanding of local structural activities, the chapter will include a detailed examination of the living and working experience of several CC residents at their flats, to see how these experiences have influenced and driven CC structural changes and transformations.

5.1 Life between the blocks

A recent survey by the Centre of Urban Research and Forecast (PADDI) estimates that 7,420 people live in this CC. The area of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat is pocketed within the parameters of four streets – Nguyen Thien Thuat, Nguyen Dinh Chieu, Ly Thai To, and Dien Bien Phu Streets. From these streets, one has to venture through networks of *Hem* before getting to the CC. However, many locals choose to access it from the *Hem* on Nguyen Thien Thuat Street because these routes lead directly to the housing complex.

Figure 5.2 Entrances to CC Nguyen Thien Thuat from Nguyen Thien Thuat Street (Photographed by the author, 2018)

The entrances to CC Nguyen Thien Thuat from Nguyen Thien Thuat Street are crowded with street vendors. There are banners with different greetings painted on the gateway saying *khu pho van hoa* ('civilised neighbourhood') and one banner advertising the location of a Caodaist temple, a religion established in Vietnam in 1926.
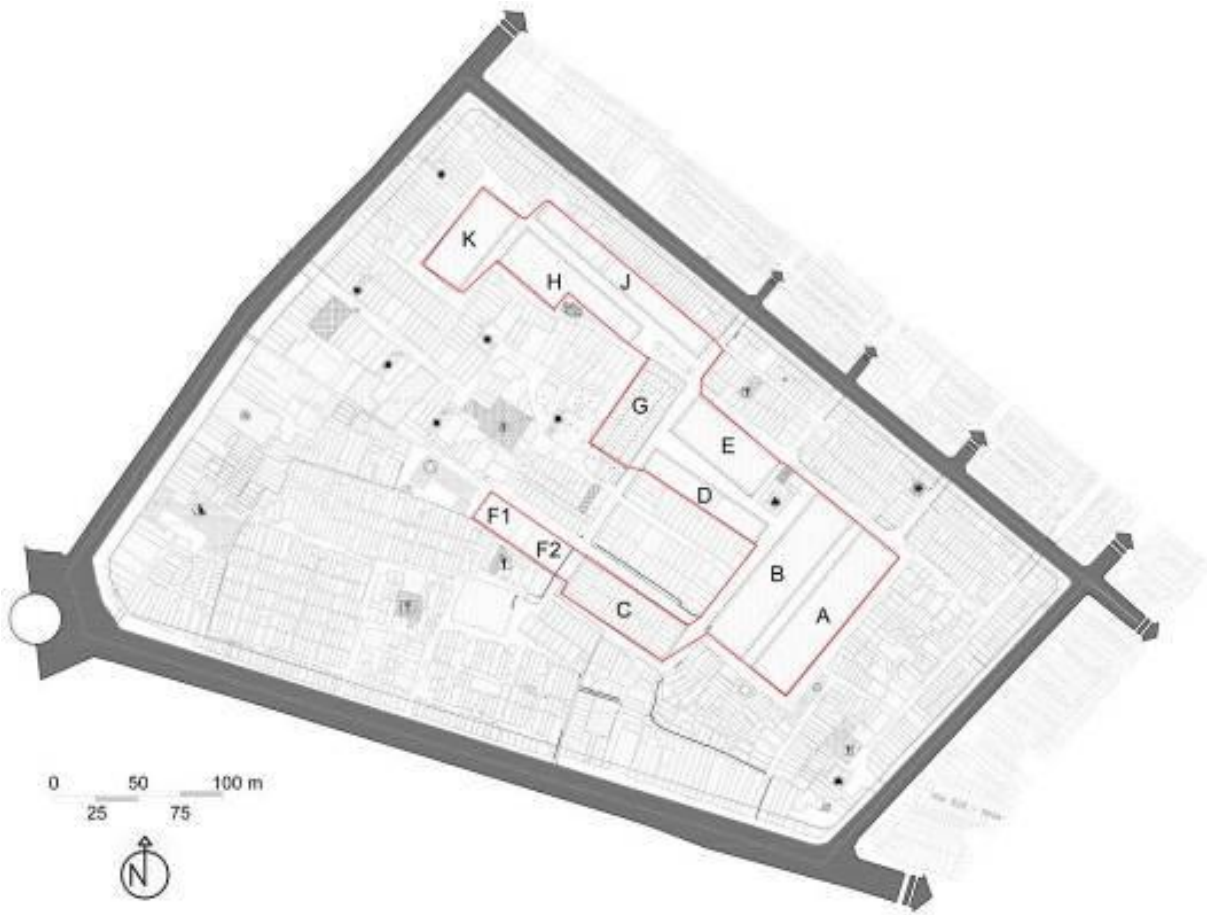
Figure 5.3 The locations of each block and the CC boundary (From the People's Committee of District 3, 2018)

There is no easy way to navigate around the blocks because their locations are scattered around a five square-kilometre area. Each block has different length and width, and their commonly shared narrow pathways are connected with the *Hem* networks. These pathways are made even narrower by different business activities of flat owners living on the ground level, street vendors, and various domestic activities. Furthermore, many flat owners have constructed different structures to informally extend their domestic spaces, as well as to conveniently support the daily routines and business activities of the CC community. Even though the building scale and the everyday life and business activities of the CC are different to those of the nearby *Hem* networks, they nevertheless recall the images of everyday urban life in the *Hem*. In particular, the use and physical adaptation of frontage areas of CC flats closely resemble those of housefronts in *Hem*. The following observations will be at the pedestrian level.

Not all retail activities along the block's pathways are the same. They depend on the locations of the blocks. The pathway between Blocks E and D is a spacious seven metres wide and only lightly travelled. Domestic activities seem to triumph at apartment frontages here, which are casually used for clothes

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drying, parking, private gardens, or pet spaces. The placement of furniture and extended structures (shading canopies, clothing racks etc.) marks the 'private' premises behind them. Each item is carefully spaced to ensure they do not invade each other's spaces. There are not many business activities, except for grocery stores at flat numbers 120 and 126 of Block E and two coffee vendors occupying the staircase areas at each end of Block D.

Figure 5.4 The yard between Blocks D and E (Photographed by the author, 2016)

The pathways traversing Blocks J, H, G, D, and part of E present a more vibrant energy. These footpaths are adaptively used for running various business activities, including restaurants, pharmacies, grocers, delis, rice shops, stationery sellers, electronics stores, and hair salons. These businesses do not exclusively serve CC residents, but also the nearby *Hem* communities. While the widths of the flats are all similar, shopfront decorations add distinctiveness to the flats, hence advertising the business to pedestrians.

Flat number 2 of Block G runs a rice shop. Baskets of different kinds of rice are displayed on steel shelves which extend onto the footpath area (Figure 5.5). The pavement in front of the flat is decorated with the same floor tiles as inside the flat. Different cafés around CC Nguyen Thien Thuat have different retrofit styles. While the café at flat 22 of Block G exposes its interior to the busy pathways, the café at flat 48 of Block D is hidden under a giant overgrown bougainvillea hedge. Structurally, the flats are almost identical to each other, but the physical changes and adaptations made by their owners are unique, creating the varied architectural colours and textures of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat.

Figure 5.5 (Left) Rice shop. (Middle) Café at flat 22 of Block G. (Right) Café at flat 48 of Block G (Photographed by the author, 2018).

CC Nguyen Thien Thuat has a number of public parks. The one between Blocks G, H, and J is the biggest. Everyday life and business activity in the park illustrate the mixed uses of CC open spaces. Many nearby restaurants set up their tables and chairs here. Customers can park their scooters along the edge of the park. The busy park also attracts a large number of street vendors who gather here daily. They are selling different commodities, such as fruit, vegetables, meat, and street snacks. There are also a number of motorcycle-taxi drivers stationed nearby. Some of them are waving to the housewives wearing conical hats who are shopping, while some are taking short naps on their motorcycles. These retail activities attract and cater to, not only CC residents, but also the nearby *Hem* communities and places further away. The mixed used of the public park is also characterised by flexible use for personal leisure activities. After school, local children play soccer at the park and in front of their family shops. This is also the perfect opportunity for street vendors selling snacks and drinks to approach their clientele. The children can play freely, safe within their territories. The open spaces are filled with human encounters and retail activities, for example businesses at the apartment fronts of the children's parents and the many street vendors, which provide informal but effective safety and surveillance.

Figure 5.6 (Left) The public park. On the top right, rows of private residential houses. (Right) Retail activities in the park (Photographed and sketched by the author, 2016).

Local business and retail activities not only spatially adapt to the pathways between the blocks or flat frontages, but also the staircase areas going to upper levels, the shared corridors of the upper levels, the

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balconies, and the CC façades. In Block B, the landing areas on all levels are occupied by different food and beverage services – a noodle shop at ground level, a steamed pancake stall on the second level, and a café on the third level. These shops require no advertising signage because their customers and the products displayed speak on their behalf.

Figure 5.7 A 'restaurant' on a landing area of Block B. (Right) The landing areas of a Block B staircase (Photographed by the author, 2019).

These shop-owners tend to make physical changes to the CC structure to accommodate their retail activities, as well as for customer convenience. For example, the landing areas on all levels of Block H are commonly used to sell daily groceries. Small items such as snacks, soap, and cleaning agents are hung on the balcony or displayed on built-in shelves attached to the walls. Several vendors in these 'staircase' cafés bring their own furniture, such as small plastic stools, tables, even a sofa for the comfort of their customers. Most of these customers are regular and are casually dressed. Their gaze wanders over the public activities on the ground level, only to be interrupted by several residents from the upper floors leading their motorcycles and bicycles down the staircase. It looks like a dangerous job, but everyone manages skilfully. 'Why motorcycles though?', one may ask.

Figure 5.8 (Left) Café at Block J's landing area. (Middle) Walking a motorcycle downstairs. (Right) Shared corridors in Block G (Photographed by the author, 2018).

In fact, shared corridors areas have been privately adapted as domestic extensions by flat owners on the upper levels. The public corridors are frequently used as parking space, kitchen space, napping areas, pet spaces, and gardens. These usages are further accommodated by series of balconies with different appearances created by adding temporary structures such as steel clotheslines, overhanging shelving for storage, steel racks for gardening, cages for pets, awnings, and steel frames. Even heavy appliances like heat exchangers or satellite dishes are attached to balconies and supported by steel L-corner joints drilled into the railings. Various electrical cables are attached to these appliances, chaotically leading to different flats on all levels. Such structural changes to balconies serve the domestic needs of the adjacent flats.
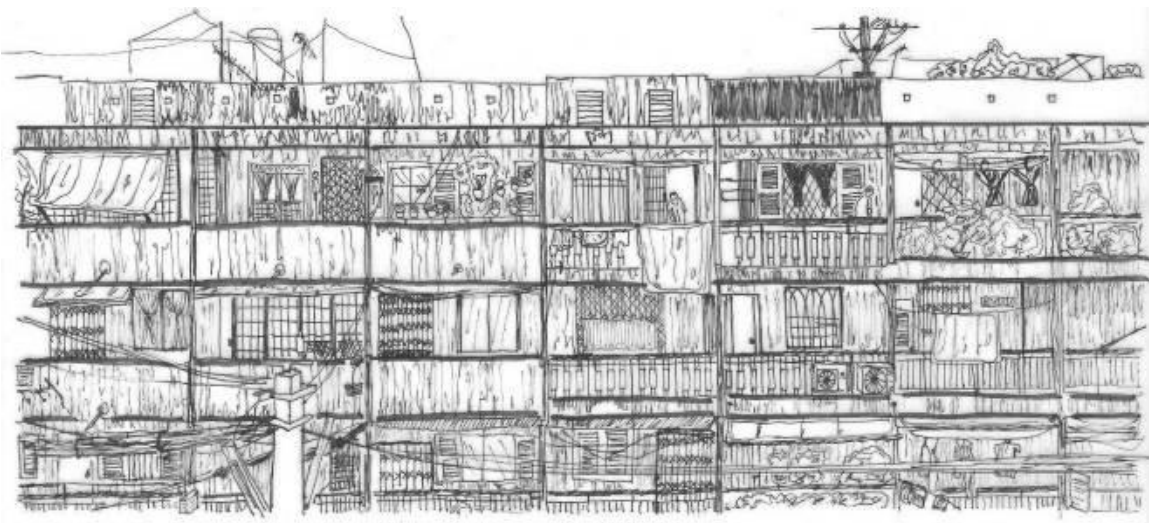
Figure 5.9 A section of Block G's facade (Sketched by the author, 2017)

Wandering around the shared corridors of the blocks' various levels presents firsthand experiences of how these structural changes are changing the façades of CC blocks. The façades, particularly the balconies, are the main evidence of these physical changes and adaptations for private usage. These privately adapted balcony structures might look chaotic and lack homogenous design or proper construction, but that does not mean they are not lacking human care and use.

Local residents, particularly elders, use the shared corridors of CC as leisure spaces. A senior man is watering his small garden of pot plants hanging all over the balcony of his flat, number 226 at Block D. The neighbours pass by to have a chat and praise him for his excellent care of the garden. Their conversation is occasionally interrupted by other neighbours who shout at them asking about the garden while walking past on the ground level (Figure 5.10). Two men are having beer and snacks in the corridor in front of their third-level flat in block G. The shade canopies above their balcony give good

shade for afternoon drinks. They see a neighbour, who recently moved out of the CC to another house nearby, walking below on the footpath. They are discussing a business opportunity to merge her flat and theirs to run a restaurant. This 'business meeting' is happening across a three-storey height. They haggle about the cost of investment over a lengthy chat of more than 10 minutes before the men resume their drinking and the neighbour leaves. The shared corridor areas are community spaces which are often informally used for private needs. They encourage human interactions within and between the levels.

Figure 5.10 (Left) Senior man watering his garden in Block D; (Right) The 'business meeting' chat at Block G (Photographed by the author, 2018).

While strolling around the CC blocks, I recall a comment from Jan Gehl in his book *Cities for People*, suggesting that more spatially open designs of buildings and houses which expose both domestic and public activities could boost everyday human encounters not only for the local community, but also for visitors (2010, pp. 20-29). Indeed, I observed many street vendors prowling upper-level corridors in search of customers. A seasonal fruit vendor parks her bike at the ground level of Block A and then quickly walks through the corridors of Block B opposite, continuing to carefully watch her bike the whole time. The exposure of private uses in shared corridors means that outsiders get a glimpse into CC life.

Figure 5.11 (Left) Temporary kitchen area with a charcoal stove on Block A's second level landing. (Middle) Taking a nap on a Block B landing. (Right) Doing laundry (Sketched and photographed by the author, 2018).

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The territories of domestic flats are significantly expanded by temporary structures and spatial adaptations like those described above. Children of families growing up in CC Nguyen Thien Thuat also expand their play spaces, perhaps after seeing their parents' and neighbours' adaptations. Shared corridors full of knick-knacks, protrusions, and random structures offer perfect spots for local children playing hide-and-seek. The public square in front of Block G is an active soccer field during lunchtime. Children always gather here right after the nearby restaurants have packed away their tables and chairs. The open spaces around CC are filled with human activities and the public squares, the footpaths on ground level, and the shared corridors of upper levels are always animated by everyday life and work routines.
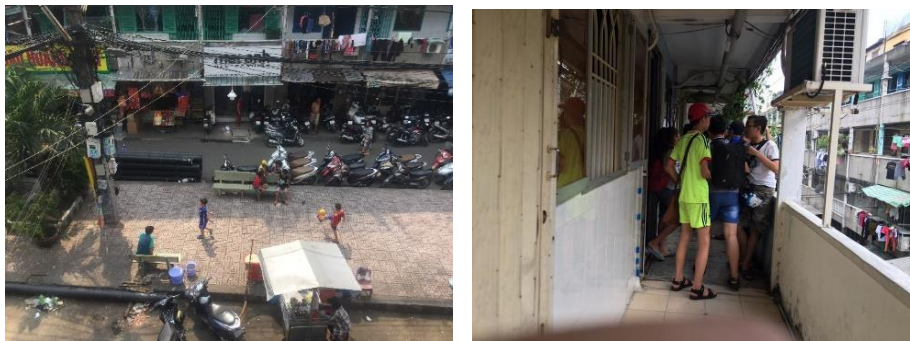
Figure 5.12 (Left) Local children playing in a small park. (Right) Hanging out in the corridor of Block D (Photographed by the author, 2018).

The outdoor environment of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat is socially and economically nourished by everyday life activities, particularly the local family-based retail and other commercial activities in their flats. The need to run businesses from CC flats strongly influences the public structures of CC blocks.

Figure 5.13 (Left) Shop signs at Block B. (Middle) Household objects and shop signs hung on the balconies of Block J. (Right) Large signboards on the ground level of Block H (Photographed by the author, 2018).

There are numbers of flat owners on upper levels who have made structural changes to their balconies to promote their businesses. Flat owners often install steel frames pushing their shop signs and

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advertisements outwards to get public attention from the footpaths. To avoid being visually dominated by adjacent structures, the sizes and colours of signboards help to highlight their businesses. Those located on the ground level seem to have spatial advantages over those on the upper levels, because oversize boards and signs can be better structurally supported there. However, the upper-level businesses have ways to compensate for their smaller signs, by focusing more on the quality of their products and services and enlarging their client networks through verbal references. These upper-level businesses can also focus their budgets on renovating and refurbishing their domestic flats to improve the productivity of their businesses. Several examples can be seen among the flats of Block H (Figure 5.14), including a flat containing a financial consultancy service on the second level whose front wall is decorated with steel sliding panels and attractive granite cladding. Another flat on the third level runs English tutorials. Its exterior wall is clad with new brick tiles and modern-looking aluminium windows and doors. A quick glimpse of the interior suggests that its domestic refurbishment is similar to its exterior decoration.

Figure 5.14 (Left) A flat with a financial consultancy in it. (Right) A flat running English tutorials (Photographed by the author, 2016).

When it comes to renovating domestic flats to run family-based retail or commercial activities, the location of the flat is a crucial factor in determining the limitations and opportunities of the renovation process. For example, upper-level flats, particularly those on the fourth level, will have opportunities to construct a 'fifth level', and flats located near staircases also can informally extend their domestic space into landing areas. Flat owners can merge ownership to combine adjacent flats into one. These merges have been occurring for years, along with construction, demolition, and renovation activities done

privately. In section 5.3, I will look at a case where multiple ownership supports the practice of family-based retail in flats.

Figure 5.15 (Left) A builder constructing an additional level with frames made of metal sheets in Block A. (Right) A hair salon has extended its shop premises to the area below a landing of Block A (Photographed by the author, 2018).

Flat exchanges also happen between nearby *Hem* residents and CC residents. According to Mr N, a local resident whose flats will be discussed in section 5.3, there is a locally famous shoemaker and repair workshop located beneath the staircase of Block A owned by Mr T.N, a resident of Block B and one of Mr N's neighbours. Another workshop owned by him is located at house 175/17 Nguyen Thien Thuat Street, a *Hem* intersecting the footpath of Block A (Figures 5.16 and 5.17). The one at Block A is currently managed by Mr T.N's assistant while he uses the workshop at house 175/17 to train his new staff. He has run the shoemaking service at his flat in Block B since the 1980s.
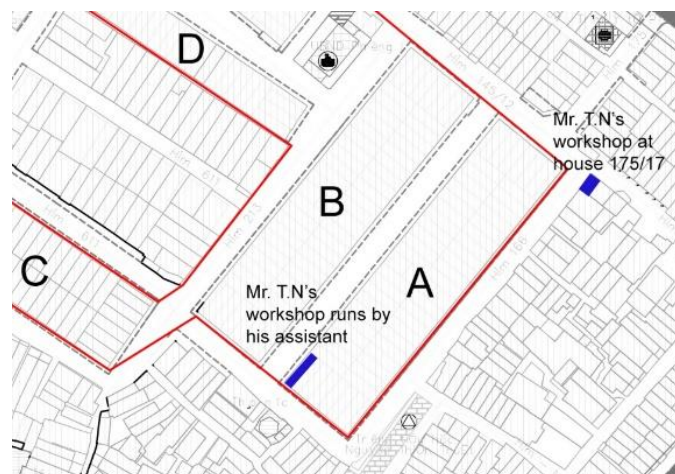
Figure 5.16 The locations of Mr T.N's workshops today (Produced by the author, 2019).

He is famous for affordable prices and skilful, timely, and friendly service.[19] The business flourished in the 1990s and Mr T.N looked for opportunities to expand his workshop space. He noticed the landing on the ground level of Block A was empty, a tactical location conveniently exposed to pedestrian flows. Mr T.N then renovated the landing to be his temporary workshop. As business improved, he renovated the temporary workshop into a permanent one. It is only of about 3-metre width and 2.2-metre depth with the staircase slope being its ceiling. Several built-in shelves are attached to the shop's wall, piled with hundreds of shoes. Repairing and polishing work is done by his assistant along the footpath outside. Sliding panels secure the shop after business hours.

Figure 5.17 The workshops at Block A (Left) and house number 175/17 (Right) (Photographed by the author, 2018).

Flat exchanges between owners are an influential factor leading to construction and renovation activities around CC areas, adapting flats to the needs of family-based retail activities. The retail activities exposed by renovations further reinforce the role of flats, not only as living space, but also as space to generate income.

Mr B, Mr N's neighbour, suggested that these private renovations and flat extensions have been occurring since the 1980s. According to Mr N and Mr B, 'informal' construction and spatial changes to the CC structure occur for two main reasons. Firstly, CC flats are about 35 metres square and too small to accommodate all domestic activities. For example, many families adapt balcony structures to sun-dry laundry, because the flats' designs mean they don't receive enough natural sunlight.

Secondly, many CC residents need space to run family-based businesses at home. Home-based businesses are a dominant source of livelihoods for local residents. These businesses also provide products and services which contribute to and support local livelihoods and the everyday needs of the

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[19] Interviews with Mr N, 2017, 2018 & 2019.

community. They range diversely from tailors, grocers, tutors, beauty salons, appliance repairs, pharmacies, restaurants, to car rentals, to name a few.
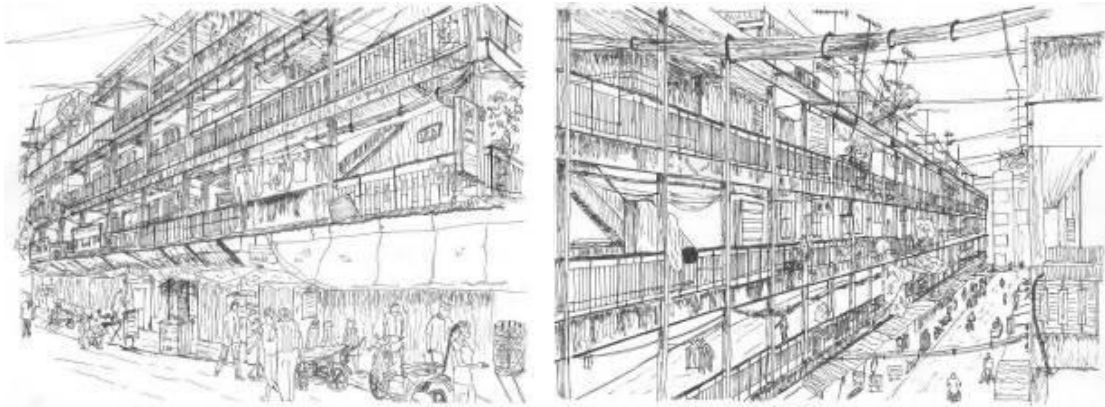
Figure 5.18 Life at Block G (Sketched by the author, 2016)

Spatial changes to the formal structures of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat are visible at every corner of all levels of apartment blocks. To a certain extent, everyday activities supported by these 'informal' structures seem comparable to the patterns of *Hem* life in HCMC, including the extension of domestic spaces and activities into public spaces, providing space for the informal economic activities of street hawkers and vendors and home-based businesses. Intriguingly, local lifestyles seem to have spatially, architecturally, and socially adapted to this foreign built form. Present-day characteristics of the CC are worth carefully observing and studying, because of their positive contribution to residents and the neighbourhood, which are often taken for granted.

Mr N said that these changes are not encouraged by local officials, who claim that these changes negatively affect the structure and appearance of the CC. CC structures are public property, and all building activities require formal permits to be approved by the local government. However, most construction and flat extension has been done without formal permits. This is because the procedures to apply for a permit for structural changes are complicated. Local flat owners like Mr N and Mr B just do it without notifying officials. How do these local building and renovation activities begin? Do shifts in politics affect and influence structural changes, such as the departure of the American-supported government and the arrival of the Socialist government after the Vietnam War ended in 1975? The following section will look at the history of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat and its present-day planning context to give us a better understanding of how local spatial transformation begins and its motivations.

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5.2 The History of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat and Present-day Spatial Transformation
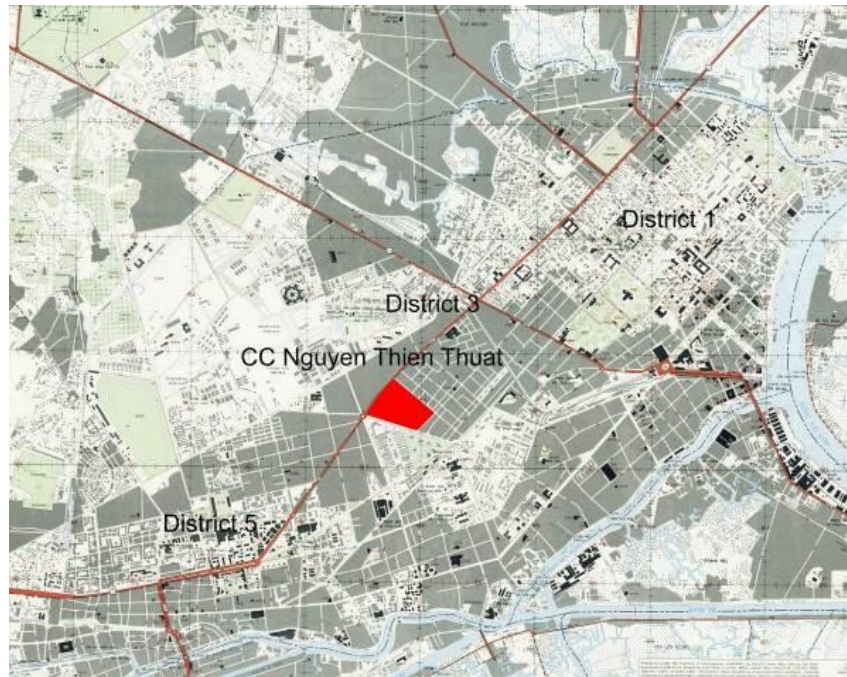
Figure 5.19 Map showing the CC location (Royal Australian Survey Corps, 1964, from the Open Library of the Vietnam Center and Archive of Texas Tech University, 2019)

The CC was built in the early 1970s and comprised eleven four-level blocks with 1,396 flats, intended to provide homes for 4,000 residents (PADDI, 2012, p. 19). According to historian Vu Hong Lien, the Nguyen Thien Thuat area was neglected in the French colonial government's plan for Saigon (Vu, 2013, pp. 11-18). It is believed that this area was first informally settled with self-built thatched houses in a maze-like network of hundreds of *Hem*. In the late 1960s, the Nguyen Thien Thuat area was devastated by the Vietnam War, as seen in the archives of the South Vietnamese Women's Museum.

Figure 5.20 (Left) Smoke coming from the Nguyen Thien Thuat area in 1968. (Right) Experts, consultants, and representatives from the US and Canada on a monthly visit during the construction of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat (From the Louis Weisner Collection, Open Library of the Vietnam Center and Archive of Texas Tech University).

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The construction of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat was part of the US and Canadian governments' redevelopment plan for Saigon to relocate residents who had lost their homes, as well as house the increasing numbers of migrants coming from the nearby provinces (Schenck, 2020, p. 240). The urban grid layout used by the French in the central business district (District 1) was extended to the Nguyen Thien Thuat area, popularly known as *khu ban co* or 'chessboard area' because of its chessboard layout. Blocks of apartments following this grid layout were built on the site of the destroyed informal settlement. The surviving houses and *Hem* were blended into the CC, but were not part of the official management system of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat. The planning style, in between the geometrical grid and the surviving *Hem* networks, explains the unique present-day morphology of the CC area, where privately built areas are randomly scattered between the blocks.

Figure 5.21 The distribution of CC blocks and private land at the present day (From the People's Committee of District 3, 2019).

Figure 5.22 Aerial views of the CC area taken in 1969, highlighted in blue (From the Louis Weisner Collection, Open Library of the Vietnam Center and Archive of Texas Tech University).

The numerous of CC's construction during this period seem to add another architectural influence to the existing urban texture of Saigon, and these massive structures reflected global trends in modernist public housing architecture, typified by Le Corbusier's *unite d'habitation*. The architecture of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat is very similar to its 'siblings' around the City, all with reinforced concrete structures and similar façades. The Nguyen Thien Thuat blocks were built in different sizes. They had some public amenities serving residents, such as parks, grocery stores, medical clinics, cinemas etc. (Thai Nguyen, 2017, p. 114). Blocks A and B, located to the east of the site, are the biggest, each occupying about 2,560 square metres and with 216 flats. The smallest blocks are F1 and F2, located to the south of the site, each occupying about 480 square metres and with 40 flats each.

Figure 5.23 (Left) Public park in front of block D. (Right) View at Block B (From the Open Library of Texas Tech Library, 2012).

The blocks' architecture is similar, with rows of flats accessed through 1.8-metre wide shared corridors running the length of the blocks. In each block, six staircases, four on both ends and two in the middle, provide access to the upper levels. The central staircase of each block features a void encompassing all levels and a small courtyard at ground level, 8 metres long and 5 metres wide. The local streets are approximately 7 metres wide and have 1.5-metre wide footpaths on both sides, which were planned as pedestrian pathways between blocks.

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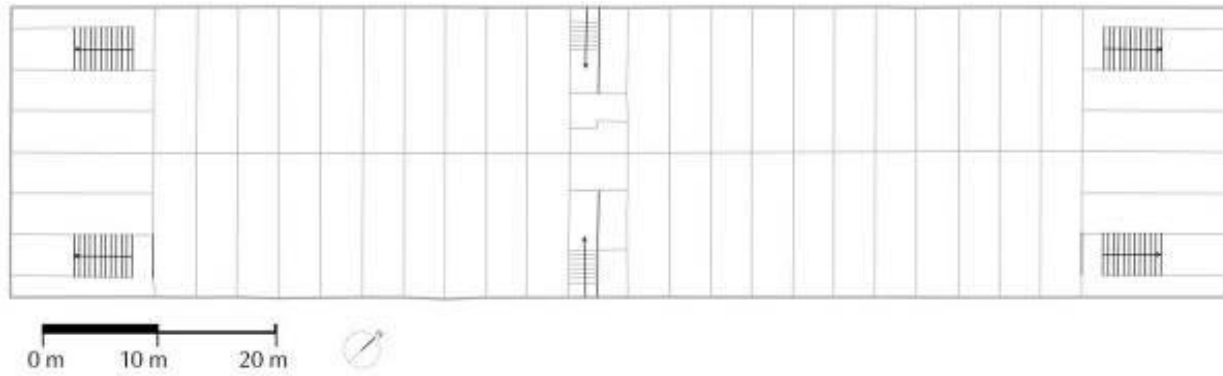
Figure 5.24 Floor plan of the ground level of Block B (Produced by the author, 2019)

A typical CC flat is 3.5 metres wide, 10 metres long, and 2.4 metres high. There are two types of flat layout, a studio-type with the living room merged with the bedroom, and a one-bedroom flat with a separate living room. Flats on ground level have higher ceilings than flats on upper levels, about 3.8 metres. Each flat is equipped with basic amenities, including a kitchen space, a bathroom, and a void for ventilation circulating through all levels. The original layouts of flats have been significantly modified and renovated by flat owners over the years. Spatial changes and structural modifications will be examined in detail by looking at the living and working routines of several flat owners, including Mr N in a studio-type flat and Mr B in a one-bedroom flat.

The end of the Vietnam War and the departure of the USA in 1975 was followed by waves of people leaving their homes for America as refugees, including many who lived in the CC. The Socialist government of unified Vietnam took over the abandoned flats and allocated them to people employed by the new government, applying a subsidised housing scheme – *khu tap the* – which North Vietnam had used since 1960 for their apartment complexes. As in most other parts of HCMC, CCs now provide homes for both existing residents who lived there under the American-supported housing scheme and new residents who came in under the Socialist housing scheme.

During the Socialist subsidy period (1975 – 1986), flat ownership was vested in the State and was not allowed to be privately traded. The government strictly controlled private business. The public park in Figure 5.23 in front of Blocks D, E, and B is now a government building of the People's Committee of Ward 1, completed in the 1980s to monitor and manage the CC Nguyen Thien Thuat area (Figure 5.25). The public square in front of Block G (Figure 5.12), the present-day soccer playground of local children,

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was a *hop tac xa* venue where officials arranged pop-up stalls with subsidised food and clothes for the CC community, Mr N's father revealed.[20]

Figure 5.25 (Left) The office of the People's Committee of Ward 1. (Right) The office is located opposite Block B, on the right (Photographed by the author, 2016).

Despite the strict control of private business under the Socialist ideology (1975-1986), many residents living in CCs still operated home-based businesses in their apartments, mostly small-scale family-based retail activities like tailoring or selling groceries or household appliances, Mr N's father added. I also interviewed Mr H.N, who frequently visited CC Nguyen Thien Thuat in the 1980s. He told me that many ground-level flats in this CC were restaurants, beverage shops, or grocery shops. Owners of these shops made changes to their interior spaces to accommodate their private businesses. For example, owners on the ground level often constructed mezzanine levels as private quarters for their families, so they could run their business from the main floor level, Mr H.N recalled. These structural changes are still prevalent today. Almost every ground-level flat in Blocks A and B has a mezzanine level.

Figure 5.26 A section through the footpath between Block A and B (Produced by the author, 2018)

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[20] Interview with Mr N's father, 2018.

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The history of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat provides an understanding of its spatial transformations at the present day. On the one hand, the monotonous design of CC façades and their simple balcony lines represent the understandable global trend in mass housing to construct large residential blocks to immediately respond to housing shortages, which here were caused by the war. On the other hand, the rush towards CC construction seems to have had severe shortcomings for the living and working routines of their residents. Notable among these issues is the lack of space for running family-based businesses, which have been part of the city's life for centuries. It is vital for CC developers and architects to acknowledge the physical characteristics of CC spaces and the local needs and urban traditions of the city.

The *Doi Moi* policies of 1986 once again encouraged the practice of private business. Informal changes to flat spaces gradually spilled over onto CC exteriors and were seemingly beyond government control. These structural changes were responding to an increase in local population and the number of family-based businesses.

A survey conducted by the Center for Urban Study & Forecast in 2012 (PADDI, 2012, p. 18) estimated that the CC population was almost double that originally intended in the 1970s. At the present day, there are 1,855 households and 7,420 people living in eleven apartment blocks as earlier stated. Most apartments are overcrowded and run-down due to lack of maintenance and occupancy control. Spatial and structural changes, like those to the façade, the added 'fifth levels', the internal mezzanines, and other domestic renovations, were done to immediately expand small flats in response to increasing living standards and the boom in family-based businesses. In some cases, locals go to extreme lengths with self-built extensions which significantly increase their floor areas. Locally, additional structures have been referred as *chuong cop* (tiger cages) or *long chim* (birdcages), according to their size and appearance. The material construction of *chuong cop* and *long chim* usually uses simple techniques of welding or drilling to make steel framing, and then whatever recycled materials are at hand as cladding. Most building has been done by local residents without formal approval from the government. These structures add new architectural layers to the once monotonous apartment blocks, generating various different structural patterns. However, these constructions are arranged via informal negotiations between flat owners that are labelled 'illegal and uncivilised' by the local government.

Figure 5.27 Nguyen Thien Thuat *chuong cop*: (Left) Block C; (Middle) Block A; (Right) *Long chim* at Block C (Photographed and sketched by the author, 2018).

The local government implemented several maintenance programs for CC Nguyen Thien Thuat in the early 2000s. However, these programs have little use in responding to the ongoing overcrowding issue or the dilapidation of infrastructure and spaces for domestic routines and home-based businesses. They aimed to transform the 'messy' *chung cu* back into a more homogenous scene, by demolishing the existing balconies and any structures attached to them, and then replacing them with new balconies. Mr N and Mr B said that Blocks B and A were among the first blocks to receive the government treatment. The different patterns of balconies and extended structures were swiftly demolished and replaced by new steel-railed balconies of the same colour and appearance. Blocks were also repainted in an opal colour (Figure 5.28). Nevertheless, after a few months everything went back to normal and residents reinstalled their shop signs on the newly built balconies, as well as steel bars for drying clothes.

Figure 5.28 (Left) Block B façade. (Right) The blue *Civilised Neighbourhood* banner put up by the local government (Photographed by the author, 2018).

In 2011, the People's Committee of District 3 decided to rebuild CC Nguyen Thien Thuat by demolishing the blocks and the houses in nearby *Hem*. New blocks will be high-rise, clustered into commercial and residential zones, but the nearby *Hem* networks seem to vanish in this plan, and everyday interactions between CC residents and *Hem* communities along the footpaths between the blocks are also not considered. However, proposals for redeveloping CC Nguyen Thien Thuat have ceased yielding practical

outcomes because of disagreement between the CC community and the local government. While many CC residents would be glad to live in improved new flats, the majority, like Mr N and Mr B, are concerned about running their ongoing businesses in the new flats. The new planning and design of residential blocks does not meet present-day lifestyles, because the informal usage of CC spaces is discouraged or banned. Daily cross-interactions between CC levels, business exposure in shared corridors, and mixed uses of public space are replaced by sealed-off glazed façades and cluster zoning for commercial and business activities. Mr Do Minh Long, Director of Urban Management for District 3, said that in order for the proposal to be carried out, it will need 100 percent approval from the CC community (Kien Cuong, 2019).

Figure 5.29 Rendering of the new design proposal for CC Nguyen Thien Thuat (From the People's Committee of District 3)

Examining the history and present-day condition of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat presents contrasting views. *Ad hoc* changes made to the CC structure should be considered more open-mindedly, because monotonous buildings and façades have been adapted to be architecturally and culturally closer to CC lifestyles. This includes the life between CC blocks and nearby *Hem,* where everyday human encounters and retail activities help to foster the bonds of community. While there are concerns over the safety of these local alterations, they nevertheless significantly add character, liveability, and convenience to the daily lives of locals. In addition, the running of private businesses in flats is worth mentioning. They not only contribute to the economic and social spheres of the CC community and the adjacent neighbourhood, they also characterise the resilience of local communities and their ability to hybridise with foreign architecture and planning. In order to understand the resilience of home-based businesses in the CC context, I decided to study several flats in Block B in depth, where locals have been running

private businesses in their domestic flats. I will ask, how does the practice of family-based business spatially, structurally, and architecturally influence renovations and alterations to their flats?

Figure 5.30 (Left) A woman doing her pedicure in the corridor. (Right) A busy afternoon in the *Hem* in front of Block J (Photographed and sketched by the author, 2018).

5.3 Flats 240 and 222 in Block B

Mr N's family – Flat 240

There are at least 900 residents currently living in the 216 flats of Block B, of which 91 flats house family-based retail activities, including 40 at ground level, 18 on the second level, 20 on the third level, and 13 on the fourth level. Mr. N's flat is on the third level.

Figure 5.31 A 3D model of Block B indicating flats running private businesses (in blue) and the location of Mr N's flat (Produced by the author, 2019).

Three people currently occupy the flat: Mr N, who works as a financial advisor for a local company; his father, who is a lecturer in Japanese language; and his mother, who is a teacher at a local primary school and also runs private classes at home. The family migrated to HCMC from Khanh Hoa Province in 1988.

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They purchased the flat from a relative who had been living in CC Nguyen Thien Thuat under the subsidy scheme of the 1980s. The previous owner did not make any substantial changes to the flat interior before selling it. It is a studio-type flat 3.5 metres wide, 10 metres long, and 2.4 metres high. It has a shared space for living, dining, and bedroom at the front, a kitchen in the middle, and a bathroom opposite it. At the back, what was once a void for ventilation circulating through all levels has been filled in to become Mr N's parents' room.

The original size and layout of the flat was not sufficient for the family's needs. Mr N's father suggested that he needed to make some changes to the interior space. He limited the changes to interior spaces, because it is more practical to improve the spaces which the family spend most of their time in.
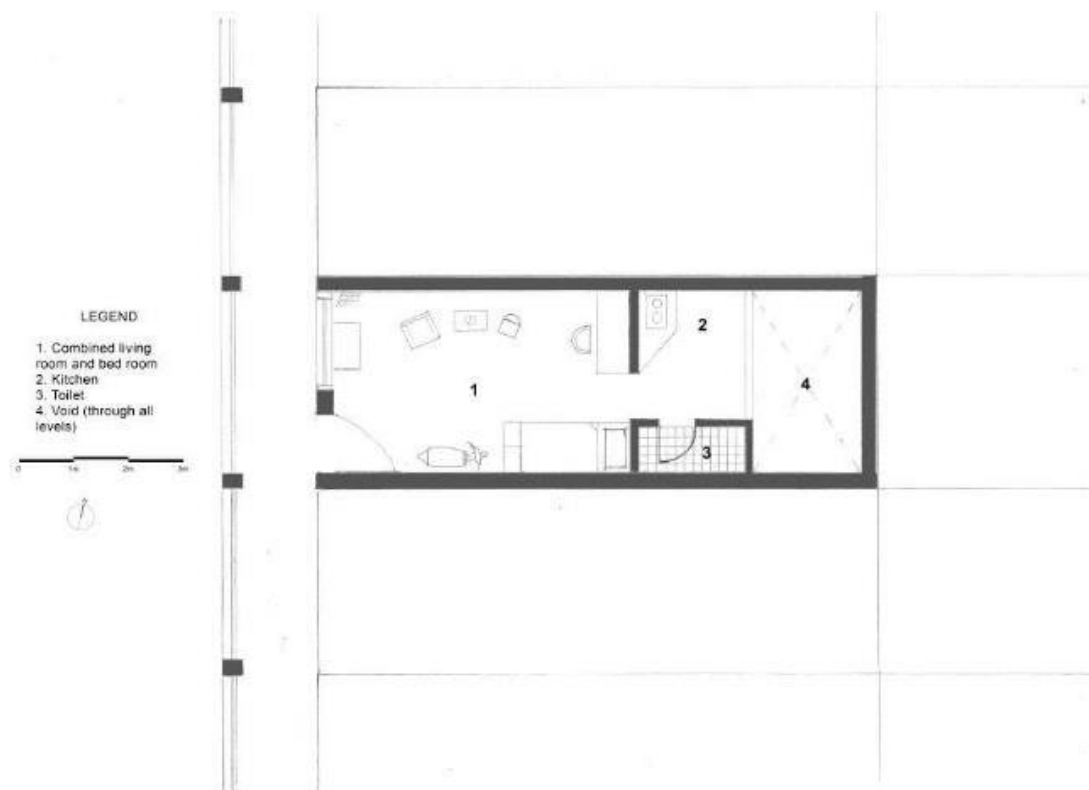
Figure 5.32 Original floor plan of the flat (Produced by the authorfrom descriptions by Mr N, 2018)

When the family first moved in, Mr N's father anticipated that the flat would need an extra bedroom. He asked a local builder to build a light concrete slab over the void at the back of the flat. He then built a 100 mm brick wall to contain the kitchen. Because most other flats also faced the same need to expand their space and most families wanted to fill in the void spaces of their flats, mutual agreements were made to build in the void spaces. The open space for living and dining was divided into smaller spaces by

a wooden bookshelf. The flat now has a living room at the entrance, a combined working and sleeping space for Mr N in the middle next to the kitchen area, and a bedroom for his parents at the back.

LEGEND

1. Living/Teaching room
2. Mr. Nguyen work station and bedroom
3. Kitchen
4. Toilet
5. Bedroom built over void
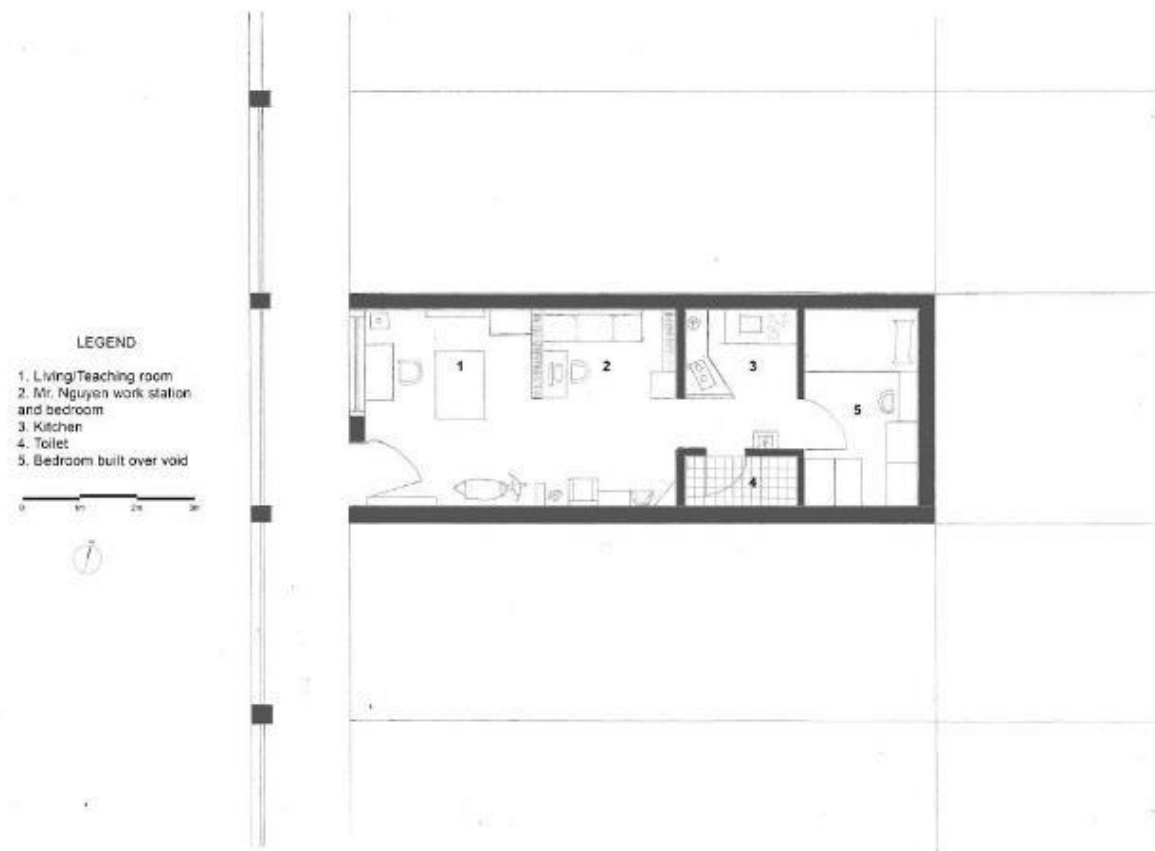
Figure 5.33 Current floor plan (Produced by the author, 2018)

All structural changes and renovation activities were managed by Mr N's father. He suggested that the family not hire any architectural or engineering consultants because they were too expensive for the family's budget. The renovations were done in 1989 and cost more than 20 million Vietnamese Dong (about 1,200 Australian dollars), including retiling the floors, construction of the slab over the void, internal partitions, and some maintenance of the kitchen and toilet areas. Mr N's father asked a local builder to do the job, following his ideas. He also negotiated with the owners of neighbouring flats directly above and below to make sure that they agreed to filling up the voids like he was going to. Both Mr N's father and his neighbours made these changes without notifying local officials, due to the complicated process for getting approvals from the local government. The renovation was completed in the 1990s and has been in continuous use until the present day.

The flat is still small, despite having been renovated and extended. Mr N's family have to make the best use of the open spaces as extra storage and for other functions. Mr N has been using the same desk from high school until the present day. It is big enough to for his computer and an A4-printer for Mr N when he is working at home. Mr. N 'recycled' a wooden sofa from the living room as his bed and installed steel shelves above it to store his paperwork.

Figure 5.34 (Left) Mr. N in his working/living room. (Right) Documents behind Mr N's sofa-bed (Photographed by the author, 2018).

Mr N's parents' bedroom is even more cramped than Mr N's room, only 1.8 metres in length. There is a desk for Mr N's father, who is a Japanese language lecturer, but he rarely uses it nowadays. He tends to work in the living room, but this has to be arranged between Mr N's mother's teaching hours when the living room is temporarily used as a classroom. There are piles of books in almost every corner of the flat, essential academic sources for their daily work. Old textbooks are used for research and teaching, and only reluctantly discarded.

Figure 5.35 (Left) Mr N's kitchen and drying space. (Right) His parents' bedroom (Photographed by the author, 2018).

The kitchen has been renovated several times due to deterioration. The concrete ceiling above the gas stove is blackened by cooking smoke. Hundreds of cooking items spill out of the storage cabinet above the stove and lie on the built-in marble table next to it. There is a metal rail hanging on the ceiling above the kitchen stove for drying laundry. Mr N's mother said that her laundry used to hang outside on the

balcony on steel racks like her neighbours', but shared areas are sometimes used as teaching spaces for her students, so she wants to keep them looking tidy and clean. In order to avoid cooking smells affecting garments, she carefully schedules cooking and drying throughout the week. The lack of space for domestic activities results in inconvenience in everyday life, however, they have learnt to cope with makeshift solutions.

Figure 5.36 (Left) View from the living/teaching room. (Right) The whiteboard for Mr N's mother's tutorials (Photographed by the author, 2016 and 2018).

Most of the routines of Mr N's family are influenced by Mr N's mother's teaching activities. This review of Mr N's flat will continue by looking at how this home-based teaching business has affected the use of CC spaces, both the flats and the public shared corridors.

Mr N's mother has been running tutorials for local primary students outside of school time for more than twenty years. The tutorials take place in the living room, usually between 5 pm and 7 pm, with an average of twelve students per session sitting around a large foldable table. However, the number of students can exceed the average, up to a peak of twenty, especially during examination periods. These extra students make use of the shared corridor as a temporary study space. While a class is on, other family members use other parts of the flat for domestic activities as per usual, such as having dinner or naps. However, they need to do it silently so the students can concentrate on their lessons.

Figure 5.37 Mr N's mother and her students in a Saturday tutorial (Photographed with permission from Mr N's mother, 2018)

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I asked Mr N's mother if her tutorials caused any problems with the neighbours, for example, if students occupied the shared corridor and blocked it, or if her teaching was too loud. She simply said that there had been no complaints at all because CC residents are used to these kinds of activities, which have always happened on every corner and in many flats in Nguyen Thien Thuat. Furthermore, her teaching activities also brought several benefits to other home-based businesses in the blocks. For instance, while waiting for their children, some parents park their motorcycles at the parking service located on the ground level, then shop for groceries and commodities. Some parents wait for their children at local beverage shops, such as cafés and smoothie shops. These shops are located in flats on different levels of Blocks A and B, as well as along pathways between blocks, in shared corridors, or on staircase landing areas, as described in section 5.1. Therefore, flat owners around Mr N's flat accept his mother's teaching and use of shared corridor for her students, because they bring an extra pool of customers as parents wait for their children to finish their tutorial.
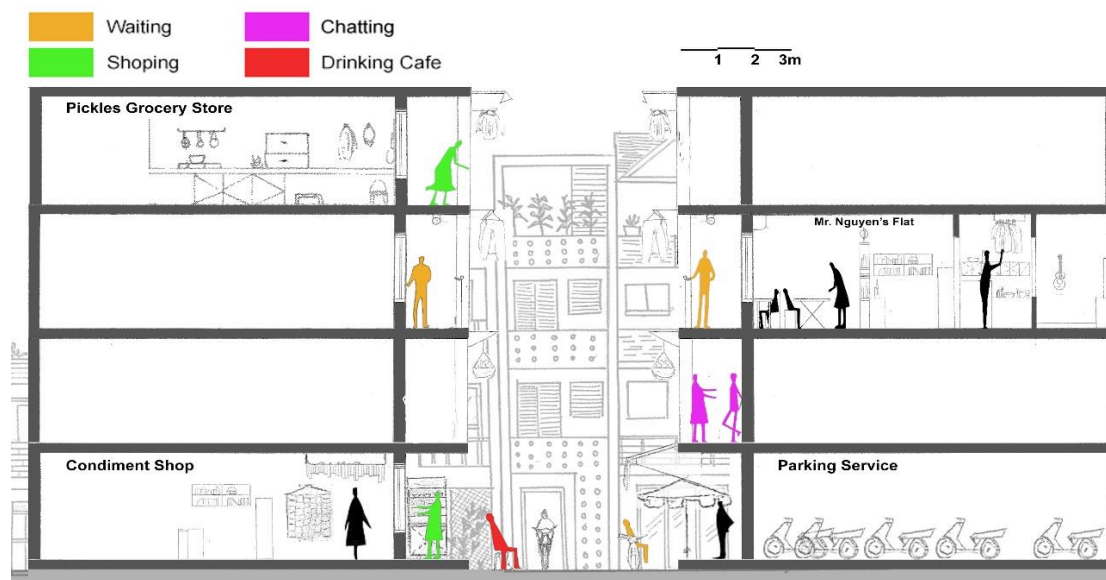
Figure 5.38 Cross-section between Blocks A and B illustrating a tutorial at Mr N's flat and parents' activities while waiting (Produced by the author, 2018).

This illustrates how mutual relationships between home-based business owners in CC flats can support and complement one another. In addition, it shows the resilience of local practices of spatial change, which are exhibited in CC public spaces, structures, and domestic flats. Customers of services at CC flats might consume other goods and services at other flats. For example, flats and public CC spaces hosting beverage stores provide temporary resting places for parents waiting to collect their children attending local tutorials, like in Mr N's flat. Flats nearby are adaptively used as grocery shops, which saves parents some shopping time because they don't need to travel to more distant markets. This ongoing practice of

home-based business sustains the related spatial practices found in CC flats, including structural changes, building extensions, and local-style adaptations of CC public spaces for business and retail activities. Both flat owners and customers appreciate these home-based businesses and so they accept and approve of informal building and construction activities at the neighbourhood level.

These ongoing spatial practices of home-based business further accentuate a local factor, the constructive relationship between flat owners which manifests in their everyday collaboration. Regardless of their flat's locations, flat owners on all levels do not appear to be opposed to informal construction and building activities in their neighbourhood. If they opposed other residents' changes, they might not be able to gain neighbourhood approval for structural changes to their own flats. As earlier discussed, the structural condition of these flats no longer meets present-day living standards. Most flats appear to lack space for living, working, and retail activities, which has caused their renovation, extension, or redesign. Having other flats improve their retail spaces and productivity also potentially brings more customers for all local businesses. This attitude in Ho Chi Minh City's CC context is a local factor which helps flat owners to anticipate and cope with each other's spatial changes.

A brief discussion with Mr N's mother further revealed how the local government has gradually acknowledged local home-based business and its contributions. Over the years, Mr N's mother has attracted more and more students, not only from the CC area. Some local officials who manage the CC area also send their children to her tutorials. Daily interactions between residents seem to prosper and be encouraged in the CC area, even by local officials. This presents an opportunity for formally acknowledgement at the municipal level of the local practice of home-based business and its related spatial practice. Professional designers and CC developers should integrate everyday human needs and encounters, which are reflected in local physical characteristics and alterations, into new proposals for development of CC areas. At the heart of these new design proposals, local officials should deploy feasible policies to encourage residents to anticipate and participate in, not only the design of their own flats, but also of their neighbours' flats. A flexible community attitude has been part of the ongoing practice of home-based business and its spatial practices for decades, shaping both the lived space and lifestyle of the CC community. If local officials managed to use this factor in their design proposals, it would greatly contribute to home-based businesses and their spatial practice along with providing new living spaces for CC residents.

The spatial changes made by local renovations and additions to the original built form of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat not only improve the lifestyle of the CC, but also help reimagine the spatial changes and

practices found in *Hem* spaces, which are the key urban grain of HCMC. Family-based businesses in CC Nguyen Thien Thuat and their symbiotic relationships closely resemble those of the vendors stationed at housefronts along *Hem* paths, as observed in Chapter 4. For instance, many local houseowners tolerate street vendors in front of their houses because vendors help to informally safeguard their homes and may provide cheap commodities to them. The exposure of both domestic and retail activities gives visual cues to vendors, who learn to adapt from these everyday experiences in a tight-knit community. These similarities between the CC and *Hem* contexts suggest two key things. Firstly, that this local factor exists despite the differences of built environment and built form, suggests that it is a tradition of HCMC everyday life. Secondly, this brings lived experience in this foreign built form closer to everyday urban experiences, like those in *Hem* spaces. This means that everyday social and economic life in the CC is not exclusive to the CC community, but also can be accessible to other nearby communities, such as surrounding *Hem* and more distant areas. This accessibility opens the services and businesses in CC contexts to a larger audience, improving the overall lived experience of HCMC's population. I will discuss this factor in more detail in Chapter 7.

Mr B's Family – Flat 222

As mentioned earlier, flat renovations and structural changes are also the results of property trading between flat owners, especially after *Doi Moi* in 1986. The flexibility to be able to exchange flats between residents significantly contributed to the growth of family-based business and retail. If a business becomes more successful over time, residents face the need to increase their flat's capacity to improve the quality of their services. Social integration between CC residents and *Hem* communities is a strategic factor in business success, because it brings more customers for products and services from businesses running in CC flats.

It is thus worth looking at the spatial practices in the CC context, where residents make spatial changes after flat exchanges, or where ownership of several flats has helped with life and business. Mr N recommended me to Mr B, a childhood friend of his, for an insight into family retail activities, as well as flat exchange and renovation.

Mr B's family currently owns two flats, number 238 and number 222. When the family first moved into the CC area from the Cho Lon area (District 5) in 1987, they purchased and lived in flat 238 before making their second purchase, of flat 222, in the early 2000s. The family had six members when they first moved into flat 238 – Mr B, his parents, grandmother, aunt, and brother. Mr B's father was a long-time coffee trader who began his coffee business in Cho Lon in the 1980s. He wanted to live in District 3

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because of its convenience for transport between the City's districts. Mr B's father used to run a small coffee production business at flat 238, a studio-type flat with a similar layout to Mr N's. This proved to be difficult for the family, so he filled in the ventilation void at the back to extend the floor space, but even that was not enough.

After years of working tirelessly producing coffee, the family saved enough to purchase flat 222, only a couple of steps from flat 238. At the moment, flat 238 is home to Mr B's aunt and grandmother, while flat 222 is home to Mr B's parents and himself. His brother migrated to Japan permanently some time after the family bought flat 222. In this section, I will focus on the spatial changes made for family-based retail in the recently purchased one-bedroom flat 222. Some of the renovations and decorations are linked spiritually to the family's belief in the geomancy system of *phong thuy*, as mentioned in Chapter 2. I will only briefly mention several *phong thuy* related structures, before making a proper analysis of how *phong thuy* influences spatial changes to homes and public spaces in a *Hem,* presented in Chapter 6.

Figure 5.39 (Left) Flat 238. (Right) The living room of flat 222 (Photographed by the author, 2018).

One reason that Mr B's father was eyeing flat 222 was its location next to a landing area. "We could potentially make some use of this space," Mr B's father said. The previous owners did not change the layout of the flat because it worked well for them. However, when Mr B's father moved in, he needed space for his coffee workshop, so renovations began. Initially, flat 222 had a bedroom at the back with a window looking into the staircase. The void area here, unlike in Mr N's flat, used to be opposite the toilet, between the living room and the bedroom (Figure 5.40). The living room had a small section for a kitchen, against the wall separating the living room from the void, which facilitated air circulation through all levels of the block.

LEGEND
1. Living room and Dining area
2. Kitchen
3. Toilet
4. Bedroom
5. Void
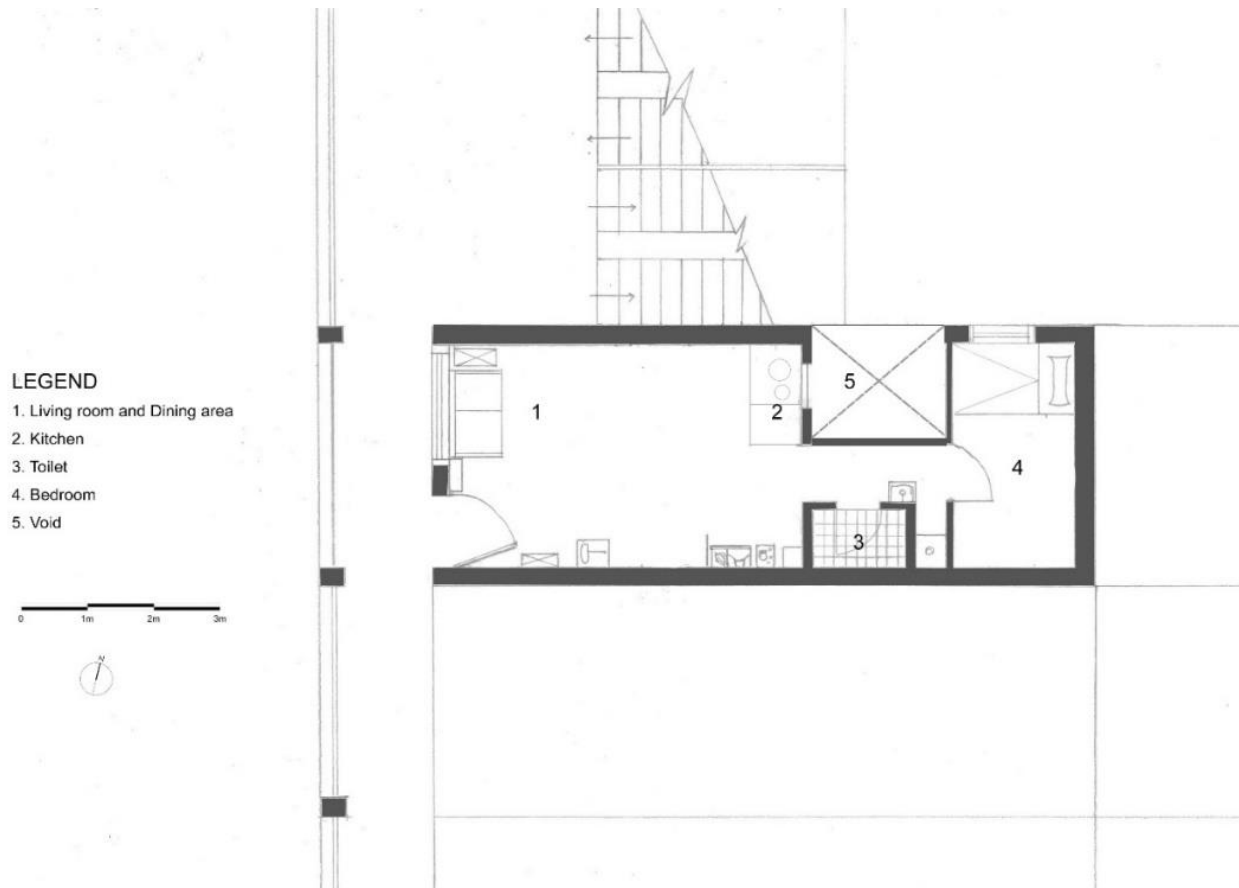
Figure 5.40 The original floor plan of flat 222 (Produced by the authorfrom Mr B's father's description, 2019)

The coffee business of Mr B's father required some space to store his machines and coffee. He also needed a space for Mr B's bed, so he decided to relocate the kitchen area to the void by filling it in. However, the void area lacked structural support for a floor slab. He discussed this situation with the flat owners above and below him. Luckily, they all faced the same need to extend their flats and agreed to collaborate. The owner on the ground level reinforced the foundations and built walls to withstand the structures above. The cost of the foundation work was equally shared between the four families, while individual extensions and construction were paid for separately.

LEGEND

1. Living room
2. Mr. Bao quarter
3. Coffee workshop
4. Kitchen/Laundry
5. Parent's room
6. Drying space
7. Family parking spot
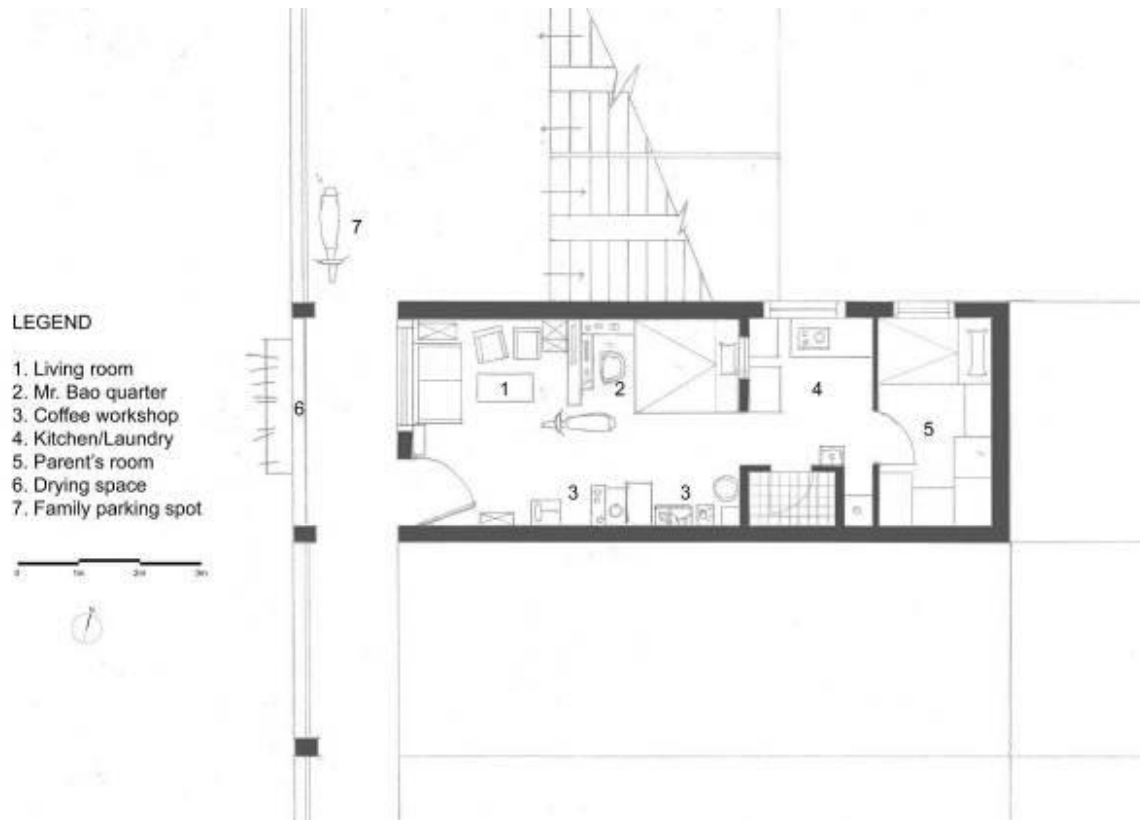
Figure 5.41 Current floor plan (Produced by the author, 2019)

This group of flat owners hired private builders to commence structural changes without notifying local officials for the same reason as Mr N, i.e. the complicated process to get formal approvals. The renovations of flat 222 also included reinforcing the kitchen walls and repainting the flat in a pink colour, which the family says brings luck. Mr B's father also built several spiritual altars around his flats, at entrance doors, above kitchen stoves, and in living rooms. The flat is more spacious after the renovation, and the former kitchen area is now Mr B's bedroom. Coffee machinery, tools, and coffee are now comfortably spread along the length of the living room. The family has also adapted the balconies for drying laundry by drilling in steel racks between the columns. The landing area is used to park Mr B's father's motorcycle, his main transportation for making deliveries to his clients.

Figure 5.42 (Left) Present-day kitchen area. (Right) The laminated boards of the floor of the flat above (Photographed by the author, 2018).

Figure 5.43 (Left) Mr B's father doing laundry. (Right) His motorcycle (Photographed by the author, 2018).

This layout worked well between 2000 and 2010, when Mr B's father was manufacturing at least 30 to 40 kilograms of coffee each day. Fresh beans were roasted by his trading partner, then delivered to his flat where they were ground and packaged for delivery by Mr B's father and his wife. His clients were the coffee vendors around the CC blocks, including those operating informally on the staircase landings and footpaths. The vendors and his neighbours would then recommend his products to others because they were affordable and close to their stalls or shops, Mr B speculated. Eventually, cafés in the *Hem* also started buying his products, and several of them are still loyal customers today. The machinery and tools in his workshop are almost fully manual, and so maintenance is cheap too. The workshop includes two grinders, a plastic wrapping and sealing machine, several baskets for storing coffee, and a scale. There used to be a coffee roaster with a maximum capacity of five kilograms of beans where the washing machine is, opposite the kitchen area, but it was sold three years ago, Mr B's father revealed.

Figure 5.44 Coffee production tools and machinery (Photographed by the author, 2018)

Mr B's father explained that he worked very hard during those years in the early 2000s to cover the expenses of his flat renovation. However, business began to decline when local coffee vendors around CC Nguyen Thien Thuat switched to ready-brewed coffee instead of his ground beans. He still produced coffee, but with a smaller capacity of five to six kilograms per day. Only a few vendors in Block B remained loyal customers, and a few coffee shops in District 1 and 5. He still make coffee with his wife, which they humorously call their 'daily honeymoon'. When I asked Mr B's father whether he had any intentions to run his own coffee shop, he quickly replied yes and showed me the plan. Flat number 220, which is right next to his, 222, is owned by the previous owner of flat 222, who offered Mr B's father the flat for approximately one billion Vietnamese Dong (approximately 60,000 Australian dollars). If the family could purchase flat 220, he intended to renovate it as a coffee shop, and flat 222 would be a combined coffee workshop and living area. Shared walls between the two flats could be demolished to allow easier access between the flats. However, the family has declined the offer because the price is beyond their budget. The changes brought by *Doi Moi*, including the right to run private businesses and to privately own flats, are factors which encourage flat owners to modify their flats, hence impacting the overall structure of the CC.

According to Mr B's family, the rise and decline of this family business were not only caused by practical factors like the new layout needed for business expansion, declining client networks, or changes in consumption and the local market. They believe that *phong thuy* is a key factor determining the success or failure of a business. Above the stove, there is an altar for the Kitchen God and a small bowl full of burnt incenses and ashes, showing that it is frequently used for praying.

Figure 5.45 (Left) The stove and the Kitchen God altar, at top right. (Right) The altar in the living room (Photographed by the author, 2018).

There is another altar built into the ceiling of the living room. Mr B's father believes that the altar helps to mediate the energy in the flat. He also retiled the ceiling area with 10 x 10 cm ceramic tiles in pink because the colour matches the family's *phong thuy* identity. When planning the location of the altar box, Mr B's father carefully checked the layout of the flat above to determine whether that room was used for sleeping or sitting, because that might severely affect the holiness of his altar. Above the kitchen entrance, he hung a large golden depiction of horses running into the flat, which he believes could help his business prosper. He has also hung several paper charms above the door lintel at the flat's entrance which say *ngu phuc linh mang*, 'Five blessings entering the door'. He has installed another altar in the exterior wall 1.5 metres above the ground, dedicated to the Sky God. Mr B's father usually lights up incense before he goes out and delivers his coffee in hopes of a safe journey.

Figure 5.46 (Left) The gold carved horses running into the flat. (Right) An altar and charms in front of the flat (Photographed by the author, 2018).

This study of spatial transformations in CC Nguyen Thien Thuat has highlighted the role of local spatial adaptations as keys to bringing more character and more earnings for the residents. This view is also supported by the historical perspective. The once monotonous façades and structures are now architecturally, culturally, and socially closer to local traditions of family-based retail and home-based workshops in domestic flats. These spatial transformations thrive by informal means, such as informal

agreements between flat owners or exchanges of flats, which are part of day-to-day human interactions between residents. These practices of spatial transformation give the block façades and structures more colour and functionality, but are negatively viewed by local officials due to their lack of homogeneity. The government sees these practices as unsafe, uncivilised, and contrary to construction codes and regulations.

One way for local governments and architects to become more open-minded when looking at these structural transformations and spatial activities is close examination of the living and working routines in the CC and the everyday activities around the blocks. Empirical observations and evaluations would raise professional awareness regarding CC lifestyles and the rationales of local residents who make physical changes to the CC structure. These professionals could then perhaps come up with technical support and design guidelines to accommodate these spatial practices, which bring a unique character to the architecture of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat. If redevelopment plans were based on the pre-existing social and structural conditions, they would help the local economy to thrive.

Finally, the in-depth case studies of Mr N's and Mr B's flats in Block B are clear evidence of the resilience and adaptability of spatial practices in the CC, which stem directly from everyday human activity, experience, and social interactions between local residents. Furthermore, the ongoing practice of home-based business as recorded in CC Nguyen Thien Thuat denote several similarities of those found in *Hem*'s spaces, such as the encroachment of commercial activities onto public spaces, *ad-hoc* style structural changes to existing buildings, a large pool of different business type, and the tight-knit relationship between local business owners. These denote that home-based business and the related spatial practice are parts of the HCMC's urban life and not limited to specific housing typologies, for example, residential houses in *Hem* and CC's blocks. In particular, retail and domestic activities which were recorded in the detailed case studies are paradigm of the home-based business in CC's context. The multi-purpose interior spaces of these flats mean that the experience of home and work coexists which has been perceived by local residents as traditions for decades . In the case of Mr B's flat, spiritual beliefs also had some influence on the renovation process, similarly to Mrs V building a communal worship room in her home. Structural design and alteration under spiritual influences by occupants embodies a transcendence of the functionality of space by the spiritual realm. *Phong thuy* and the related daily rituals which maintain a sense of holiness perceptibly enhance the ways these dwellers perceive their living and working spaces. In the following chapter, I shall travel to several *Hem* in District 5, where local residents have been applying *phong thuy* for home construction and *Hem*'s landscaping.

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Chapter 6. Spiritual Aspects of *Hem* Space in Chinatown, District 5
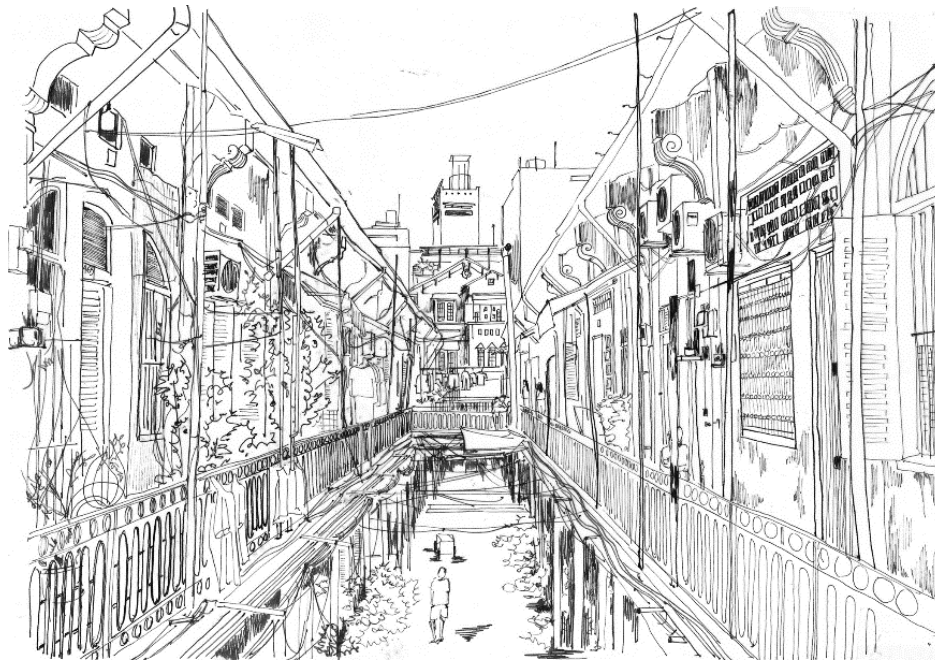
Figure 6.1 View to Hao Sy Phuong from the second level (Sketched by the author, 2018)

My encounters with *phong thuy* practice occur when Master Thanh visit to my family shop. His visits usually occur monthly and are requested by my mother. His consultation helps to ease my mother worries about the family business, as well as the health of family members. For example, master Thanh usually suggests that my mother put up different charms and decorations around the shop. These charms are placed for specific durations which depend on the month. These encounters giving me first-hand experience of the influence of *phong thuy* practice on interior architectural design, and its role in all aspects of family life, including business, personal health, and renovations.

This chapter examines *phong thuy* and spatial practices via analysis of the physical characteristics and human activities of a *Hem* of the Chinatown of HCMC, Cho Lon. This *Hem* is commonly known as Hao Sy Phuong and is one of the most historic *Hem* in the City. The investigation includes the application of *phong thuy* to physical changes, decoration, and design, including local usage of public spaces, ritual activities, and *phong thuy* customs. My experience from my preliminary field trip in 2017 was that the local community had mutual respect for and belief in *phong thuy* practices, even though the residents came from different ethnic backgrounds (Teochew, Cantonese, and Vietnamese). Furthermore, the

physical and historical characteristics of several landmarks around Hao Sy Phuong, such as the *Hem* entrances, gateways, communal paths, and public altars, are important in the *phong thuy* beliefs and practices of residents of this *Hem*. For many residents, the physical characteristics and orientations of these public structures are vital to achieving desirable *phong thuy*. The investigation will reveal how individual and community attitudes to *phong thuy* have shaped the spatial landscape of Hao Sy Phuong. Physical building changes under *phong thuy* influences in Hao Sy Phuong are most apparent in the alterations, (re)design, and renovation of local house façades and front areas. The first section of this chapter will hence focus on spatial *phong thuy* practices on building exteriors.

As suggested in the literature review about *phong thuy* practices in Chapter 2, *phong thuy* is also involved in changes to the living and working spaces of houses. The second section of this chapter will look at *phong thuy* practices at the domestic and interior level. It will closely examine the influence of *phong thuy* on interior layout, domestic fittings and decorations. I will investigate the interior architecture of a house owned by Ms P.G, who is Chinese-Vietnamese and has substantially applied *phong thuy* to construct and decorate it.

Figure 6.2 Charms and decorations in the living room of Ms P.G's house (photographed by the author, 2018).

Throughout this chapter, the investigation will cut through different spatial layers of the built environment of the *Hem*, for instance, its public spaces, built structures, house fronts, and domestic areas. It also aims to understand the lived experience of *phong thuy* users via the examination of the interrelationship between the *phong thuy* beliefs of users and practitioners, their interior architectural alterations, and their personal identities (date of birth, ethnic background, family traditions and customs). How can spatial practice be accessed and evaluated via the practice of *phong thuy*? How has *phong thuy* been used to improve the quality of living and working spaces physically? What are the human activities, such as daily rituals and worshipping, which are incorporated in *phong thuy* practice

and spatial changes? How does *phong thuy* connect residents, their buildings, and public *Hem* spaces, and help residents to better understand the everyday spaces where they live and work? The findings and understandings emerging in this chapter will help to inform the argument that *phong thuy* and its related spatial practices are key contributors to the wellbeing of the community, as well as reflecting the personal identities of individuals.

6.1 *Phong Thuy* Aspects of Hao Sy Phuong

As suggested from the contextual review in Chapter 1, *Hem* in Cho Lon are commonly known by specific names. The generic *Hem* is also *Phuong, Ly, Hang,* or *Kieu* in different Chinese dialects. Different names are also attached to refer to the historical, ethnic, or mercantile background of the community which first resided there. Hence, each *Hem* also has its own unique public structures and landmarks to celebrate and commemorate local traditions, ethnic backgrounds, and histories. This section will begin by giving some historical background of the area, which will help to identify the key landmarks and public structures of Hao Sy Phuong and to examine how local *phong thuy* practice uses the physical characteristics, orientations, and locations of these structures.

According to the journalist Dinh Nguyen (2018, pp.229-235), the housing and ground-plans of *Hem* Hao Sy Phuong (present-day *Hem* 206 Tran Hung Dao Street) stem from the early 1910s, when a businessman named Hao Sy developed the area for his soap-making employees in a local detergent factory. Hence the area was named after him. The word *Phuong* means *Hem* in a Chinese dialect, so the local community refers to the area as Hao Sy Phuong. The original community was mainly of Teochew ethnic background, and their families have preserved their traditions and heritage for generations. For example, Teochew dialects are still used in everyday conversation and worship of the Teochew deity, which will be described later, is still practised.

Dinh Nguyen (2018, p.330) suggests that the 100-year-old Hao Sy Phuong is one of the few *Hem* in Cho Lon which has retained its historic architectural features and landscape with little change. The *Hem* is a communal courtyard shared by 27 two-storey houses on both sides, divided into a total of 53 flats, 26 on the ground level, and 27 on the second level. The courtyard is about 81 metres in length and 5 metres in width. There are two main entrances to Hao Sy Phuong, located at the south and thr east of the site. Each entrance features a staircase leading to second-level flats. These flats have a shared corridor of 1.5-metre width, with concrete slabs creating a veranda space for flats below. The observations from my field trip suggest that these veranda spaces have been adaptively used as communal space, in particular,

for senior residents to gossip and relax on their lounge chairs. They are also 'kitchen' spaces where some housewives prepare meals for their families.

The present-day demographics of Hao Sy Phuong have changed because in recent decades several families have relocated to elsewhere in HCMC and new residents have moved in as permanent residents. Mr C, a local resident current residing at flat number 17, talked about these changes. According to him, Hao Sy Phuong's ethnic mix now comprises Teochew, Cantonese, and several Vietnamese families.[21] New residents have redesigned and renovated their flats to match their own decoration tastes and styles, which can be seen by looking at the flat façades, now in different styles and colours. "I do not mind those changes to our Hao Sy Phuong as long as we respect each other life and spaces," Mr C added.
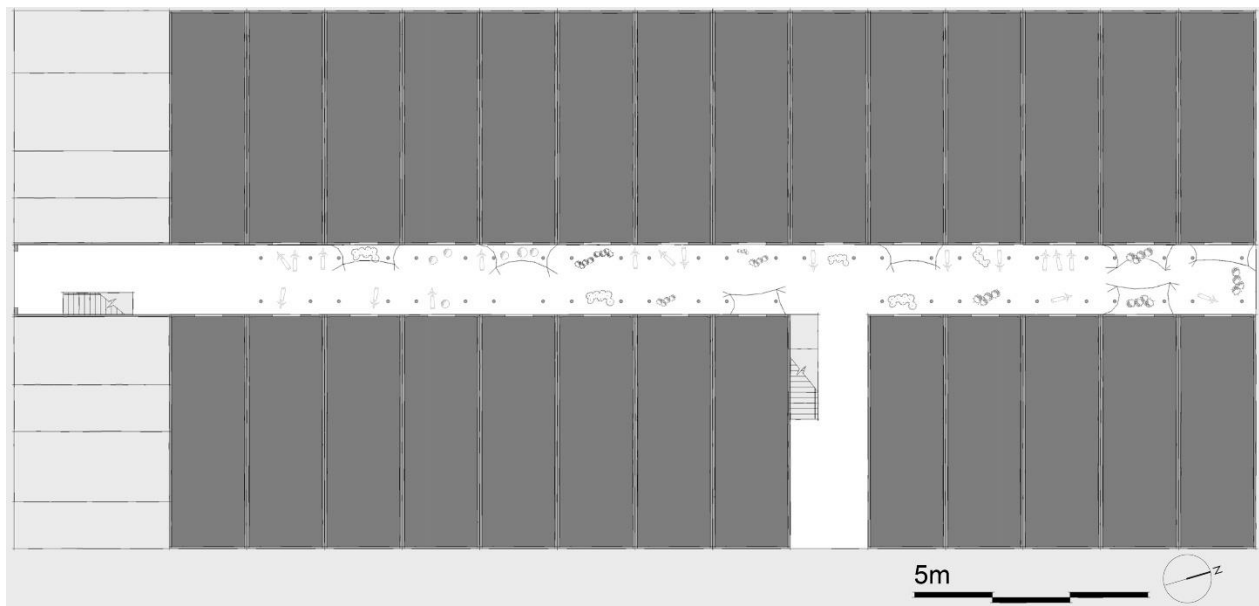
Figure 6.3 Site plan of Hao Sy Phuong (Produced by the authorfrom a GPS map of HCMC's architectural planning documentation, 2018)

When scrutinising the façades of both old and new flats, their designs and decorations seem to repeat similar patterns. There are two altars constructed in the same way, one on the ground and the other directly above. At the entrance of each flat, various ornaments and objects are hung or glued at the door's lintel, including paper amulets and octagonal-shape reflective mirror, or known as *bat quai* mirrors.

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[21] Interview with Mr C, 2018.

Figure 6.4 *Bat quai* mirrors hung above door lintels (Photographed by the author, 2018).

The placement of charms and construction of altars on flat façades is due to a shared belief that one of the entrances to Hao Sy Phuong is a bad luck area haunted by evil spirits, according to Mr C. These charms, talisman, and structures make residents feel protected and safe. The structure and decoration of the altars built into local façades are almost identical to those of communal altars located near Hao Sy Phuong's entrance. Many residents dedicate specific times of the day to taking care of their altars at home, as well as the communal one.

What makes these talisman, decorations, and structures significant, physically and spiritually? How do their symbolic meanings relate to each other? How are these incorporated into the construction, renovation, and design of local façades? What are the meanings of the related ritual activities performed near them? Moreover, what are the meanings of these rituals, charms, and structures in *phong thuy* beliefs and practices? How are these meanings and practices linked with the public spaces, physical condition, and local landmarks of Hao Sy Phuong in *phong thuy* practice? The following sections will address these questions by investigating the structures, building details, and decorative items of flats and public spaces in Hao Sy Phuong, including the gateways into Hao Sy Phuong, the characteristics and structures of flat façades, and the notable altars seen on façades.

To gain an empirical understanding of *phong thuy* beliefs and how they influence the lived experience and routines of local residents, this investigation looks at the spatial routines involved, such as daily rituals, maintenance, and community attitudes toward each other's spiritual spaces and structures. The analysis of these *phong thuy* practices then helps to reveal how local residents perceive their everyday built environment and their motivations for commencing spatial changes and practices necessary under *phong thuy* beliefs. This understanding of the local experience and practice of *phong thuy* will explain how it has been used as a tool to improve the living and working spaces of residents.

Figure 6.5 The façade of a second-level flat (Photographed by the author, 2019)

The Gateways to Hao Sy Phuong

As mentioned earlier, the identity of each *Hem* in Cho Lon is shown in its name, which is marked at its entrance with the construction of a gate (Dinh Nguyen, 2018, p.230). The name reflects the background of the community, such as its ethnicity, village of origin in China, religious beliefs, or mercantile background. These backgrounds further influence the design of the gateway into the *Hem*, which usually includes a concrete plaque engraved with the *Hem* name and columns on both sides. Taking care of these gateways fosters a sense of community, especially if they represent the community's religious or spiritual beliefs. In such cases, residents would consider these structures their 'spiritual guardians' which bless good fortune and prevent bad luck, protecting life and nourishing local business (Dinh Nguyen, 2018, pp.220-223).

Figure 6.6 (Left) the southern gateway to Hao Sy Phuong. (Right) The eastern entrance (Photographed by the author, 2018)

There are two entrances to Hao Sy Phuong, one at the south from Tran Hung Dao Street and the other at the east from Ngo Quyen Street. Each entrance is a tunnel-like walkway of different lengths. Some upper-level flats run the length of these entrances. The southern entrance is the main one, about 20 metres long and 5 metres wide, whereas the eastern entrance is more spacious, about 30 metres long and 7 metres wide.

The southern entrance still reflects the characteristics of a typical Cho Lon *Hem* gate. The Chinese text for Hao Sy Phuong, made of steel and painted vermillion, is hung on the steel mesh underneath the concrete bowl supporting an upper-level balcony (Figure 6.6). On the eastern entrance, there is no concrete plate, just a makeshift mica board with paper texts glued onto it. I also noticed several lanterns hung at both entrances and two small altars with smouldering incense in ceramic bowls. What has created the differences between these two gateways of Hao Sy Phuong? What is the purpose of the lanterns and altars? I spoke to Ms T, a vendor running a beverage shop along the length of the eastern entrance who is also a Hao Sy Phuong resident, in flat 26 on the ground level.

Figure 6.7 (Left) The lantern above the altar to the left. (Right) Another lantern above Ms T's beverage shop (Photographed by the author, 2019)

Ms T revealed that changes to the gateways have occurred in recent years. The steel mesh with Chinese text on the southern entrance was not the entrance's original form, where the *Hem* name was carved into the old concrete bowl above the gate (Figure 6.8). Since the *Hem* was built almost 100 years ago, the text has decayed. The community hired a local metal artisan and instructed him to cut the steel text using the typography of the original and hang it on steel mesh below the concrete bowl. The new gate was completed in 2010 to pay homage to the 100th anniversary of the *Hem*. The construction costs were self-funded by the Hao Sy Phuong community. The mica board on the eastern gateway was a gift from a Chinese film-making crew after they finished shooting at Hao Sy Phuong in 2016 (Figure 6.8). The community is proud of being internationally known from the movie, and the mica board reminds them

of this. Local efforts to restore gateway structures are based on the desire to preserve Hao Sy Phuong's identity through these local landmarks.

Figure 6.8 (Left) The original concrete text of Hao Sy Phuong; (Right) Film-crew from Hong Kong in 2016 (collected from Dinh Nguyen, 2018, p.230 and Kenh14, 2016[22])

The significance of the gateway also extends to local beliefs. The lanterns and altars found along the entrances and gateways of Hao Sy Phuong are linked to the community's everyday activities within these spaces. Ms T and several locals, including Mr C, whom I interviewed, said that these items are part of ongoing local spiritual beliefs dating back generations.
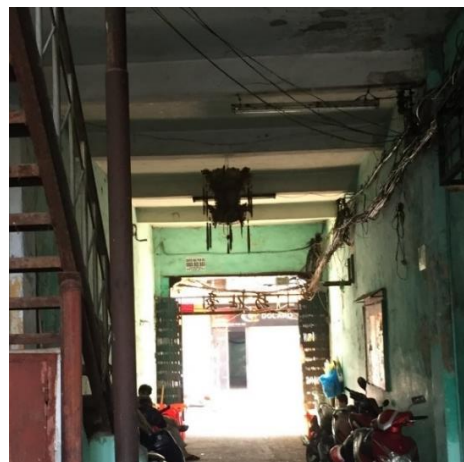
Figure 6.9 (Left) Altar and lantern at the eastern entrance (Photographed by the author, 2018).

Ms T and Mr C said that when Hao Sy Phuong was constructed in 1910, the eastern side of the *Hem* was believed to be a graveyard haunted by evil spirits which could have brought illness and misfortune to local businesses. According to their parents, there was talk of business going through challenges and hardships because of the 'haunted' site nearby. Another local tale is that the community hired a local

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[22] Retrieved from: https://kenh14.vn/cine/sao-tvb-quach-tan-an-huynh-duc-ban-chu-than-le-duoc-fan-bat-gap-quay-phim-tai-cho-lon-20160402183733386.chn

geomancer to analyse the *phong thuy* of the site. The geomancer suggested that they should build several shrines dedicated to their deity Bao Zheng, a Chinese politician and judge of the Song Dynasty in the 10th Century who is widely honoured as the symbol of justice in the Chinese culture. Despite there being no formal records to prove these rumours and tales, the majority of present-day residents still firmly believe these stories. The most apparent evidence of this is the daily performance of rituals by the local community at the Bao Zheng altars near the entrances. In addition, many residents have constructed altars within their homes dedicated to the worship of Bao Zheng, including some of my interviewees for this research, Mr C, Ms T, and Ms P.

Figure 6.10 Bao Zheng altar at the assembly hall (*hoi quan*) Ha Chuong, about 500 metres from Hao Sy Phuong (Photographed by the author, 2018)

There were initially two shrines to Bao Zheng in Hao Sy Phuong. They were demolished in 1980 and 1990 by the government, according to Mr C.[23] He said that the demolitions were due to spiritual beliefs not being supported by government policy during the strict Socialist period (1975-1986). The first shrine used to be near the eastern entrance which is now an abandoned outpost and used as a communal storage area. This outpost was built by the People's Committee of District 5 for official monitoring and administration of local activities. The second shrine was located in front of flat 33, an area now used as a private parking space for flat 33.

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[23] Interview with Mr C, 2019.

Figure 6.11 (Left) The location of the first shrine, today an abandoned outpost. (Right) The second shrine was formerly in front of flat 33 (Photographed by the author, 2019).

The community reconstructed the shrines with smaller altars and attached them to the nearby walls and columns. The altars are very similar. Each is an L-shaped concrete structure finished with pink ceramic tiles, with a square base of about 25 centimetres. On each altar, there is a vertical tablet inscribed with Chinese text and a ceramic censer decorated with Chinese dragon patterns and filled with sand.
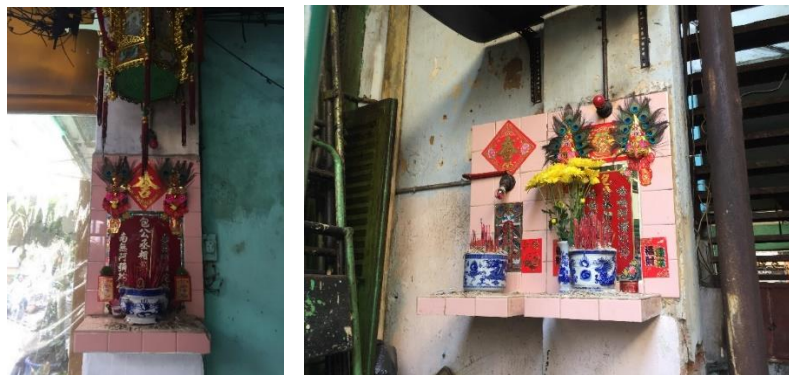
Figure 6.12 (Left) The Bao Zheng altar near the eastern entrance. (Right) The one at the southern entrance (Photographed by the author, 2019).

The locals frequently visit the Bao Zheng altars. I observe more than twenty burnt sticks of incense plunged into the censers, suggesting that they are regularly attended. The altars bring holy presences to the gateways and Ms T says that local residents, including herself, worship them as the abode of their deity Bao Zheng. The incense sticks are burnt as offerings to the deity. Worship is repeated daily and Ms T usually does it at noon. As we are discussing the altars, Ms T briefly leaves the conversation to perform her ritual. She holds a few incense sticks and stands in front of the altar near the eastern entrance and, with eyes closed, quietly chants in her Chinese dialect. Despite scooters constantly going in and out of the *Hem*, she prays undisturbed as they slow down to pass her.
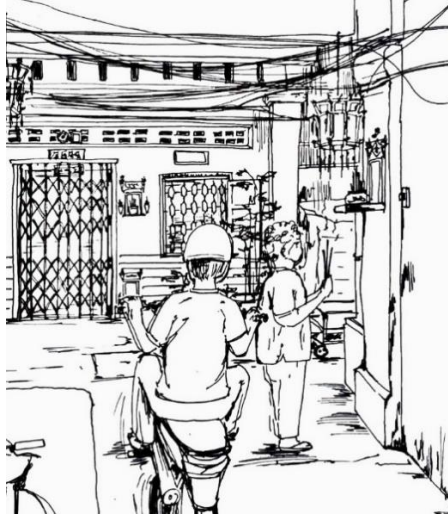
Figure 6.13 Ms T praying in front of a Bao Zheng altar as a motorcycle passes (Sketched by the author, 2018)

When Ms T returned to her shop, I resumed the discussion with her and she revealed that lighting incense at Bao Zheng's altar helped her feel protected from the bad luck that is believed to come from the graveyard formerly located at the eastern entrance. Ms T continues that other locals also come here and pray if their family members have fallen ill, or just to receive blessings to overcome life's hardships. She also opens up about the purpose of the lanterns, which are not only used to light the gate at night, but also to relieve the gloomy ambience of the entrances. The light of the lanterns mimics the holy aura of the godly saint Bao Zheng, adding a sense of holiness to the altars and also deterring the bad fortune believed to be brought by evil spirits.
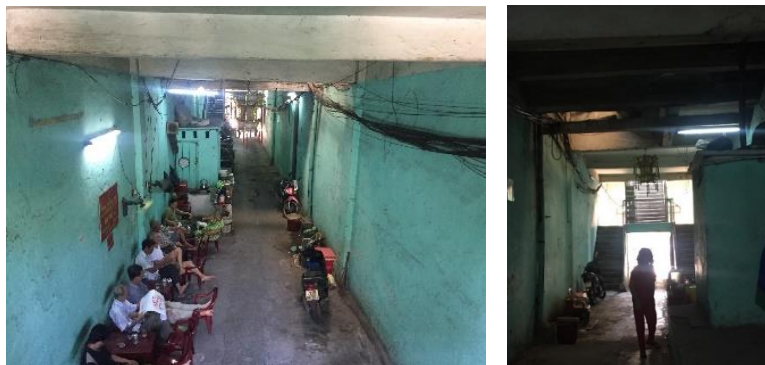
Figure 6.14 (Left) Ms T's beverage shop. (Right) Ms T returned to her shop after praying (Photographed by the author, 2019).

It is also a routine for Mr C to light incense and make offerings whenever he struggles with his business. Notably, the orientation of the eastern entrance leads directly into his flat and he is always concerned about the *phong thuy* aspects of the entrance. For Mr C, worshipping at the altar has been a way to

lighten some of his everyday worries. I will look further at the *phong thuy* impact of the eastern entrance on Mr C's flat in the following section.

It seems that the local community of Hao Sy Phuong hold the exclusive 'spiritual rights' to take care of these altars, including lighting the incense and cleaning up the altars. The gateways of Hao Sy Phuong are more important than just their physical functions of providing access between the *Hem* and the public streets. The gateways provide a sense of spiritual security, and without the altars the community might feel vulnerable to the 'demonic force' coming from the eastern entrance. As discussed earlier in Chapter 2, the purposes of worshipping deities derive from various basic needs of everyday life, for example, to gain health for overcoming illness, or to be lucky and prosper in business (Phuong Tran, 2017, p. 80; Trang, 2013, pp. 6-8).

In fact, gateways and entrances have always provided a sense of spiritual protection in Vietnamese settlements, such as in the traditional villages of Vietnam. In the book *Village Architecture in Hanoi*, Phuong Dinh suggested that village life could be characterised by the everyday activities of villagers at their gateways, such as performing ceremonies, gathering, and trading (2010, p. 27). Villagers also consider their gates to be spiritual protectors. The architecture of village gates differs in decoration, structure, and style. Their spiritual roles can be observed in village ceremonies and ritual activities. For instance, villagers usually enter through the gate whenever they return to the village to pay their respects, and pallbearers lower the coffin outside the village gate as an expression of respect (Phuong Dinh, 2010, p. 27).

Figure 6.15 (Left) Gate of Yen Thai Village. (Right) Gate to *Hem* 714 Nguyen Trai Street, known as Tue Hue Ly (From Phuong Dinh, 2008, p.27 and photographed by the author, 2018)

Although the gateways of *Hem* in Cho Lon like Hao Sy Phuong and those of Vietnamese villages are of different forms, styles, and architecture, understanding local activities of worship and other rituals helps to better grasp the local community's feelings about their gateways and entrances. This understanding

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helps to decode the symbolic meanings and spiritual roles of gateways in the everyday life of the community, and hence to identify the uniqueness of the *Hem*. The gateways of Hao Sy Phuong are unique amongst the *Hem* of HCMC. Spatial practices at the entrances of other *Hem*, such as *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang (Chapter 4), or the entrances to CC Nguyen Thien Thuat (Chapter 5), are more related to trading and commercial activities. In other *Hem*, there are banners which signal the beginning of the *Hem*, but the entrance areas are often occupied by street vendors, local businesses, and stalls engaged in commercial and trading activities. The need for commercial and trading space is more relevant in these *Hem*, while the need to be spiritually protected against the former graveyard at the eastern entrance is more relevant in Hao Sy Phuong, due to local spiritual beliefs specifically associated with the geography of the site. It is critical to respond to local needs, either commercial or spiritual, because doing so will improve livelihoods and wellbeing and increase the sense of comfort and security of the community.

Even though the folk beliefs regarding Hao Sy Phuong's gateways as negative forces lack the evidence needed to be seen as fact, having spaces for local residents to perform ritual activities, like the altars at the gateways, seem to temporarily 'heal' local concerns about the negative aspects of the gateways. These beliefs may be superstitious, but they have persisted among Hao Sy Phuong residents. The spaces for worshipping Bao Zheng and the other altars provide spiritual and social meaning to the Hao Sy Phuong community. Gateways are adapted physically and used for ritual activities, which in turn provide a sense of spiritual comfort and security and improve community and individual wellbeing. Mentally, the beliefs about the haunted eastern gateway are part of Hao Sy Phuong's traditions. The continuous practice of traditional worship activities results in the community preserving the structures of the gateways, culturally, spiritually, and socially strengthening the image of the community.

When I asked Ms T and Mr C if the government had initiated any strategies to preserve the physical characteristics and elements of gateways, such as altars, banners, columns, spaces for ritual practices etc., they said that most initiatives come from the community. The government may not share the beliefs about the 'haunted' graveyard at the eastern entrance, but any feasible strategy to commence renovation of Hao Sy Phuong infrastructure, including the gateways, will require officials to understand these beliefs. It is crucial for local government to preserve the character of Hao Sy Phuong's gateways as important landmarks contributing to local wellbeing and identity.

Spiritual Façades: Charms and Ornamentation in *Phong Thuy* Practices

If the entrances and gateways of Hao Sy Phuong can be understood as spiritual supports for community life and needs, the question arises as to whether local house façades also have any spiritual function. Their architectural purposes are very similar in terms of separating territories. Hao Sy Phuong's entrances and gateways are structures marking off the area from other communities of Cho Lon. Local front door areas and flat façades use structures to separate domestic areas from exterior spaces, as well as divide the territory of neighbours. My observations of the physical characteristics of Hao Sy Phuong house fronts and façades suggest that they have been 'ritualised' by attaching ornaments and charms. Almost every house in Hao Sy Phuong has two altars built into the façade next to the entrance doors. They look very similar to the Bao Zheng altar at the *Hem* entrances. Door lintels here display a variety of paper amulets and spiritual objects. This section will look at the *phong thuy* aspects of the architecture and façades of houses in Hao Sy Phuong, including a detailed examination of a local house, flat 17, owned by Mr C, who is of Chinese background. The examination will focus on the spatial practices of local residents and their *phong thuy* practices and their influence on architectural changes of house façades, house front usage, and public space in Hao Sy Phuong.

Figure 6.16 (Left) A typical façade of Hao Sy Phuong (Photographed by the author, 2019)

Before going on to the examination of *phong thuy* practices, a brief introduction to a typical façade and its physical characteristics is necessary. This will help to understand how and why some typical characteristics of house façades have been preserved or changed due to *phong thuy* beliefs. The typical

façade of a Hao Sy Phuong house is about four metres wide and six metres high, with an entrance door in the middle, two adjacent sidelight windows with tops of half-arch shape, and wooden louvre shutters. The entrance door usually comprises several louvred wooden panels, two on the bottom with an offset of 600 mm above the ground and two on the top running the full height of the door frame. There are ventilation holes above the door and windows. Façades often feature *art déco* style corbels jutting out which support shared roof structures on the second level and the corridor above the ground floor flats.

Figure 6.17 Some variations of façades (Photographed by the author, 2019)

According to Dinh Nguyen (2018, pp. 210-217), these façade features have prevailed since Hao Sy Phuong was built in the 1910s. Functionally, the louvred doors allow natural ventilation flow. This design allows further sunlight into the interior through the windows above the door and sidelights, so that the interior is well ventilated but not overheated by Saigon's scorching sun. Many families of Hao Sy Phuong have renovated their flats, including the façades. Despite their façade changes displaying a contrasting mix of old and new architectural styles, most Hao Sy Phuong's house owners still appreciate these original features and have incorporated them into their renovations, which indicates that the original façade design responds well to the local weather.

Many renovations and (re)designs of house façades are also done under the influence of local *phong thuy* beliefs. Front walls might be repainted in different colours or reconstructed to suit not only the personal tastes of local households, but also in many cases, like Mr C's, the new colours and decoration of local façades are believed to bring good luck to their lives. Mr C said that in any architectural renovation, the placement of doors and openings in the façade always receives great concern, attention, and effort from residents. They always ensure there is enough space on their lintels and façades to hang spiritual charms and ornaments. Furthermore, house renovations in Hao Sy Phuong have mostly concentrated on façades due to the physical condition of the local houses and the *Hem*. Most Hao Sy

Phuong flats have similar interior layouts whose overall structural condition is too poor to undertake substantial domestic renovations. For this reason, most residents, including Mr C, avoid any domestic extensions and most structural changes for *phong thuy* reasons are made to exteriors and façades. Thus, observing local changes and spatial practices around house façades may provide insight into the experience, beliefs, and rituals of local *phong thuy* practice.

Figure 6.18 Elevation of local façades (Produced by the author, 2019)

In *China's Living House*, the anthropologist Ronald Knapp notes that doors and house entrances are traditionally believed in Chinese culture to be a border where good luck is welcomed and evil forces are expelled (1999, pp. 40-70). Huynh Ngoc Trang (2013, pp. 85-100) and Phuong Dinh (2010, pp. 84-87) add that similar beliefs are also commonly shared by Vietnamese *phong thuy* believers, who regard residential entrances and doors as their spiritual protectors against bad luck. Doors, windows, and other openings on exteriors and façades are also key architectural elements of the *phong thuy* status of the site (Phuong Dinh and Groves, 2010, p. 14).

Figure 6.19 (Left) a pair of chicken feet hung as a protective charm. (Right) A bunch of herbs hung on the right side of the entrance door (Photographed by the author, 2019).

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Author Derham Groves (2011, p.60) explains that charms are often used as spiritual 'devices' that help channel good luck into the house and deflect bad luck or evil spirits. They take various forms, including everyday objects like scissors and fans. Intriguingly, the charms found in Hao Sy Phuong are much more mundane items, such as a pair of chicken feet or a bunch of herbs (mugwort, gleditsia, lemongrass, magnolia flowers, basil, pomelo etc.). These charms are temporary and only hung on several occasions during the month for a few days, usually near the door lintel and above the ground.

During my discussion with Mr C, he explained that the types of charms were dictated by the family's ethnic background and traditions. For example, Mr C's Teochew background explicitly favours the use of herbs like mugwort, lemongrass, and pomelo, the leaves of which he presses, because evil spirits and ghosts hate the scent of those herbs, so they help to repel the bad luck carried by evil spirits. In front of his flat number 17, he usually hangs these herbs near the electrical meter to the left of his door (Figure 6.20). Cantonese families favour chicken feet because they believe the vigilant posture and agile movement of the chicken swiftly brings good luck to them. Mr C's family, however, disfavours the use of chicken feet as charms due to their traditional belief that the short, clipped sounds of the chicken represent miscommunication, which jeopardises the practice of business.[24] *Phong thuy* practices of house decoration and charm placement here use familiar and sometimes mundane objects and the use of these charms and talisman, based on their symbolic meaning and the house owner's background, brings a sense of personalisation to living spaces.

The most permanent charms are the amulets with golden Chinese texts inscribed on red paper strips. The texts on the paper strips are mostly in ornamental calligraphy and pasted onto door lintels. According to Mr C, current lived experience and circumstances dictate the appropriate types and forms of these paper charms, which can be added to or changed according to need. Together, paper charms and seasonal charms complement each other's 'spiritual strength'. The most popular paper charms are *ngu phuc lam mon*, meaning 'Five blessings upon this door', because a door can be a metaphor for a family. The five blessings are longevity, wealth, fortune, virtue, and peace.

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[24] Interview with Mr C, 2018.
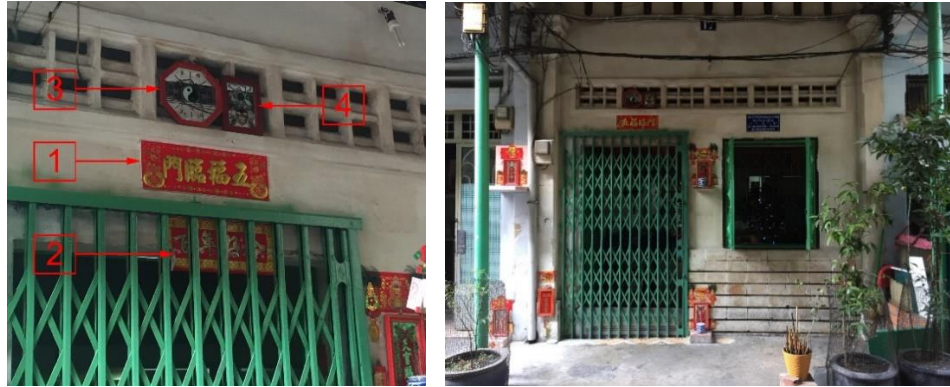
Figure 6.20 (Left) (1) Five-blessing charm, (2) good cohesion charm, (3) *bat quai* mirror, (4) *mon than* portrait. (Right) Overview of Mr C's façade (Photographed by the author, 2018).

At Mr C's door, he has hung the *ngu phuc lam mon* and layered below it are the *bach nien hao hop*, meaning one hundred years of good cohesion together. He has combined these charms with a *bat quai* mirror and a reflective portrait of a *mon than*, or gate god. To ensure the potency of these charms, Mr C said the inscribed paper charms should be appropriately selected according to the life circumstances of the homeowner because otherwise they will have no effect. The selection of charms can be done in consultation with *phong thuy* masters. In the case of Mr C, his *phong thuy* master Master Khoa has helped to select the right charms believed to combat several issues. Mr C briefly disclosed that he is running a logistics and travel business at his flat, and is currently facing some financial challenges. This further causes tensions between family members living with him in the flat. The following paragraphs will closely examine the *phong thuy* issues of Mr C's flat 17, the *phong thuy* solutions, and how they are reflected in the changes and usage of his house fronts, as well as how his *phong thuy* issues and solutions are interlinked with the built environment of Hao Sy Phuong.

Mr C's *phong thuy* consultant Master Khoa pointed out that because the flat is located at the receiving end of the eastern entrances, it is negatively affected by haunting spirits as earlier mentioned. Furthermore, Master Khoa suggested that the straight path of the entrance is another cause of bad *phong thuy*. These beliefs and spiritual meanings associated with the eastern entrance intensify Mr C's need to be watchful for precarious forces believed to bring harm to the wellbeing and business of his family.
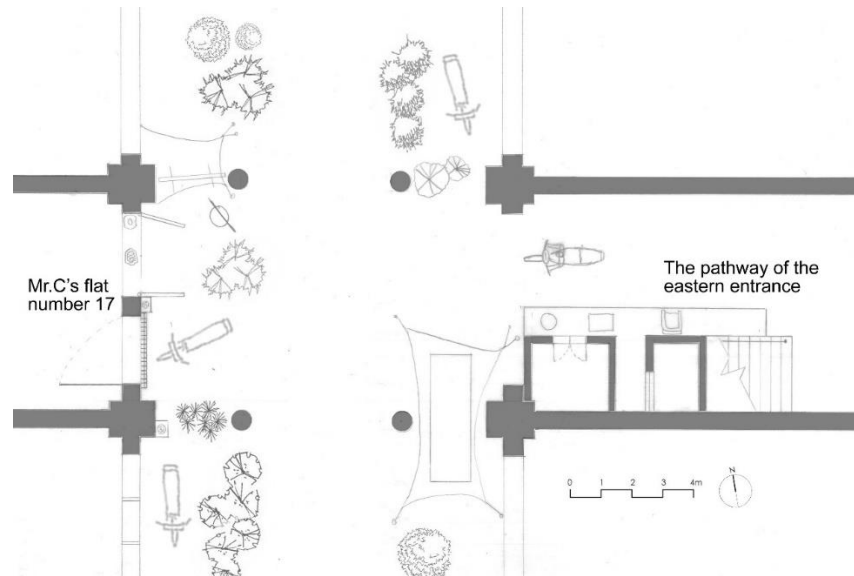
Figure 6.21 Site layout of Mr C's flat and the entrance (Produced by the author, 2018)

According to Master Thanh, who was consulted by my mother about her *phong thuy* issues, the houses located at the receiving ends of T-junctions have the worst *phong thuy*. In Master Thanh's forty-year *phong thuy* experience in HCMC, straight pathways allow bad energy, *ta khi,* to invade the domestic areas of these houses. Living in these houses should be avoided at all costs because their occupants will always feel anxious, stressed, and bad-tempered and their lives and businesses will always face challenges. I asked Mr .C whether Master Khoa thought the same thing, and Mr .C agreed. The descriptions are very similar to descriptions of bad *feng shui* areas by Ronald Knapp. He noted that laneway areas are the most intrusive and perilous, because of their narrow width and straight pathways, which resemble poisonous arrows (1999, p.55). Houses at the receiving ends of laneways are particularly vulnerable to the bad energy carried by these poisonous arrows (Knapp, 1999, pp.55-56).

Figure 6.22 The 'evil force' thrusting into Mr C's flat, as described by Mr C (Photographed by the author, 2018)

Mr C does not entirely blame the locations of his flats and these bad *phong thuy* pathways for his current struggles, but the description of the site's bad *phong thuy* matches his flat's orientation and surroundings. This fact pushes him to resolve *phong thuy* issues as real-life measures to resolve family tensions and business challenges. Understanding of the spiritual aspects of the built environment becomes easier with *phong thuy* decipherment, which allows *phong thuy* users like house occupants to increase their awareness of their living space and make spatial changes reflecting their *phong thuy* needs.

Mr C followed the design recommendations of Master Khoa. He first demolished the previous façade, which had an entrance door in the middle. The new design has the door shifted to the left, to avoid the straight *ta khi* and welcome good energy, *vuong khi*, which meanders in smooth and curvy lines. The entrance door became the threshold safeguarding his flat thanks to this change, but that was not enough. The master suggested he reinforce the door by placing several charms on its lintel, including a *mon than* portrait, paper amulets (*ngu phuc lam mon* and *bach nien hao hop*), and a *bat quai* mirror (Figure 6.23). A bunch of herbs is occasionally hung near the door lintel for the same reason, to reinforce the spiritual strength of the doorway. The following analysis will focus on the symbolic meaning of the *phong thuy* charms used on Mr C's façade and hopes to explain why their spiritual meanings are significant in the lived experience of Mr C, as a house owner and *phong thuy* believer.
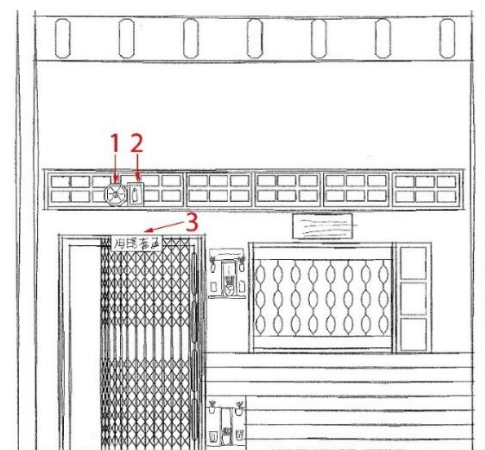
Figure 6.23 Elevation of Mr C's façade. The charms are: (1) a *bat quai* mirror; (2) a *mon than* portrait; and (3) paper amulets (Produced by the author, 2018).

The *mon than* is usually a portrait of a warrior in full Chinese-style battle regalia posed standing and waving a weapon. There are different versions of the *mon than* portrait, such as those on the door panels of *hoi quan* Phuoc Kien with two men in Chinese-style scholar's outfits (Figure 6.24). Master Khoa

believes the version with the weapon is more vigorous and more effective to ward off the bad spirits of the eastern entrance.

Figure 6.24 (Left) A *mon than* portrait next to a *bat quai* mirror at Mr C 's flat. (Right) another version of *mon than* portrait in *hoi quan* Phuoc Kien (Photographed by the author, 2018)

The *bat quai* is an octagonal mirror which helps to bring *phong thuy* balance to the house and its occupants. According to Thieu Vi Hoa (2009, p.67), a good *phong thuy* site has a balance of the five elements or *ngu hanh* – metal, wood, water, fire, and earth (*kim, moc, thuy, hoa, tho*). These elements of the site's *phong thuy* also need to be carefully checked against the houseowner's *ngu hanh,* which is determined by their time, date, and place of birth (Hoa, 2009, p.67). The issue is that the *ngu hanh* of the houseowner and of the site will not always match perfectly (Phuong Dinh, 2009, pp.202-204). If a person or site is believed to have more or less than the necessary quality of any element, it will result in bad luck, poor health, and loss of wealth (Hoa, 2009, pp.67-70). On the other hand, balancing these elements for a site or a person will bring health and wealth to the house and its occupants. To assess the quality of these five elements of a site or person, *phong thuy* masters use a tool called *bat quai*, which formularises responses to personal or site contexts.
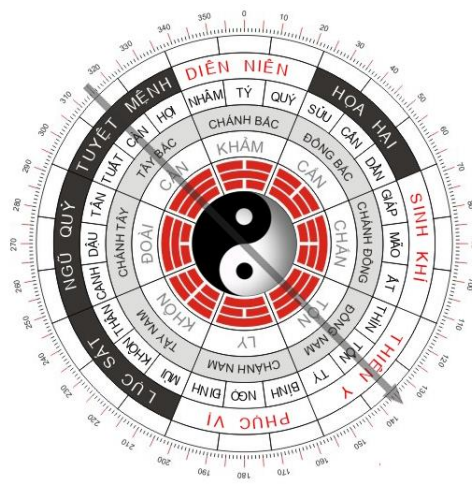
Figure 6.25 A recreation of *phong thuy* directions based on a discussion with Mr C (Generated by *wonder.vn*)

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Mr .C's *phong thuy* master also used *bat quai* to 'diagnose' the *ngu hanh* of his flat based on its orientation. The diagnosis required Mr C to provide his time, date, and place of birth to Master Khoa, who then checked his *ngu hanh* against the flat's *ngu hanh*. The length of his flat runs along the east-west axis and his front door is situated at the eastern end. They determined that the wood element *moc* was currently lacking in his flat. At the same time, the *phong thuy* diagnosed that any force coming from the west would bear harmful energy. This prediction coincides with the orientation of the eastern entrance way, which begins in the east and ends in the west (Figure 6.21). Balancing the *ngu hanh* of the flat is thus critical for Mr C because the diagnosis fits the physical characteristics of his flat's surroundings. The *bat quai* mirror is used as a charm and hung at the door lintel, which helps reinforce the wood element. To further deal with the lack of the wood element in his flat, Master Khoa suggested that Mr C should repaint in a brown colour to promote the earth element *tho,* because earth and soil nourish trees and wood.

Figure 6.26 Mr C's façade and his garden (Photographed by the author, 2019)

The last recommendation of the master was to construct a *binh phong* structure in front of his flat, a protective screen which can be built as a half-height brick wall or door panels. This *binh phong* is intended to allow *vuong khi* to 'curve' and 'flow' into the flat, bringing better fortune. However, Mr C anticipates that the local government will oppose this construction and will surely label it a traffic obstruction. The alternative option is a smaller *binh phong* in the form of a garden. This is a more viable option because it can be temporarily relocated if need be. When I asked Mr C whether the threat of these negative forces was real, he pointed to his garden as evidence and said that the plants are never fully grown because evil spirits consistently drain the life force from them. He also places burning incense daily as part of an offering ritual for the spiritual protectors of the house, which will be explained in detail later. He ensures that he always renews the plants once they are dead because he believes ghosts and evil spirits typically dwell in dead trees and plants. The new pot plants are then used to hold incense for his rituals.

To ensure the potency of *phong thuy* charms, Mr C said, they should be carefully selected to match the life circumstances of the homeowner, because they will have no effect otherwise. The selection of charms should be done in consultation with *phong thuy* masters. An example Mr C described was his neighbours at number 6 on the ground level. Beside the familiar *ngu phuc lam mon* (five blessings) charm, they have pasted another charm, the *luong duyen mien man*, meaning perfect/harmonious relationship. Recently, one of the family got married, and the couple currently lives together in this flat. Their parents hoping this charm would confer blessings on the newlywed couple, and that their relationship would last forever. Since Mr C's lived and worked experience concern more about the tension between his family members and their private business, using the *luong duyen mien man* would not bring positive changes to his house because his situation does not coincide with the meaning of this charm, Mr .C asserted.

Figure 6.27 (1) *Luong duyen mien man.* (2) *Ngu phuc lam mon* (Photographed by the author, 2019).

Secondly, the placement of *phong thuy* charms (*mon than* portraits, *bat quai* mirrors etc.) also needs to be done with harmony between the structure of one's living space and the surrounding environment. As described by Mr C earlier, the openings of houses, such as windows and doors, are their most vulnerable areas, where evil forces can lurk and cause problems in the domestic realm. Since his entrance looks directly at the 'haunted' eastern gateway, the symbolic meanings of his *phong thuy* charms along the door lintels help to spiritually 'reinforce' these vulnerabilities. Placing these charms elsewhere would not work since the charms are believed to be potent only within this specific physical setting. Another interesting example illustrating how different physical settings lead to the use of different charms is the use of housefront areas of flats near the northern entrance to raise chickens. Despite these flats not looking directly at the eastern entrance, their owners still believe in the stories of the haunted eastern entrance. To them, the most effective method is not only applying a paper amulet, but also raising a

chicken or rooster in front of the house, because its vigilant posture symbolises the standing pose of a warrior. Hence, it will safeguard the house from demonic forces.

Quick discussions with these flat owners further reveal that their use of spiritual charms, either paper amulets or personal pets, derives from different levels of awareness of *phong thuy*. For instance, Mr LY who lives at flat 3 suggested that he had little experience in *phong thuy*. However, he still believed in the stories regarding the eastern entrance. He raises his roosters following the recommendations and explanations of his neighbours, who do the same. Since roosters are also his favourite pet, this works both ways for him. Spatial changes and adaptations of public *Hem* for spiritual reasons are not only done by those who have firsthand experience in *phong thuy*, like Mr C, but also by those who have only observed their neighbours' practices. The public exposure of *phong thuy* charms and practices seems to have influenced several residents to deploy spiritual measures despite perhaps not being fully aware of their *phong thuy* aspects. Chapter 7 will further discuss how this contributes to physical transformations of Cho Lon's *Hem* made by residents with different levels of belief and awareness in *phong thuy*.

Figure 6.28 (Left) Mr L.Y (Right) and his roosters (Photographed by the author, 2019)

Finally, charms and talismans are personal invocations for household harmony and fortune, so placement of these charms should be done only by the house's occupants, and visitors and neighbours should treat them with respect. These charms reflect the personal identities and images of house owners, such as their ethnic backgrounds and family beliefs. For example, both the *phong thuy* diagnosis and *phong thuy* solutions at Mr C's flat were based on his date and place of birth. Hence, *phong thuy* practices like the placement of charms or (re)design of house façades help to strengthen the sense of personal belonging, the self-image of the residents, their family traditions and culture, and subsequently their emotional attachment to the space they live in. They also reflect life circumstances, such as domestic tensions, business concerns, or celebrations of family events. These charms and talismans are deployed so that their symbolic meanings bring good fortune to their businesses, improve the family's

relationships, or guard the health of occupants. The local community shares these beliefs, which means that there is mutual respect for each other's charms and talismans.

Spatial Practice and Ritual Activities at Altars for Deities in *Hem* Space

Taking a closer look at Hao Sy Phuong house façades of all styles, it is notable that two altars always appear together near the entrance. They also all have the same placement, one at ground level and the other approximately 1.4 metres above the ground, and they all face the *Hem*.

As I focus on local daily life in front of houses, my observations suggest that these altars influence the ways the community goes about its daily routines. The spaces around these altars are large. Locals doing chores or socialising with neighbours at their housefronts seem to keep their distance from the altars and avoid turning their backs on them. Street vendors also keep their distance while prowling around Hao Sy Phuong for customers. This section will continue to explore the *phong thuy* aspects of Hao Sy Phuong by looking at altars built into local housefronts and the everyday rituals involved. The investigation will attempt to understand their symbolic meaning and how they shape the daily routines and lives of individual house and flat owners, the neighbourhood, and some outsiders, like street vendors and visitors. This will lead to a better understanding of the local community's attitude towards each other's spiritual and *phong thuy* beliefs via observation of everyday encounters between local residents, especially when they are performing rituals in housefront areas.
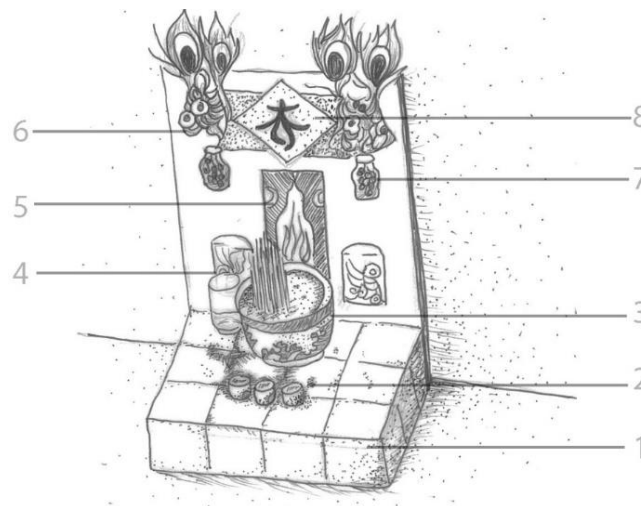
Figure 6.29 The typical structure of an altar: (1) concrete base; (2) shot glass for wine; (3) ceramic censer; (4) lucky pocket; (5) spiritual tablet; (6) *kim hue* – golden flower; (7) *than hong* – godly silk; (8) paper printed with the text 'Auspicious' (Sketched and produced by the author, 2019).

Both these altars have a similar design. A typical structure usually comprises two connected parts, the concrete base protruding approximately 200 mm from the façade and holding a censer for burning incense, and a vertical tablet in the middle. Most of the altars are decorated with a pair of ornaments on both sides – *kim hue* the golden flower and *than hong* the the godly silk. *Kim hue* is peacock feathers and *than hong* is a metal globe wrapped with silk. The centre tablet is the main spiritual feature of the altar and normally inscribed with texts according to the meaning of the altar. Another decorative feature is a printed diamond-shaped red paper with the yellow text *phuc*, or auspicious.

According to Mr C, the locations of altars symbolise different deities. House owners regard them as their personal guardians and protectors. The higher altar is commonly referred to as *ban tho troi*, or Heaven altar, which is dedicated to the worship of the Officials of Heaven, the *thien quan*. An ideal placement of the Heaven altar is with the base elevated from the ground, facing outward from the interior and not covered by any structure above it. The lower altar is *ban tho dat*, the Earth altar dedicated to the worship of the god of the land, *tho dia*. Ideally, the Earth altar should touch the ground.

Figure 6.30 The two altars seen on house façades (Photographed by the author, 2018)

This setting of altars, as explained by Huynh Ngoc Trang (2013, pp. 149-152), is derived from the folk belief that the Officials of Heaven are messengers who frequently travel between the mortal realm and Heaven to report the life of the family to the gods. Also, every plot of land is believed to have its own protectors. Worshipping these deities is believed to bring peace, wealth, and health to the house owner and occupants, on condition that these altars maintain this traditional form and be provided with daily offerings, possibly incense or wine poured into short glasses, according to Trang (2013, p. 150).

Even though the Heaven and Earth altars are humble in size, they significantly influence local house owners to conduct their daily lives in verandah spaces and shared corridors. The altars confer a holy presence and most house owners dedicate the space in front of their altars strictly to worship activities like burning incense, changing the decorations on the altars etc. Everyday routines, including leisure, storage, parking, and pet activities are kept at a distance and to either side of the altar. Neighbours are also mindful of each other's altars and do not turn their backs on them while socialising.

Street vendors who come to Hao Sy Phuong also show respect to the altars at housefronts. A vendor selling vegetables parks her bike neatly in front of a house at some distance from its altars before meeting her customers on the upper level. Mr C suggested that vendors who come here without knowing these facts or respecting the vicinity of altars are usually scolded. The vendors who are 'permitted' to operate in Hao Sy Phuong are those who show respect to the culture and customs of the local community, including respect for worship activities around the Heaven and Earth altars.

Figure 6.31 Everyday life at house fronts in Hao Sy Phuong, with everyone trying to avoid turning their backs on altars (Photographed by the author, 2018)

Incense is not only put in the censers on the altars, but can also be found in random places near altars. Some examples are maintenance holes in the ground, metal funnels wired into balconies or drilled into load-bearing columns supporting the shared corridor above, nearby plant pots, or at the foot of structural columns (Figure 6.32). Various mundane household objects are also used as censers, like a beer can, a brick, a candy box. Some of these censers are carefully wrapped with different paper charms. Why do the locals place incense like this?

Figure 6.32 Various *ad hoc* censers (Photographed by the author, 2018)

I asked Mr C about these 'findings', and he suggested that these alternative censers help house owners to overcome 'difficulties' with their flat orientations and not being able to provide the ideal setting for the Heaven and Earth altars. The extra censers act as extensions of the main censers on the altars. "The censers for the Heaven altar should not be covered by any structures above, and the censers for the Earth altar should be buried into the ground. Do so and the deities should acknowledge the sincereness and give the house owners more blessing," Mr C claimed. He also uses his plant pots as censers for the Earth altar because "the incense sticks are buried into the soil; they touch the earth," he continued. Variations like this denote the different perspectives of house owners on an 'ideal' setting, but also serve as ways to hold more incense sticks.

Figure 6.33 How extra censers are planted/constructed in relation to main altars (Photographed by the author, 2018 and 2019)

The cultural researcher Tran Hanh Minh Phuong suggests that lighting incense and pouring wine into shot glasses on altars are the most common and longstanding worship rituals for making offerings to the gods in Vietnamese culture (2017, pp.79-80). It is further believed that the number of incense sticks expresses the sincerity of the prayer, so the more incense and other offerings, the greater the sincerity they are expressing, meaning their desires, wishes, and needs will be fulfilled (Phuong Tran, 2017, p.80).

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The scent and smoke of incense also confer a sense of holiness on the surroundings, and thus censers are spiritual objects that should be treated with care and respect.

Figure 6.34 Incense sticks planted in a brick attached to the ground. Other offerings nearby include a small cup of tea and a satchel of candy (Photographed by the author, 2018).

Almost every flat owner in Hao Sy Phuong has put censers in the public *Hem* and decorated them with various ornaments and paper strips. The significance of these censers to local life may not be apparent to the eyes of visitors, but becomes more prominent when locals light incense or perform their worship rituals. Mr C suggested that it is an ancient rule not to disturb other people's worship or else be scolded. Also, incense should be completely burnt without being extinguished by any means. Otherwise, worshippers will be furious because their holy spaces are now offended, directly affecting their prayers.

Furthermore, these extra censers are sometime relocated if residents feel their locations might not be ideal. This could be because their wishes and needs have been fulfilled, or because everyday concerns and anxieties keep accumulating. Mr C said that he used to have a metal censer drilled into a column in front of the house, because his Heaven altar is underneath the shared corridor of the upper level. This practice lasted until Master Khoa advised him to have a small garden in front of his house as *binh phong* to repel the evil force coming from the eastern entrance. He then could use the plant pots as censers, as earlier described.
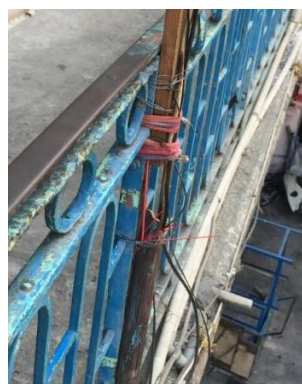
Figure 6.35 Incense loosely bound to a balcony with rubber bands (Photographed by the author, 2019)

The spatial effect of these local rituals and worship activities is that the *Hem* comprises temporary spiritual spaces with individual worship times. The static physical condition of the site can be overcome by the mobility of small spiritual objects, such as the various censers listed above. The sense of spiritual space gained from observing static physical features like charms, talismans, decorations, and altars becomes more real when they are animated by local ritual practices. Observing these rituals is also the best way to learn about the community's everyday aspirations, concerns, and desires.

Rituals performed in specific areas around houses further reinforce the sense of spiritual belonging and being at home. Ritual activities that interact with spiritual structures, such as the pairs of altars investigated in this chapter, enable the inhabitants to engage with their spiritual understanding and beliefs about their own lived spaces, which in turn enhances their personal attachment to these spaces. The important role of local freedom to place and use spiritual structures and charms in the *Hem* should be acknowledged, as well as the freedom to practise rituals which animate the symbolic meanings of structures and charms and help achieve community and spiritual goals.

However, the local government has different views about altars and the performance of rituals. Structures like randomly placed altars not only bring a negative image to public spaces, but also pose fire hazard concerns (Phu Le, 2019).[25] Most non-altar censers, such as those in Figure 6.32, are carelessly built. Some of them are placed near gardens and laundry spaces, where their ashes could spark fires. Mr C said that local officials sometimes patrol the *Hem* and remove informal censers.

These are also concerns for researcher Tran Hanh Minh Phuong, who encourages people to decrease the number of incense sticks burnt by one per day as a way to safely continue these ritual routines (2017, p. 80). These concerns and the discouragement of some ritual practices are rationally based in health and safety problems which structures and rituals might potentially cause. Nevertheless, this causes a dilemma. Local spiritual beliefs and ritual practices regard these structures and *phong thuy* charms as protectors of residents and house owners from bad fortune and illness. At the same time, they can cause fire hazards and safety concerns. This dilemma calls for a detailed analysis of the role of *phong thuy* in improving the lived experience of *phong thuy* believer residents.

Phong thuy practices help to connect spiritual beliefs and personal experience, such as everyday life problems and complexities, with the spaces people live in. For believers, the building of spiritual

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[25] Retrieved from https://baotintuc.vn/xa-hoi/nguy-co-chay-no-do-thap-huong-dot-vang-ma-trong-thang-co-hon-20200902170315143.htm

structures and deployment of *phong thuy* charms improves the spiritual aspects of their houses and home spaces, compensating for physical conditions which are deficient in beneficial *phong thuy* elements. For believers, these spiritual structures, *phong thuy* charms, and rituals help to support mental wellbeing, emotions, and the human psyche. It is thus crucial for the local government to deploy feasible policies and design support for local residents, like those in Hao Sy Phuong, who want to improve their home spaces via the construction of *phong thuy* charms or structures. Forcibly demolishing and totally disregarding the role of charms and spiritual structures could make *phong thuy* believers feel vulnerable to dangerous spiritual forces, thus negatively impacting their mental wellbeing. This is also not the correct solution because *phong thuy* is a spiritual belief which has been traditionally practised here for generations and is highly resilient to sudden change. My suggestion is that government planning agencies and architects should make an effort to accommodate the existing ritual practices of *phong thuy*, while ensuring that any health and safety issues are taken into account by maintenance programs.

(1) The altar for the Sky deity
(2) The altar for the Earth deity
(3) Double-pannel door to 'swing' fortune in
(4) Paper amulet ward off evil
(5) A temporal censer on the balcony
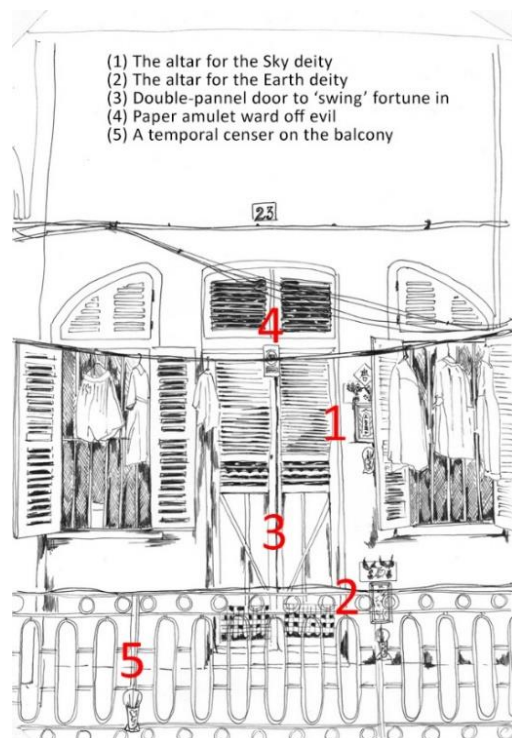
Figure 6.36 Key spiritual features of a Hao Sy Phuong flat (Produced by the author, 2019)

In the case of Hao Sy Phuong, local accounts suggest that the local government has not yet devoted adequate effort to maintaining the historic built environments of Cho Lon's *Hem*. These stories also suggest that the local government has not yet deployed feasible policies to support and maintain local

traditions of worship and ritual activities. In fact, many other historic *Hem* in Cho Lon share similar stories and situations. The gateway of Tue Hue Ly (*Hem* 714 Nguyen Trai Street) is today damaged, with multiple cracks in both columns, its name plaque hidden behind a government propaganda signboard and almost imperceptible from the public street. At the most extreme end of cases, the gate of Kieu Hung Ly (*Hem* 137 Luong Nhu Hoc Street) has been completely demolished due to local residential development.

Figure 6.37 (Left) The gate of Kieu Hung Ly in 2017. (Middle) The gate has been demolished. (Right) The gateway of Tue Hue Ly (From Dinh Nguyen, 2018, photographed by the author, 2019).

Despite the physical characteristics of Cho Lon's *Hem,* such as gateways, entrances, shrines, and altars, sometimes not being able to retain their original forms, their spiritual and social roles are always there for the local community, who still see them as *Hem* landmarks and community spaces. At Trieu Thuong Hang (*Hem* 257 Cao Van Lau Street), the design of the banner has changed since my first and most recent visits, in 2017 and 2019 respectively. However, some spiritual features and worship activities are still respected and continued, including censers for incense and *bat quai* mirrors. The *Hem* expansion has claimed certain private premises of local houses in Tue Hue Ly. Nevertheless, local residents still preserve the traditional spiritual structures, Heaven and Earth altars, on their house façades or built into shared walls of houses, and building setbacks are adaptively used as spaces for daily rituals at altars. The local communities of Cho Lon's *Hem* value the spiritual roles of these *Hem* structures and characteristics in their wellbeing. Architects and city planners should thus make efforts to identify the symbolic meanings of *Hem* characteristics and preserve them as a way to improve the quality of everyday life in Cho Lon's *Hem*.

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Figure 6.38 (Left) *Hem* Trieu Thuong in 2017. (Middle) In 2019. (Right) Altars at Tue Hue Ly (Photographed by the author, 2017 and 2019).

City planners and architects should be mindful of spatial practices reflecting *phong thuy* beliefs in their preservation efforts. *Phong thuy* in home improvement, as described earlier, is often based on the occupants' personal identities combined with the symbolic and spiritual meanings of the house's physical characteristics and the surrounding spaces and buildings. This practice is most obvious when local residents, like Mr C, redecorate house fronts based on *phong thuy* diagnoses of flat orientation and the shape of the eastern gateway of Hao Sy Phuong. The practice then leads to a multilayered spiritual system reaching from the physical spaces of personal territories to public structures and landmarks. The cohesiveness of this system is primarily built from the personal identities, backgrounds, traditions, and customs of *phong thuy* believers, which are thus critical aspects of community wellbeing. If these 'spiritual' physical spaces are ignored or destroyed, it puts the multilayered 'spiritual system' in jeopardy.

Moreover, local gateways, entrances, and communal shrines serve as announcements of the traditions and ethnic background that provide the *Hem* with a collective identity and a sense of community. Observations of human activities, including worship routines and other *phong thuy* rituals, at entrances, gateways, and communal altars are crucial to understanding the spiritual and *phong thuy* aspects of the built environments of *Hem* in Cho Lon. Responsible designers and planners should respect the social and cultural roles of gateways, altars, and other associated spiritual spaces in their strategies to improve *Hem* spaces. This respect should also extend to the *phong thuy* beliefs and practices of local residents in their homes and immediate neighbourhoods which contribute to both individual and community wellbeing by softening worries regarding bad *phong thuy*.

6.2 *Phong Thuy* Aspects of Interior Spaces in Cho Lon's *Hem*

The previous section investigated the spatial practices of *phong thuy* beliefs at the exterior level. This section will examine the spatial practices of *phong thuy* beliefs at the domestic and interior level. In particular, it will closely investigate how *phong thuy* beliefs influence design and architectural decisions regarding domestic home improvements, including domestic layout, furniture setting, and decoration. It will also look at how basing houses on *phong thuy* influences everyday routines within their territory, such as in domestic areas and at housefronts.

I met Ms P.G while visiting *hoi quan* Tue Thanh in Cho Lon during my field trip. I was interested in worship activities and approached her to enquire about these rituals. The brief talk quickly developed into an extensive discussion where she explained the spiritual practices of her home. She is a firm *phong thuy* believer keen to teach herself its principles and apply them to the interior architectural design of her house, which is located in a *Hem* of Nguyen Trai Street. Her *phong thuy* practice has also taken into account the physical characteristic of the *Hem*, the nearby buildings, and the orientation of her home. Ms P.G has inherited Teochew traditions from her family and several family traditions are still appreciated and practised in her house. For Ms P.G, family traditions and *phong thuy* practices are important contributions to the interior architecture of her home. After our intensive discussion, Ms P.G was kind enough to invite me to visit her home, observe its interior, and participate in family rituals. She invited one of her relatives, Ms T.M, to share about the family's heritage and *phong thuy* beliefs.

Figure 6.39 (Left) Ms P.G (in black dress) praying at *hoi quan* Tue Thanh and (Right) attending a peace blessing ceremony at home with her family (Photographed by the author, 2018)

The house I will now discuss is 572/8 of *Hem* 572 of Nguyen Trai Street, about 250 metres from the Hao Sy Phuong. Ms P.G has owned the house since the 2000s and it is home to six family members – Ms P.G and her husband, her youngest daughter Ms H, and older brother Mr T.G and his small family of two. Ms

P.G is of Teochew background. She said that the design and construction of her home were done according to *phong thuy* beliefs, with the assistance of her *phong thuy* Master Chinh. Master Chinh also helped Ms P.G to find properties that were suitable for Ms P.G's *phong thuy*. Therefore, this section will begin with a review of the *phong thuy* characteristics of Ms P.G's *Hem* before going into detail about her domestic spaces and house construction process.

The *Phong Thuy* Setting of the House and the *Hem*

Figure 6.40 (Left) Entrance to *Hem* 572 Nguyen Trai. (Right) Ms P.G's house (Photographed by the author, 2019).

The *phong thuy* diagnostic process began with Ms PG submitting her date of birth and the site orientations of selected properties to Master Chinh. Ms P.G and Master Chinh then carefully studied the history of each site and the surrounding buildings to see if they had *ta khi* (bad energy). Ms P.G said that the Master usually participated in her property excursions and inspections. Although *phong thuy* inspection is costly, Ms PG insisted it be done so the house would have the best *phong thuy* to benefit her family.

After thorough consideration, Master Chinh suggested that a house site in *Hem* 572 would best match Ms P.G's *phong thuy*. Furthermore, he predicted that the *Hem* had several dragon lines of positive energy, known as *long mach* (Figure 6.41). According to Ms P.G, *long mach* lines are rare and if house owners can tap into them, they will be blessed with good fortune, health, and peace throughout their lives. Evidence of the *long mach* lines provided by Ms P.G and Master Chinh was the structure of the building complex at the *Hem* entrances (Figures 6.40 and 6.41).

Figure 6.41 The *long mach* line, according to Ms P.G's description (Photographed by the author, 2018)

The building is about seven storeys high, with the *Hem* penetrating its ground level and then running between other buildings. This means travellers in and out of the *Hem* have to first circulate underneath the building's structures. According to Master Chinh, the positive energy from *long mach* lines can be harvested by building structures which allow *long mach* lines to meander through the building. Any structures built on top of its path, or blocking the path, would terminate the *long mach* energy. Using the *bat quai* compass, Master Chinh was able to identify a *long mach* path in the *Hem*. He also explained to Ms P.G that the 'floating' structure of above the *Hem* was an architectural solution which taps *long mach* energy.

However, the site also has several problems. There is a kindergarten directly opposite. Master Chinh suggested that when no one is in the kindergarten, a sense of abandonment is generated which leads to occupation by *ta khi*, negative energy.

Figure 6.42 Site map of Ms P.G's house and the Son Ca kindergarten in front of her house (Reproduced by the authorafter GPS map from HCMC Department of Planning and Architecture, 2020)

Different site locations, building characteristics, and surrounding landforms may present different *phong thuy* aspects that are either positive or negative for the lives of house owners. Like many other residents

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of Cho Lon, Ms P.G wanted to design the best possible place for her family to live. *Phong thuy* was incorporated into the interior architectural design and house construction process to counter and negate the bad, and nurture and promote the good, using Master Chinh's diagnosis of the site. The following section will look at the interior architectural design scheme of Ms P.G and how this responds to, and is influenced by, *phong thuy* beliefs.

Interior Architectural Design for The *Phong Thuy* of Ms PG's House

When the site was purchased in early 2003, the house was only one storey. Renovations began right after the purchase. Today, the house has two storeys. When recruiting architects and builders, Ms P.G required them to respect the family's belief in *phong thuy*, particularly Ms P.G's *phong thuy* designs and recommendations from Master Chinh. Ms P.G forbade the architects to design any gable roof structures or any exterior decorations featuring L-shapes because they would provoke death energies, *sat khi,* according to the *phong thuy* Master. The pitch of a gable roof looks like the tip of a sword or an arrow and those who live under a gable roof would be 'wounded' by the *sat khi*.

The pointy-roof theory is very similar to the *feng shui* belief in the 'secret arrow', where pointy objects like the tips of fences are deemed to bring negative energy to nearby living areas, as asserted by Derham Groves (2011, p.56). L-shaped decorative structures look like gallows for the hanging of criminals. In *phong thuy*, this decoration also provokes *sat khi*. The design solution was a flat roof, with upper-level balconies decorated with three concrete columns with half-chamfered sides. Explaining the chamfered columns of the balcony, Ms P.G says that if the columns appear to be full-shaped, they will look like three sticks of incense, one of the ritual offerings during death ceremonies.
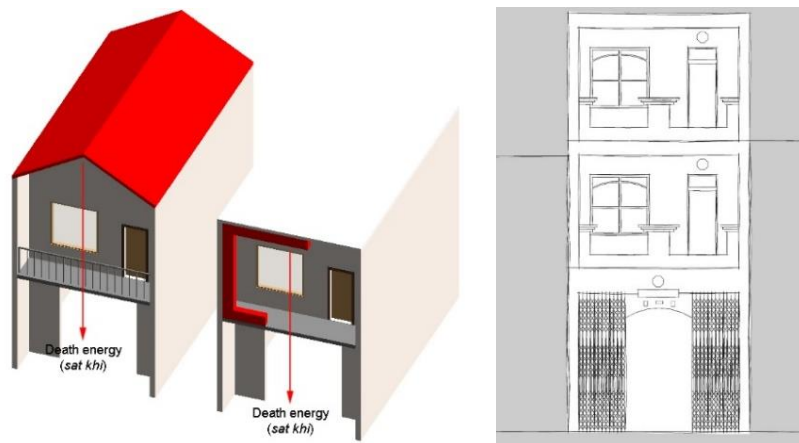
Figure 6.43 Bad *phong thuy* designs for the house, produced from Ms P.G's description. (Right) The present-day façade (Produced by the author, 2018).

To harvest the most *long mach*, Ms P.G planted a small garden opposite her house. There is a small shed with a retractable shade awning going over the garden. According to Master Chinh, planting trees can help smoothe *long mach* paths, so frontage gardens can redirect *long mach* to flow into houses. This use of the house frontage on the *Hem* is also influenced by the *phong thuy* diagnosis based on Ms P.G's date of birth and the orientation of the house. The length of the house lies on the east-west axis, representing the Earth (*tho*) element, and her date of birth represents the Water (*thuy*) element. Master Chinh suggested that Ms P.G's water element would nourish the Wood element of the frontage garden, which would sustain a garden, thus better channelling the *long mach* into the house. This layout would bring a harmonious cycle of self-balancing elements to the house, bringing good luck and wealth. This is interesting when compared to the front garden of Mr C, which has a different *phong thuy* meaning. His garden acts as spiritual protection against straight pathways, while Ms PG's garden is for attracting the good energy of *long mach* which runs the length of the *Hem*. The same type of garden space can be interpreted and decoded differently by *phong thuy* because of the different geography and physical characteristics of the site, as well as personal identities. This means *phong thuy* practice is highly relevant and applicable in various geographical contexts, and that a detailed examination is required to ensure the best *phong thuy* outcomes when designing the homes of *phong thuy* believers.

Figure 6.44 Ms P.G's frontage garden, on the right, with a small roof built over it for shading (Photographed by the author, 2018)

Master Chinh further assisted with the interior layout of the house. Investigating how he participated in the design progress will provide insight into how *phong thuy* practice and its spiritual aspect has penetrated to the finest urban grain, domestic areas. It will also show how the house's occupants perceived their home spaces regarding *phong thuy* practice.
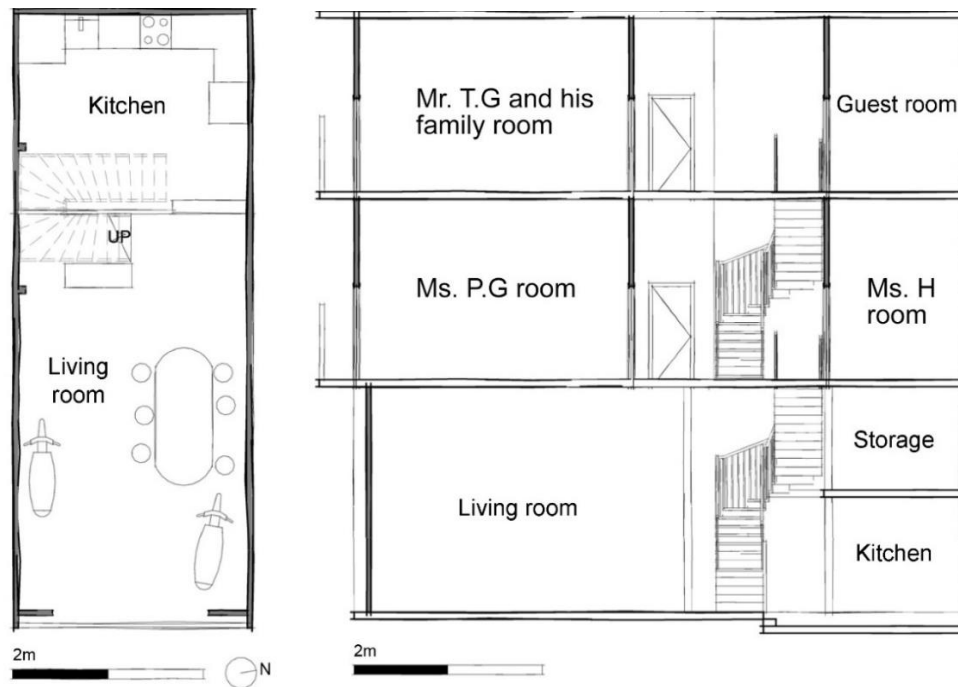
Figure 6.45 (Left) Floor plan of the ground level. (Right) Section through the house (Reproduced with permission of Ms P.G).

Ms P.G's house is about 2.5 metres wide and 8.2 metres deep. It has two upper levels which are private family quarters. The living room is used as a working area for Ms P.G, who is a property investor. The main staircase to the upper levels is located in the middle of the house, and the kitchen occupies the back quarter. The kitchen is recessed lower than the floor-level of the living room area, and there is a small mezzanine above the kitchen.

According to Ms P.G, the symbolic meanings of each domestic area of the house are associated with certain attributes and aspects of the family's wellbeing. The three key areas that are most important according to Master Chinh are: the living room, a space ensuring harmony between family members; the staircase, a space ensuring the good fortune and wealth of the family's businesses; and the kitchen, a space containing the energy of the house's business activities. Master Chinh then laid out the remaining interior spaces of the house, the private quarters, toilets, storeroom, and guest room, and ensured they were situated correctly. Master Chinh's scheme was then incorporated into the interior plans by the architect. For example, the architect planned a mezzanine above the kitchen. This is because if any private quarters were located directly above the kitchen, their occupants would suffer constant anxiety and bad temper due to the heat from the stove. The mezzanine acts as a buffer zone to ease such concerns. Another example is the placement of the toilet. Master Chinh advised not placing any toilet above the kitchen area. Otherwise, the toilet's Water element would extinguish the Heat element of the

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kitchen, which is the critical *phong thuy* energy centre of the house. These practices and recommendations illustrate that *phong thuy* masters have extensive power to influence the interior design and construction process undertaken by architects and designers.

Figure 6.46 The mezzanine level as storage space (Photographed by the author, 2018)

This power also extends to *phong thuy* masters who are involved with interior decorations, fittings, or even furniture selections. According to Ms PG, design recommendations from Master Chinh were helpful because they broke down into comprehensive and easy-to-understand strategies. I will examine this process by observing the decoration of the key *phong thuy* spaces of Ms P.G's house.

Figure 6.47 Ms P.G's living room (Photographed by the author, 2018)

The living room has a ceiling about five metres high, which creates a sense of spaciousness. For Ms P.G, the ideal atmosphere for a living room is welcoming, bright, and lively, an idea supported by Master Chinh. A lifeless living room – small, poorly lit, and cold – creates a sense of abandonment and lack of care resulting in bad *phong thuy*, Ms P.G claimed. I also recognised Ms P.G's effort to breathe life into her living room the moment I walked into her home. The walls and ceiling are painted in warm earth

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tone with decorative shadow lines running their full length. The floor is covered with 400 x 400 mm marble tiles, which were top-of-the-market at the time of the house's construction, Ms P.G said.

The staircase is U-shaped with the first step facing the interior wall. There are 23 steps because, according to Master Chinh, an odd number of steps brings good luck, health, and fortune. This is a *phong thuy* rule which many house owners in HCMC follow because even numbers of stairs represent evil and illness. Another *phong thuy* rule is that the length of the staircase should not point out of the house, because if it does the family's good fortune will escape the house, so curling the length of the staircase into a U-shape helps to retain it. Master Chinh also suggested that a *binh phong* (protective screen) could be placed between the staircase and the house's entrance to further retain the family's good luck.

There is a big altar, beautifully decorated with marble, next to the staircase which is dedicated for the deities *tho dia* and *than tai,* the gods of land and fortune, respectively. The ornamentation and decorative items look similar to those of the house front altars in Hao Sy Phuong. According to Ms PG, these decorations add a sense of formality because they are parts of the family's ritual practice, which will be described later.

Figure 6.48 The altar next to the staircase (Photographed by the author, 2018).

One of the *phong thuy* tools which Ms P.G required her builders and carpenters to use when constructing and decorating her house was the *lo ban* ruler, a retractable measuring tape with measurement units on top and star signs on the bottom. Ms P.G used the *lo ban* ruler to measure almost everything in the house, including furniture, fixtures, door panels, and then gave the

measurements to the builder and carpenter to follow. The purposes and variations of *lo ban* ruler can be revisited in the review of *phong thuy* in Chapter 2.

Figure 6.49 Lo *ban* rulers (Collected by the author)

Ms P.G wanted the house's entrance to attract good fortune from the *long mach* of the *Hem*, so she picked the star signs *quy nhan* – to be helped by good people – and *quyen loc* – power and fortune. Ms P.G said that having trustworthy partners is crucial for of her property business. The alignment of *quy nhan* and *quyen loc* landed on the measurement of 1.57 metres, or 3.13 metres using the *thong thoang* version. She picked the measurement of 3.13 metres as the width of the entrance's opening because she preferred a spacious entrance. The full ceiling-height entrance was constructed with arch-shaped wooden folding panels, addressing the Vietnamese proverb *nha cao*, *cua rong,* which means 'tall house and wide gate'. The sense of welcoming and lively spaciousness is a good *phong thuy* aspect which brings good fortune and health to the occupants. Ms P.G said that this adage was also the 'design brief' for her house.

Figure 6.50 Entrance doors (Photographed by the author, 2018)

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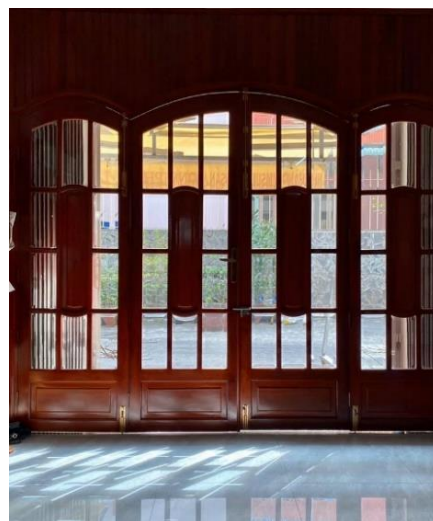
Furniture and fixtures, including souvenir shelves, cabinets, kitchen counter, and especially altars, were carefully inspected using the *lo ban* rulers and their divination system. Ms H, Ms P. G's daughter, described an incident during the making of the altars for *tho dia* and *than tai* next to the staircase. The altar's dimensions were decided using the *am phan* ruler, and a width of 41.2 cm would capture the *tai vuong* sign representing prosperity. The carpenter accidentally stretched the width to 45 cm, where the star sign indicated by the *am phan* ruler is *tu huyet*, or death point. Ms P.G was furious with the carpenter and she terminated the contract right on the spot. The concern was that this star sign would not only prevent good fortune coming into her house and business, but would also 'welcome' illness into the family. Ms P.G found a new carpenter, strictly instructed him to follow the *lo ban* measurements and warned him by telling him about the previous carpenter's mistake. The reconstruction of the altar, seen in Figure 6.48, made it the most noticeable feature of the living room. The story of the altar illustrates Ms PG's serious consideration of *phong thuy*, particularly the use of the *lo ban* ruler, in designing her house.

The role of *phong thuy* practices, as observed in Ms P.G's interior design, is to help the occupants to identify the spiritual aspects of the spaces they live in. With the assistance of *phong thuy* masters, the spiritual meanings of different domestic areas are broken down into a comprehensive view of the everyday life and wellbeing of the house's occupants. Design opportunities are generated to either avoid or mitigate negative *phong thuy* aspects in interior decoration and construction. The easy-to-digest understanding of the *phong thuy* aspects of their interior also encourages residents to participate in the design and construction process with the architects, builders, and carpenters. This participation further ensures that the interior design reflects the *phong thuy* desires, needs, and goals of the houseowners, thus improving their mental wellbeing.

The tension between Ms P.G and her carpenters is also instructive about the collaborative process of designing and constructing home spaces for *phong thuy* believers. Designers and carpenters who respect *phong thuy* practices tend to be the most sought after as compared to those who do not. Tensions may arise if designers and carpenters cannot cope with the expectations and desires of house owners, because the spiritual meanings of the house decorations, interiors, and building details reflect the personal identities of house owners, for example, their birth dates and personal beliefs, which they can be very sensitive about. In these circumstances, *phong thuy* tools, including the *lo ban* ruler, can help to ease conflicts. These tools provide measurements which help to coordinate the design, building

details, interior furniture, and fittings so that they are close to the occupants' *phong thuy* desires, aspirations, personal backgrounds and identities.

Reinforcing *Phong Thuy* Charms

As observed in Hao Sy Phuong, Ms P.G also deploys different charms to reinforce the *phong thuy* of her space. The selection of *phong thuy* charms was based on the spiritual meaning of her domestic space, as well as the family's ethnic background. Some others were also suggested by Master Chinh. There are many charms in Ms PG's houses and about 22 are hung, displayed on shelves, or built into the structures of the domestic spaces. There are 12 paper amulets glued or pasted onto domestic appliances. The locations of these charms have been carefully measured using a *lo ban* ruler. This section will investigate the experiential links between the meaning of these charms, their locations, and their *phong thuy* motivations.

Figure 6.51 (Left) Ms P.G's wooden running horses figure and gold horse plaque. (Right) Her wine collection (Photographed by the author, 2018).

In the living room, there are a great number and variety of charms, including ceramic wares, liquor bottles, and antique items. On the northern wall, there is a wooden lacquered statuette of two horses running into the house. The running horses in the golden plaque hung above are running inwards in a similar direction. Running horses symbolise bountiful fortune and good opportunities for the business owner. Directing the horses inwards can bring the good energies and luck of *long mach* into the living room, which is also where Ms P.G's home office is located. In order to retain the *vuong khi* (positive energy) of *long mach* in the living room, bottles of wine and spirits are placed along the shelving. Ms P.G explains that *long mach* energy is attracted to water. This collection is placed near the dining table, which is also her working desk.

There is a miniature sailboat made of oak on the shelf near the staircase, beautifully crafted and detailed. The bow of the sailboat points outward towards the *Hem*, symbolising the courage and endurance of the business.

Figure 6.52 (Left) The sailing boat; (Right) the antique clock (Photographed by the author, 2018)

On two sides of the living room, there are pendulum-clocks hung on the walls. These *phong thuy* charms are the most expensive items here, each costing about 10 million Vietnam Dong (about 630 Australian dollars). Ms P.G explained that the swinging of the pendulums actively channels the flow of positive energy and circulates it throughout the house. Ms P.G's husband is an antique enthusiast and spirits collector, and his hobbies cut both ways, including supporting his wife's spiritual beliefs and *phong thuy* practice.

As mentioned, there are also paper charms with the Chinese text *nguyen ven,* meaning *always full*, pasted onto domestic appliances and food storage. Ms P.G said that Master Chinh advised her to paste these charms onto, in particular, the rice basket, the water jar, and the fridge. Master Chinh explained that rice, water, and salt are three ingredients which represent the basis of human survival. To have these staples always abundant symbolises that luck, good energy, and endless prosperity will always remain in the house. In fact, Ms P.G never leaves the vessels for these three items half-full and refills them every day. During the Lunar New Year, she flips these paper charms upside down to change the word into *phuc*, meaning 'auspicious'. This custom is part of family tradition, and was passed down from her mother, who is of Teochew ethnic background.

Figure 6.53 Charms reading 'Always full' on fridge panels and a rice basket (Photographed by the author, 2018)

Here the selection of charms to be placed in specific locations, as well as their orientation, highlights how *phong thuy* choices can reveal a lot about the everyday life and family stories of Ms P.G's household. They reflect Ms P.G's attitude towards her business and her care for her family's wellbeing and traditions. While these *phong thuy* charms might not instantly fulfill her desires and wishes for the family's business, they do however bring a sense of encouragement, good luck, and liveability that motivates the family's work and life. Several charms also reflect the family's background, which further strengthens the sense of family tradition. *Phong thuy* charms seem to work as tools to spiritually improve the human psyche and the feelings and emotions connected to living spaces.

Ritual practices and *phong thuy* activities within the house and in *Hem* spaces

This last section will focus on the *phong thuy* rituals of Ms P.G's family. As suggested earlier, *phong thuy* links the spiritual meanings of different parts of home spaces – the public *Hem*, house fronts, and domestic areas. Thus the *phong thuy* rituals that Ms P.G performs also occur in different places, such as in front of the living room altar, at her doorstep, and some communal rituals in the public *Hem*. The investigation in this section hopes to bring some understanding of how *phong thuy* practice requires human interaction with specific areas of home spaces.

According to Ms P.G, there are numerous *phong thuy* rituals. The intensity of each ritual depends on its purposes. One of the daily rituals is Ms P.G making an offering at the altar of the God of Land, *ban tho tho dia*, in front of the staircase. The offering makes her feel safe and protected during real-life problems. The type of offering depends on the seriousness of her problems. For example, whenever Ms P.G has lost the house keys, the offering comprises cakes, fruit, and some beverage. If Ms P.G has a big property project happening, the offering comprises a whole roasted pig, flowers, and seasoned fruit. Some physical interactions with the *tho dia* statue, for example, to slightly move it, will ensure the effectiveness of these rituals.

Figure 6.54 Offerings during (Left) celebration of a new project and (Right) Lunar New Year (Photographed by the author, 2019)

On the 15th of every lunar month, Ms P.G instructs her daughter Ms H to grab a handful of rice mixed with salt and throw it into the public *Hem*. Ms H, however, must remain within the house while performing this ritual. This ritual is *cung vong linh*, praying for the deceased. As said earlier, rice and salt are essential for life. It is traditionally believed that lost souls wander around in search of food. Satisfying their needs will mean these souls do not disturbing house owners. This ritual, again, denotes the spiritual function of a threshold between the domestic and the public, the protected and the exposed.

Figure 6.55 Ms H preparing some rice for the *cung vong linh* ceremony (Photographed by the author, 2018)

One of the most intense ritual practices with great symbolism and a sense of comfort for Ms P.G's family is the monthly peace blessing ceremony – *cau binh an*. This is performed by monks invited from a nearby Buddhist temple, with family members of all generations gathered in the living room. The first part of the ritual involves communal chanting. Altars to deities and ancestors, including *tho dia* altars, are central to this part of the ritual. The monks light incense, then chant in front of the offerings at each altar, which have been prepared by family members.

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Figure 6.56 (Left) Praying in front of the domestic altars. (Right) Praying at the doorstep (Photographed by the author, 2018).

The second part of the ritual takes place at the doorstep of the house. The monks light incense around some offering tables. This area is set up with two tables displaying ceremonial items, a round table within the house and a rectangular table outside the house. The round table displays items like censers, wooden bells, vases of flowers, or candles. The rectangular table displays some fruit, joss paper, candies, a bowl of rice mixed with salt, and candles. Offerings on the round table call the spirits of the deities dwelling inside the home to keep safe the house's entrance, while offerings on the rectangular table are for the *cung vong ling*, for the lost souls wandering outside the home.

Last but not least, Ms P.G has been running annual charity events, which are also part of *phong thuy* practice. There are two main motivations for her charity events, and both are direct results of her *phong thuy* beliefs about the spiritual characteristics of her home and the public *Hem*.

Figure 6.57 (Left) Charity stamps. (Right) Ms PG and her daughter preparing the packages (Photographed by the author, 2018)

She believes that the success of her property business in recent years is due to the good *phong thuy* of her home. Doing these good deeds for her community is, for Ms P.G, a way to show her appreciation for the blessings of the gods, by not being 'greedy and selfish' with the good fortunes she has received.

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Secondly, happy people coming here in high spirits adds a sense of liveability, which spiritually reinforces the *phong thuy* of her home. As described earlier, when the kindergarten is empty, this brings bad *phong thuy* because it lacks human presence. The laugher and joy of the recipients at her charity events can revert that negative influence.

Figure 6.58 (Left) Ms P.G's daughter and son helping locals during charity events. (Right) Lines of people waiting to receive their packages in front of the house (Photographed by the author, 2018 and 2019).

With their different intensity levels, *phong thuy* rituals powerfully shape the daily behaviour and routines of the house's occupants in specific places, spaces, and structures of the house. While spiritual charms and talismans architecturally reinforce the sense of home in a *phong thuy* believer's house, the use of domestic spaces for *phong thuy* rituals better manifests the occupants' attitudes to their spiritual beliefs. These findings also added to the fact that professional architect should respect the occupant's *phong thuy* concerns, particularly, their related rituals when designing their homes. *Phong thuy* and their related rituals, such as worshipping activities and offering ceremonies, are parts of the local *phong thuy* belief like Ms. P.G or the Hao Sy Phuong's communities. Rituals that are done as customary practice, like those observed at Mr C, Mr and other residents in Hao Sy Phuong, or intense practice as observed at Ms P.G, denote that worship activities are crucial for the practice of everyday belief in *phong thuy*. Hence, the respect of *phong thuy* from designers and architect could extend in their account of constructing, improving and designing residential projects with adequate physical spaces to everyday rituals of houseowners *phong thuy* followers. Doing so would help the houseowners maintain a safer space when performing *phong thuy* related rituals.

The main intention of this chapter is not to scientifically question the practice of *phong thuy* and its rituals, but to empirically evaluate how *phong thuy* beliefs might affect human lived experience, subsequently influencing design decisions and ideas for houses. The differences in *phong thuy* explanations and understandings between the two *Hem*, and the different *phong thuy* interpretations of the unique geographies of the two sites, highlight that *phong thuy* knowledge and practice are universal, comprehensive, and applicable to people of various backgrounds and life complexities. Some aspects of

phong thuy practice empower the use and deployment of ordinary household items, everyday appliances, or objects very close to the daily routines of the occupants, making the practice of *phong thuy* widely accessible, not an exclusive practice for specific groups or professions. The significance of these spiritual talismans and charms is animated by interaction-based rituals, resulting in the direct involvement of occupants with them and the altars. Day-to-day care and interaction further strengthen personal responsibilities for maintaining the practice of rituals as ways to satisfy real-life aspirations and wishes, or to heal real-life concerns and anxieties.

In addition, the investigation in this chapter has revealed the extensive influence during the design process of *phong thuy* on interior architectural design via the *phong thuy* master. Diagnoses from *phong thuy* masters like Master Khoa and Master Chinh help people understand their living environments better. These diagnoses demonstrate how people's personal identities and ethnic backgrounds are connected with the spiritual meanings of their living spaces, including their domestic areas and the surrounding public environment. *Phong thuy* practice thus reveals the spiritual problems or benefits of a place, which in turn inform the architectural or interior design strategies of the designer or architect.

I also experienced this firsthand while working as an interior architect in Vietnam. Most of my clients had a special concern with *phong thuy,* which was often the determining factor in obtaining client approval. In early 2020, a client wanted to open a hotel in Da Lat in Lam Dong Province. This client also had his own *phong thuy* master, Master Lam. One of the problems of my design proposal was a *phong thuy* conflict between my proposed construction materials and Master Lam's recommendations. The Master suggested that I had used too much wood. He recommended I revise the design with more metal in it, so that it would spiritually match the client's date of birth, which would nourish his fortune in *phong thuy*. My client only approved the design proposal when I revised the design following Master Lam's recommendations.

Figure 6.59 (Left) Initial proposal for the hotel's interior. (Right) After *phong thuy* recommendations (Author, 2020).

Given that *phong thuy* is increasingly popular, architects, designers, and city planners should make efforts to respect the *phong thuy* practices of house owners. Despite *phong thuy* beliefs' basis in

mysterious stories, *phong thuy* practice and its architectural impact can still make some positive contributions. *Phong thuy* helps to bring a place closer to the desires and needs of the inhabitants. It is also the objective of interior and architectural practice to create and design liveable and desirable homes for clients. The *phong thuy* master could help to close the gap between the design ideas of the architects or designers and the client's desires or concerns regarding the space they live in.

Chapter 7. Spatial Practice in 'Saigon *Hem* Space': A Discussion

Figure 7.1 The narrow pathway of *Hem* 14 of Ky Dong Street (Sketched by the author, 2017)

In Chapter 1, I introduced the ongoing difference in perspectives on the planning, architecture, and usage of *Hem* spaces between the HCMC government and local *Hem* communities. In brief, government planning policies have faced strong resistance from *Hem* residents because they have made these local spatial changes and usage adaptations a way of life. A historical review of the establishment of HCMC's *Hem* helped to navigate this research by suggesting several case studies for a better examination of spatial practice in real-life contexts. Chapter 2 presented the theoretical basis for understanding the concept of spatial practice and its implication for interior architectural and urban design research. Together with his second spatial mode, *conceived space*, the review of Lefebvre's spatial dialectic has provided key aspects of the theoretical framework of the thesis which was presented in Chapter 3. This theoretical framework also established mutual ground to explain the differences in perspective between government planning authorities and *Hem* communities on the usage of public *Hem* and their built environment. The framework also makes several suggestions on a possible way forward, to examine the case studies from a phenomenological perspective, with bottom-up investigation focused on the human activities and physical characteristics of *Hem* spaces, because they are fundamental aspects of Lefebvre's concepts of spatial practice.

In Chapter 4, I recorded local spatial practices through firsthand observation and documentation of everyday uses of *Hem* space along the length of *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street. The investigation also looked at how spatial changes and uses of domestic space in local houses might influence public *Hem* spaces. This urban phenomenon has also appeared in many American-built apartment blocks, locally known as *chung cu* (CC). In Chapter 5, I investigated these spatial changes and uses of CC spaces in specific places and structures, including block façades, public pathways, and domestic flats. The investigation in Chapter 5 revealed how these spatial changes to CC spaces have transformed local life and CC landscapes to closely resembled those of *Hem* areas. In Chapter 6, I examined the influence of *phong thuy* practices and beliefs on the *Hem* built environment of Cho Lon. In addition to the common application of *phong thuy* to house renovation, improvement and design, *phong thuy* is also perceived by practitioners as a way to maintain social and ethnic values, identities, and spiritual beliefs.

This chapter will bring together these findings from the case study chapters, and reflect on them on the two theoretical levels outlined in Chapter 3 in the conceptual framework – spatial theory and architectural and planning practice. The discussion will contribute to a reading of the (trans)formation of HCMC's *Hem* spaces, assimilating the spatial practices influencing the built environment of *Hem*. Understanding these phenomena will allow this thesis to propose several design recommendations in the Conclusion chapter, as possible ways to maintain desirable spatial practices in HCMC's *Hem*.

7.1 Learning from the Spatial Practices of *Hem* Spaces

Contributions of *Hem* spatial practices to theoretical understanding

The analysis of everyday spatial usage in the case study of *Hem* 60 of Ly Chinh Thang Street in Chapter 4 suggested that the *Hem* built environment has been influenced and shaped by the ongoing practice of home-based business and retail activities by local house owners, vendors, and stall owners. What are the specific local factors sustaining the *Hem* community practice of home-based business? How do these findings extend or add to the theoretical understanding of Lefebvre's spatial modes, *conceived space* and *perceived space,* in the broader context of HCMC and its *Hem*? A brief revisiting of the theoretical relationship between these two spatial modes should assist discussion.

The literature review in Chapter 2 identified a theoretical gap that causes spatial practice to often be neglected by the creators of *conceived spaces*. The theorist Michel de Certeau claimed that urban spaces created by professional designers and planners do not always support and appreciate the everyday life practices of their inhabitants (de Certeau, 1984, pp.92-93). Hence, the everyday lived experience of the

inhabitants tends to be excluded in the designs of architects and urban planners. Lefebvre considers this a global matter: "Within the spatial practice of modern society, the architect ensconces himself in his own space" (2005, p. 268). In an effort to reconcile this global tension, Lefebvre asserts that "spatial practice regulates life – it does not create it" (1991, p. 39). These theories empower this investigation to look into local factors and discuss how they contribute to the everyday life and built environment of *Hem*. Here the main local factor is the social fabric, the symbiotic relationship between *Hem* residents manifested in the everyday retail activities and use of public space along *Hem* pathways, like that of *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang.

As outlined in Chapter 4, local practice of home-based business is a key factor driving the morphology of public space in *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang, including the (re)construction of buildings, houses, renovations, and encroachments by various activities. Most houses in *Hem* lack space to properly host commercial and retail activities, and lack access to professional architectural, engineering, and planning services. These issues persisted in the past and are still prevalent today. One of the most common and immediate solutions is *Hem* residents adapting their own housefronts to set up their business, or encroaching on their neighbours' housefronts or other public space in the *Hem*. These activities are often accommodated by extensions and structural changes to housefront areas.

Figure 7.2 Shade canopies above a grocery display in *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang (Photographed by the author, 2017)

Regarding the symbiotic relationship between *Hem* residents, this can be observed in everyday negotiations seeking approval and acceptance of setting up businesses in public *Hem* spaces or along local housefronts. There are several possible explanations for this. The first is that when a resident accepts others making changes and adaptations to public *Hem* space, this will help them to gain acceptance from others when they need to make an adjustment. The second explanation is that

cooperation between residents as business owners potentially produces economic benefits. In particular, cooperation between mobile vendors, home-based business owners, and house owners is the paradigmatic case illustrating this social factor. Some examples drawn from observation were described in Chapter 4. Local café owners, like the one at house 46, accept street vendors selling breakfast nearby. Their services mutually benefit each other. The street vendors can serve food to customers enjoying their coffee, and customers who eat breakfast will stay longer and have another coffee. Another example is the vendors stationed in front of Mrs V's house. Attendees visiting Mrs V's home for weekly worship activities also enjoy buying from street vendors at discount prices, so there is a symbiotic relationship between Mrs V, her attendees, and the street vendors where they fulfill each other's needs.

This symbiotic social factor identified in the context of *Hem* spaces seems to extend Lefebvre's concept of *perceived space*. Lefebvre suggests that the predominant factor in spatial practice (*perceived space*) is the everyday social relations and lives of the inhabitants (1991, p.50). The acceptance by *Hem* residents of each other's changes to public space, generating everyday negotiations between *Hem* residents, has helped to make the present-day *Hem* landscape. *Perceived space* in *Hem* contexts is *Hem* space adapted for home-based business and its related spatial practice. Furthermore, the daily negotiations between *Hem* residents are not the sole factor influence the spatial changes in *Hem* spaces, their interactions with mobile vendors who come from elsewhere are also another influential factor. Hence, the social factors discussed as part of local *Hem* spatial practice are significant because they reflect changes that are socially and economically needed and closer to local everyday lived experience.

It is worth noting that this specific aspect of spatial practice does not exclusively occur in public *Hem* space. The changes and uses of domestic spaces also influence the spatial adjustments of public *Hem* spaces. As observed in Chapter 4, the street vendors in front of Mrs V's house have to temporarily relocate to nearby housefronts during her communal worship activities, for the convenience of her visitors and her motorcycle parking valet. This interrelationship between domestic and public spaces indicates that the everyday routines of domestic spaces are also part of the social fabric which forms spatial practice in *Hem* public spaces. Therefore, understanding the domestic routines and lived experience of inhabitants is crucial to gain empirical knowledge of the social factors in *Hem* areas.

Another point to be noted is that the social aspect of *Hem* spatial practice is resilient to immediate social, cultural, and political changes caused by different agents, such as the strict Socialist ideology before *Doi Moi* (1986) and the 'modern city' vision afterwards. This is evident in the local records of home-based businesses and private shops from the Socialist period. Despite local government having

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strict economic policies to discourage private traders, many locals of *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang still informally hosted shops in their homes, or gathered at the temporary market square (the present-day food court), as described in Chapter 4. This period was economically challenging for the majority of HCMC's population because the country was still recovering from the Vietnam War. Informal trading activities, like those in *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang, helped to generate daily income and overcome the challenges facing local business owners. Furthermore, local residents generally accepted these informal trading activities because they provided affordable goods and services during this turbulent period.

Figure 7.3 (Left) Government proposal for expanding *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang; (Right) Present-day usage of *Hem* spaces and housefront structures (Map collected and reproduced by the author, 2018).

The resilience of social factors is also seen in the present-day tension between local government planning and the everyday uses of *Hem* spaces. In the early 2010s, the People's Committee of District 3 implemented strategies to expand the width of *Hem* and allow increasing traffic. Some preliminary evictions occurred, but the area is slated for further expansion. Informal activities like home-based businesses and street vendors still exist. These areas are also characterised by the comeback of structural extensions and encroachments. In my interview with Mr H.H, Mrs V's son who works as a lawyer, he told me that local residents extending or allowing others to occupy their housefronts is perceived as informally marking out their private premises and territories. This general consensus of *Hem* residents who fear losing these territories involves some consideration of the social fabric, not

least of which is the local attitude that the spatial transformation of *Hem* spaces contributes to liveability, which at the same time has delayed recent government planning strategies.

The significance of Lefebvre's concepts and the social factor discussed is that they help to identify how lived experience has contributed to the everyday life and landscape of *Hem* spaces, and subsequently to the practice of home-based business. The subsequent spatial adaptations and uses made by local residents, albeit appearing chaotic and unsafe, contribute to local livelihoods and social life and should be formally acknowledged by government as responses to local everyday needs. This including but not limited to the tradition of home-based business and its related spatial practices. Moreover, the social factors which create the urban fabric and spatial changes of *Hem* spaces should not be disregarded, because they have been part of the community mentality for decades.

According to Phuong Dinh, Daou and Huppatz (2015, p.5), there will always be unavoidable conflicts between the perspectives of space created by professional practices and spaces that are physically responsive to the changes of inhabitants' everyday routines, needs, desires, and struggles. This is because of different approaches by the stakeholders creating the spaces. Professional practice tends to rely on static factors like design knowledge and political influence, while local residents tend to rely on their lived experiences and hand-on resources. The authors suggest that total disregard of one perspective in favour of another might lead to more distance between the perspectives, rather than bridging the gap (Phuong Dinh, Daou & Huppatz, 2015, p. 6). This suggestion emphasises that discussion should further examine the spatial practices of home-based business, not least of which are the everyday negotiations that are part of the (trans)formation of *Hem* built environments, architectural characteristics, and public spaces. Looking at the physical characteristics of *Hem* spaces and human activities can reveal how home-based business spatially, physically, and architecturally adapts the built environment of *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang.

Contributions of Spatial Practice to *Hem* Life and Architecture

The flexible use of *Hem* open spaces is often associated with informality and chaos. There seem to be no logical patterns to their spatial changes throughout the times of their use. Everyday living realities mean that local use of *Hem* spaces has no pretensions of order. Local residents have no intention of hiding the structural changes to their houses from the public, regardless of their physical appearance. These structures appear as just what they seem to be, with specific functions serving the local lifestyle. As described in Chapter 4, the nature of unplanned construction and the consequently unusual footprints of houses in *Hem* have resulted in many living difficulties, such as lack of space for domestic, leisure, and

retail activities. The everyday flexible uses and adaptations of housefronts areas observed in *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang reflect these everyday issues and their temporary solutions. Furthermore, these observations portray the characteristics of everyday life and the physical conditions of most *Hem* landscapes in HCMC, as suggested in the contextual review in Chapter 1.

Figure 7.4 Variations of housefront structures, decorations, and uses (Sketched by the author, 2020)

Therefore, it is vital for this discussion to further delve into the interrelationship of the social factor discussed previously, the local spatial alterations, and the physical landscapes of *Hem*. How do everyday encounters between local residents, house owners, business owners, and street vendors influence the spatial changes of the *Hem*, as well as the related spatial practices? And how do the physical characteristics of *Hem* spaces help to form, construct, or support these human encounters and the everyday negotiations which lead to the flexible use of *Hem* spaces? The answers to these questions might bring us one step closer to understanding the resilience and resistance of spatial practices to the formal plans and regulations of Lefebvre's *conceived space*.

Figure 7.5 Senior residents enjoying their leisure time in front of their houses (Photographed by the author, 2020)

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In Chapter 2, the literature review identified two key aspects of spatial practices as tangible clues for examining the spatial changes and uses of *Hem* spaces. These are the physical characteristics of space and the everyday routines, human activities, and lived experience occurring there. As outlined in Chapter 2, Allan B. Jacob asserted that architectural characteristics and physical appearance, including building structures, decoration, styles, and sizes, are directly related to the lifestyle of the occupants, their wealth, and their lived experience (1985, pp. 31-36). The way that physical characteristics contribute to and expose everyday human encounters and activities has been called 'urban transparency' by Kim Dovey. The term denotes the ability to 'read' and learn about the everyday life of communities from their 'exposed' human activities, including domestic activities which occur in public spaces (2016, p. 82). Dovey argued that areas lacking sufficient resources for design professionals and construction materials tend to expose more human activities and public interactions, and hence are highly transparent (2016, p. 82).

The observed activities of local vendors and house owners, with their associated spatial changes, and the physical characteristics of houses in *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang illustrate Dovey's ideas. Many domestic activities spill over to the public open *Hem*, especially from tube-shaped houses of less than two storeys, due to their limited structures and footprints, as suggested in Chapter 4. The indoor areas of these houses are often bounded only by simple entrance doors, so all domestic life is exposed to the public as soon as they open their doors. Hence, street vendors and nearby business owners quickly learn house owners' lives and routines at their doorsteps, establishing opportunities to negotiate doing business there. Their choices of location are also based on other services running nearby which might potentially bring customers. For instance, food vendors often station themselves near the restaurants and cafés of *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang.

Figure 7.7 Street vendors stationed in front of a smoothie shop (Photographed by the author, 2018)

The urban transparency found in everyday encounters between local house owners, business owners, and street vendors is reflected by spatial practices which are ongoing solutions to the persistent lack of space for domestic and retail activities. Moreover, these solutions are not formulated by architectural designs, but are based on everyday social life and needs. This is the social fabric of symbiotic relationships between local stakeholders discussed in the previous section. The informal occupation of *Hem* space by business owners and street vendors, and the associated spatial changes, not only informally mark their territories, but also the home-space territories of houseowners.

What about the business and vendor activities which are occupying in front of formal-style houses? These include houses with more than three levels, visibly secured by professionally designed and constructed tall fences and gates. These houses have low transparency to public view. However, the daily routines in these domestic spaces, such as the communal worship ceremonies at Mrs V's house, also have impact on spatial practices in public *Hem* by others, including vendors, business owners, and travellers. As explained in Chapter 4, the traffic jams caused by Mrs V's guests lingering near the gate have always happened at the same time and place for years. Local vendors like Mr C.H.I use this moment to observe Mrs V's doorstep area and negotiate stationing himself there. These observations of retail and business activities in houses of different architectural characteristics denote two things.

Figure 7.8 (Left) Mr C.H.I stationed in front of Mrs V's neighbour's house; (Right) A food stall in front of a villa-style residence with tall fences and gates (Photographed by the author, 2018).

Firstly, the physical characteristics and decoration of *Hem* houses do not necessarily correlate with the lifestyle of the occupants, as proposed by Jacobs. This would mean that informal-style houses are associated with informal trading, while occupants living in formal-style house would be totally secluded from public life and tend to reject the everyday retail activities and related spatial practices of street vendors, which is not true. Secondly, the tolerance of such activities by the owners of formal-style houses further suggests that the discussed social factor exists in every *Hem* resident, regardless of their financial background and lifestyle. They mutually assist one another, which establishes a sense of

community via everyday adaptations making use of housefront areas. Given that this mentality has been part of everyday community life for years, it is important for professional designers and policymakers to acknowledge and account for it as part of economic and social wellbeing when they attempt to (re)develop *Hem* spaces.

Are there specific built characteristics of housefront areas that could further illustrate the above two points? Moreover, can these be used to demonstrate the resilient aspect of spatial practice in *Hem* which was discussed in the previous section? The spatial changes and adaptations to building setbacks along *Hem* paths are revealing. As suggested in Chapter 1, informal densification and construction in *Hem* areas has produced unusual house footprints, long and short. The uncoordinated reclamation by local government of housefront areas to expand *Hem* widths adds to the randomness of house lengths. After reclamations, these new setbacks provide opportunities for home or business owners and vendors to physically adapt their stalls and shop extensions, or display their merchandise more conveniently, encouraging them to open for longer and on a daily basis.

Figure 7.9 Vendors and local residents in the open-public *Hem* (sketched by the author, 2020)

According to Christopher Alexander, the psychological effects of living in long thin houses, like the typical tube-houses in *Hem*, can be both positive and negative for the daily routines of their inhabitants, which may influence them to undertake renovations and spatial changes within the house (Alexander et al., 1977, pp. 535-537). Even multi-level houses like Mrs V's often lack spaciousness, gradually leading to a sense of overcrowding. The best way to overcome this, for Alexander, is to seek opportunities to adapt outdoor spaces in unused areas, such as 'left-over' areas between or in front of buildings (Alexander et al., 1977, p.538). These areas can be contextually related to the building setback areas along the *Hem*'s path and the house's front vicinity.

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However, Alexander argued that building setbacks could negatively affect urban space as they "destroy the street as a social space" (1977, p. 593). The staggered buildings fronts caused by setbacks of different lengths can generate a slum-like feeling, discourage people from gathering socially, and destroy the atmosphere of a street (Alexander et al., 1977, pp. 593-594). Observations of *Hem* building setbacks nevertheless suggest differently. Spatial changes to housefronts and setback areas positively contribute to the liveliness of local life and business. These are areas that provide space for displaying merchandise, or for customers to consume products like coffee and meals. They are also spaces for local residents to gather socially or enjoy their leisure time, as described in Chapter 4. Different variations of housefront areas suggest that local home or business owners and vendors have a knack for identifying possibilities to adapt housefronts for the convenience and function of their businesses and this is a tradition of local spatial routines and everyday experience. Moreover, these spatial uses and alterations seem to add a sense of uniqueness to *Hem* spaces.

Figure 7.10 Menus of a restaurant are glued along the exterior wall of house 90 of Hem 60 Ly Chinh Thang (photographed by the author, 2019)

Local ways of adapting and using building setbacks in *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang represent the post-*Doi Moi* style of architecture. *Hem* spaces and their built environments reflect the changes brought by *Doi Moi*, for example, the legalisation again of privately owned business and trading. The urban planning systems of previous governments, including the French colonial regime and the US-supported regime, could not cope with waves of migration which massively boosted HCMC's population and, created squatter settlements in *Hem* areas. Some property investors, such as the previous owner of Mrs V's house, constructed houses with proper planning and design. However, the majority of the informal-style houses in *Hem* have had no professional input. The re-opening of private business after *Doi Moi* significantly improved the city and many households in *Hem* areas economically. Those who flourished under *Doi Moi* economic policies were in a better position to hire professional consultation to renovate their

houses, increase their standard of living, adapt to growing family sizes, and upgrade their home businesses. Changes in *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang brought by *Doi Moi*, including private construction and government projects, resulted in this unexpected creation of building setbacks and their different uses. This unexpected creation is an architectural factor enabling local residents to cope with changes after *Doi Moi*, and which has contributed to spatial practice in *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang.

The ways *Hem* communities adapt, alter, and use building setbacks, together with their reactions to changes made by neighbours, is an architectural example which illustrates and adds to Lefebvre's theory of *perceived space*. Building setback areas are adapted to become everyday spaces for home-based business and retail activities. Residents who fear losing part of their private premises due to government expansion projects allow local businesses to occupy housefront areas and make changes to their building setbacks as a way of asserting their ownership of them. *Hem* communities accept these spatial adaptations because they solve two problems, the fear of losing property and the lack of retail space. Since the benefits outweigh the disadvantages, such adaptations are widely appreciated by *Hem* residents. Everyday negotiation and informal agreement not only help to sustain *Hem* spatial practice, which is based on the local tradition of home-based business and retail activities, they also diversify the morphology of *Hem* space, where houses can spatially change, be renovated, and transform according to financial capacity and social networks. This flexibility is at the core of *Hem* spatial practice, significantly contributing to the livelihoods and everyday convenience of local residents.

Issues regarding property ownership and inheritance rights are also factors challenging local government expansion programs. As seen in the detailed case study of Ms H's house, disputes between family members over property rights have delayed the local government's attempts to verify the ownership of her property, hence delaying the widening of the *Hem*. Moreover, some government expansion projects have resulted in structural deterioration which has affected the lives of residents, like the floodwater pooling inside Ms H's kitchen. Local government should have a full understanding of these situations and deploy feasible programs to support *Hem* residents and address these issues. Doing so would gain the full cooperation of local residents in the project of upgrading *Hem* and making better urban spaces.

The discussions in section 7.1 suggest that local government and planning agencies should respect the diversified morphology of *Hem* spaces, including the flexible use of spaces in front of houses in *Hem*. Planning schemes for *Hem* that do not consider space for building setbacks and associated daily activities, such as small-scale business activities, will have negative social and economic consequences.

This consideration should also extend to the social aspects of local spatial practice, manifested in the symbiotic relationships between *Hem* residents and their everyday negotiations to adapt public open *Hem* spaces. These mentalities have been part of the local social fabric for years, and are a crucial factor in their social and economic wellbeing, as earlier explained. Lastly, new regulations that either allow or encourage private extension should take into account the structural condition of local houses and buildings in *Hem*. These regulations could then help to resolve safety problems caused by the spatial modifications and structural changes to local houses

Figure 7.11 (Left) A spacious street with various human activities on its pavements in Phu My Hung town; (Right) A food vendor busy preparing takeaway (Photographed by the author, 2018).

7.2 Learning from the spatial practice of '*Hem*-style' apartments

Contributions of the spatial practice of '*Hem*-style' apartments to theoretical understanding

Figure 7.12 Busy morning market in front of Block G (photographed by the author, 2016)

As described in Chapter 5, informal and open spatial characteristics are not unique to *Hem* spaces, but can also be observed in the public areas of some American-built *chung cu* (CC). Spatial transformations can be seen in both domestic and public areas of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat, characterised by informal

additions built by CC residents. This physical transformation means that the present-day condition of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat closely resembles that of *Hem* spaces. This section will discuss the architectural and structural transformations of CC spaces to further elaborate on Lefebvre's conceptual tension between *conceived* and *perceived space* in the CC context. More specifically, it will look into the local factors driving transformation and the related spatial practices. How are these factors similar, or different to those discussed in *Hem* spaces? Lesson learnt from the answers hopefully would extend the Lefebvre's theoretical concept to the CC context – which constitute an important layer of HCMC's urban grain.

According to Lefebvre (1991, p. 38), modern spatial practice should not solely be defined by the everyday routines of houseowners, pedestrians, and those who live and work at street-level, but also, by the daily life and economic activities of tenants in a government-subsidised high-rise housing project. However, Lefebvre was concerned the architectural characteristics of mass-scale housing could be a negative experience for tenants (2005, p. 267). More specifically, the monotonous structures, plainness, and modularisation are "the worst kind of abstraction" and often fail to reflect and support the lived experience of the tenants (2005, pp. 266-267). These criticisms suggest that professional designers should consider the lived experience of tenants, not the least of which is their need and desire to improve their quality of life and housing.

Several decades of support from the US government led to the rapid construction of CC mass housing blocks around HCMC in the late 1960s. Notably, CC Nguyen Thien Thuat is one of the largest that was built, as outlined in Chapter 5. The architecture and planning style of most American-built CC share similar characteristics, 'modularised' with the same structural design, four- to five-level height, façade, and geometrical grids of pathways between CC blocks. While the construction of the CC complexes was an immediately necessary act to provide housing for those displaced by the destruction of the Vietnam War, they do not meet the living and working standards of the present-day. Observations and examination of the present-day condition of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat showed that the formerly monotonous structures of the CC have been changed by residents, both internally and externally. This has been done in response to several issues, around lack of domestic spaces for extended families and home-based retail spaces, which are very similar to the problems in *Hem*.

In particular, the original structures of CC blocks and flats are not adequate for the re-emergence of private business, including family- and home-based business, brought by *Doi Moi* in 1986. Outside the flats, block façades have been covered with variations of local-style balconies, shop-sign extensions, billboards, and other informal building structures in the forms of either *chuong cop* (tiger cage) or *long*

chim (bird cage). Some of these structures also act as flat extensions to gain extra domestic space, further accommodating the need to combine the domestic routines and retail activities of flat owners. Inside the flats, the former layout, such as the studio-type flat of Mr N's family and the one-bedroom flat of Mr B's family, have been redesigned by flat owners to suit their family's lives. Filling up ventilation voids is the paradigmatic renovation activity.

However, local building changes and construction activities have been deemed to be ugly, unsafe, and slum-like by the local government, and thus are discouraged. These government perspectives are reflected in their recent strategies responding to local building alterations. These include the demolition of CC façades, then rebuilding them with homogenous-looking balconies, and proposals to redevelop CC spaces with new high-rises.

The physical changes, transformations, and adaptions made by CC residents, which are layered over the former structure of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat, seem to represent Lefebvre's ideas of *perceived space*, while local government strategies and responses to these local adaptations seem to represent his *conceived space*. The tension of the different viewpoints suggests that the discussion should look into the social factors behind CC spatial practice to resolve the differences.

In fact, the constructive relationship between flat owners, manifested in the everyday collaboration and negotiation associated with their alterations of built space, is the key factor that facilitates and sustains this ongoing spatial transformation. As briefly discussed in Chapter 5, CC residents accept and collaborate with their neighbours in changing the structures of flats because most of them face the same need to extend their space. If one disagrees with another's changes, one might not be able to gain neighbourhood approval to make structural changes to one's own flat. Another motivation is that these structural changes bring several mutual benefits to the economics of home-based business in CC. For instance, parents who are waiting for their children attending a tutorial at Mr N's flat can shop nearby or enjoy beverages at establishments located in flats at all levels of Blocks A and B, as well as in the shared corridors and public pathways. Local beverage vendors around CC Nguyen Thien Thuat appreciate Mr B's father's coffee service because his workshop is nearby, shortening the delivery time with cheaper supplies. This symbiotic relationship between local business owners, whereby one service can support or complement another, drives local flat owners to approve and accept spatial changes to CC flats. Thus, this social factor helps to sustain the practice of home-based business in the CC context. Having identified this social factor, the discussion will now turn to similarities and differences with *Hem* spaces.

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Figure 7.13 (Left) Grocery stores have extended their display into the pathway between Blocks G and J; (Right) *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang (Photographed by the author, 2017).

As briefly stated in Chapter 5, the symbiotic relationship between business owners around CC flats and their neighbours closely resembles that of the business owners, house owners, and mobile vendors in *Hem* spaces. The observed local challenges, such as the lack of space for domestic and retail activities, and how CC residents overcome them, suggest similarity with *Hem* spaces. In both *Hem* and CC contexts, everyday negotiations and mutual agreements are key to running home-based businesses and the related spatial practices. Local retail and its spatial changes not only aim to cater to the local community, but also to visitors and customers from elsewhere. This also affirm that the social factors driving home-based business and its spatial practices persist in different settings and are able to adapt to different built forms and urban typologies.

The main difference identified in the CC context is that the social factor here appears even more intense than in *Hem* areas. Construction and building activities to modify CC spaces require collaborative efforts between flat owners, such as flat exchanges and joint construction. Most flat owners have to negotiate with their neighbours, above and adjacent to them, to fill in void areas, like Mr N did. In some situations, they may even have to share the cost of load-bearing structures in order to withstand the extended structures above, like Mr B's family did, as explained in Chapter 5. Explaining the flexible use of *Hem* housefronts and property encroachments, like with Ms H's house in Chapter 4, only requires observation of the routines of house owners and the encroachments of their neighbours. This difference further accentuates the resilience of the social factor, which means local residents tend to seek immediate solutions by cooperating with their neighbours and community. Despite the many permutations of informal building extensions and alterations to the original architecture of CC blocks, this social factor seems to exist in one form or another throughout.

To Lefebvre, spatial practice should not be ignored or neglected by professional designers because the inhabitants will always attempt to transform the housing typology where they live, in order to

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accommodate their everyday need. On this, Lefebvre stated that the inhabitants will 'always strive to presuppose [*conceived space*] it, though slowly but surely as [spatial practice] masters and appropriate [*conceived space*] it (1991, p.39). After decades of use, CC are run-down and overpopulated due to lack of proper maintenance support by government (Thai Nguyen, 2017, p. 114). CC residents have had no choice but to make these 'informal' changes because they are the most immediate and practical response to the everyday needs of local residents. Ongoing efforts to change this foreign-style apartment block by local residents suggest that local lifestyles, small-scale retail activities, and the mentality of supporting one another, are driving factors that significantly contribute to spatial practice in CC. These once monotonous and massive blocks are gradually appropriated by this spatial practice, which makes them suitable for present-day lived experience and the existing urban grain and tradition of HCMC. The above statement by Lefebvre reinforces that local government and professional designers should acknowledge the role and contribution of CC spatial practices to the life of the community, not least of which is the architectural character of CC blocks.

Christopher Day suggested that the phenomenological changes found in large housing development are inevitable, and commented that "All large development stifle diversity. Brand new places will not change for several decades" (1999, p. 267). Thus, housing tenants will eventually change their homes according to changes in living standards, experience, economics, and their everyday needs (Day, 1999, pp. 267-268). The following section will discuss how these spatial changes and practices in CC reflect Day's ideas. In particular, it will examine how these structural changes and the local social factors are influenced by the everyday life and architectural characteristics of CC spaces.

Contributions of Spatial Practice to '*Hem*-style' Apartment Life and Architecture

Figure 7.14 Pathway between Blocks A and B (Photographed by the author, 2016)

According to Manish Chalana and Jeffery Hou (2016, p. 13), structural changes to apartments or houses made by tenants are natural phenomena in the urban context, where local government cannot provide adequate support for the everyday life of tenants. The physical characteristics of apartments and houses after changes closely resemble many urban settings of their cities, signifying that these structures have successfully entered the vernacular and affirmed the places and identities associated with tenants' lives and routines (Chalana and Hou, 2016, p. 13). Hence, local tenants may have a tendency to reject other immediate changes, such as government maintenance and redevelopment programs which do not support local lifestyles like their own spatial changes do. Observed local changes happen at the CC's built environment in Chapter 5 denote a similar experience to these ideas of Chalana and Hou.

This section will discuss spatial change phenomena in CC spaces which reflect the lived experience, everyday encounters, and negotiations of the local community. Specifically, it will examine the interrelationship between the social factor, as identified in CC spatial practice, and the two key aspects of spatial practice, physical characteristics and human activities, which Lefebvre theorised. This will possibly provide a way to identify how this social factor facilitates the internal agreements leading to the spatial changes of flat layout and block structures made by residents.
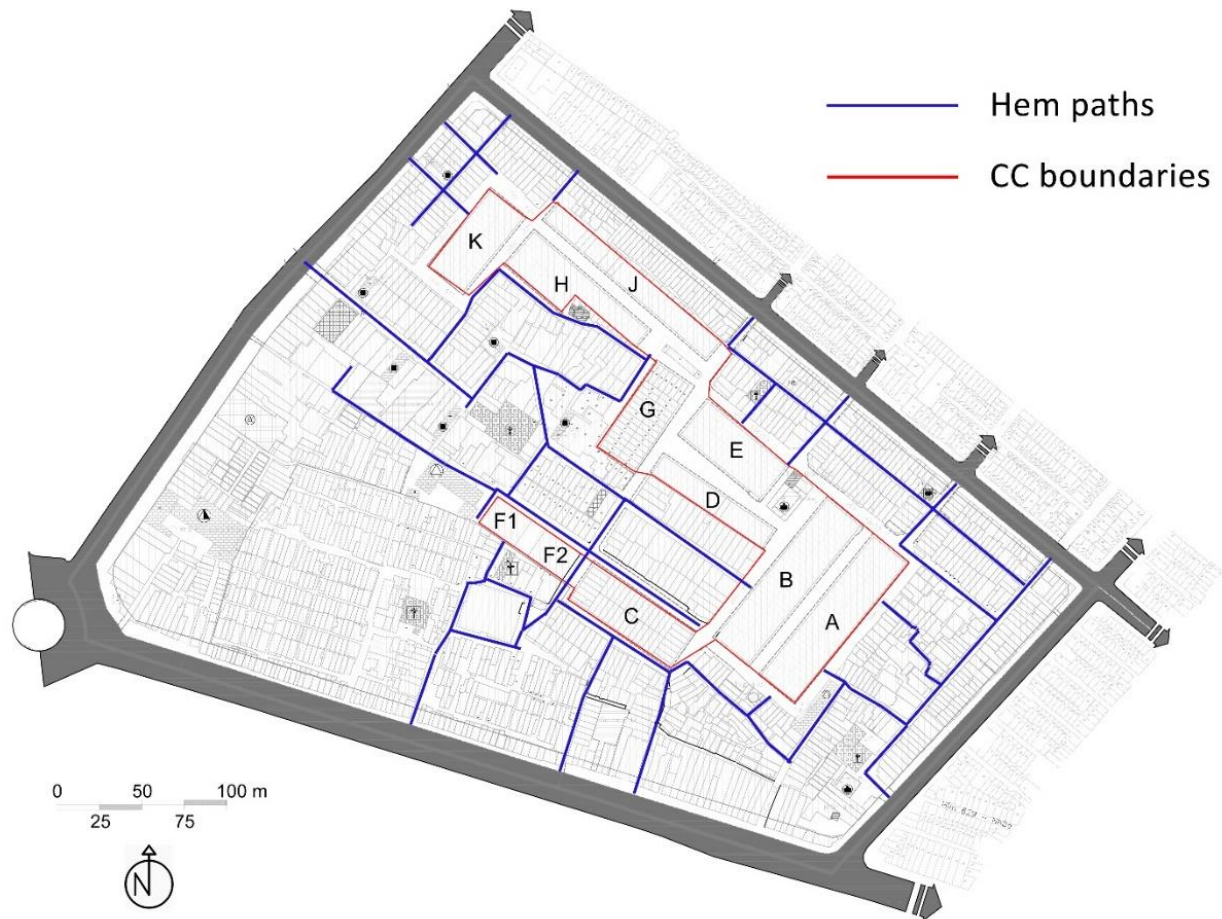
Figure 7.15 *Hem* networks around CC Nguyen Thien Thuat (Produced by the author, 2020)

While the original structures of CC blocks were not designed to facilitate building additions, customisation, or adaptation, the present-day built form of CC blocks is shaped by locally made modules and structures, all in different forms and made with different construction techniques. What has driven these changes, perhaps, is the nature of home-based business in Vietnam, which was reviewed in Chapter 2. Ha Minh Hai Thai (2019, p. 927) suggested that physical adaptations for home-based business, such as structural renovation and (re)design, are done to achieve two key things. First, to combine domestic routines and retail activities within home spaces. Second, to expose the business to public view. Therefore, home spaces tend to expand into public view due to the practice of home-based business and its associated physical changes (Hai Thai et al., 2019, pp. 297-298).

Figure 7.16 The owner of a restaurant located at a Block A staircase watching her children finishing their lunch (Photographed by the author, 2017)

Observations of CC public spaces described in Chapter 5 confirmed the association between Hai Thai's description of Vietnamese-style home-based business and the present-day uses of CC spaces. Public spaces of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat are not only used to run retail activities, but also for domestic activities, including the ground-level pathways between the blocks and the shared corridors and staircase landings on all levels. While greeting customers and trade partners in front of their flats, shop owners also do their chores, cook, nap, chat with their neighbours, or look after their children. For the convenience of retail and domestic activities, flat owners then make additional changes to CC structures, especially the balconies and façades. These structural changes further reflect that both retail and domestic activities are inseparable parts of daily life in CC.
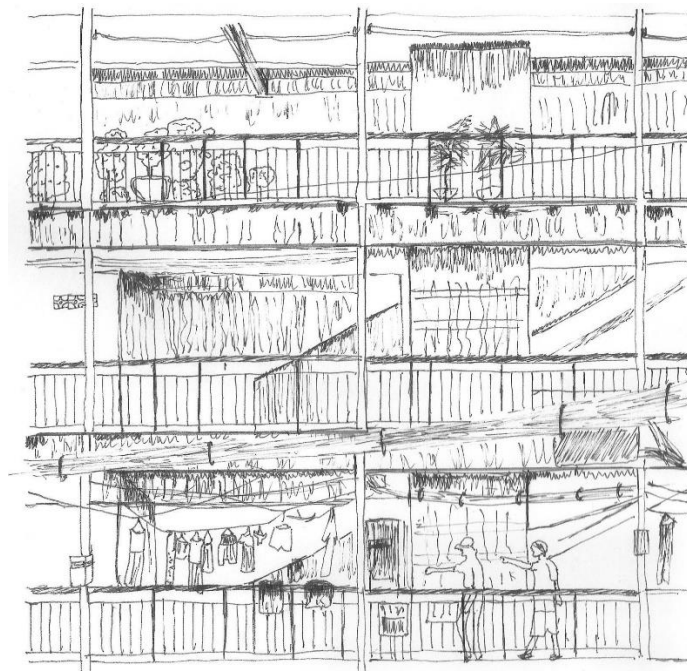
Figure 7.17 Some senior residents are going to a coffee shop locates at level three of Block A (Sketched by the author, 2017)

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Observed local changes show significant consideration of CC physical proportions and characteristics during joint construction activities, in the sizes of structures, the flexible use, and their 'openness' characteristic of CC blocks. If add-on structures are too big or bulky, they interfere with pedestrian movement in pathways and shared corridors. Customers might no longer travel with ease through CC spaces, discouraging them from discovering local amenities and businesses and damaging home-based businesses there.

This finding is significant, as it reaffirms the previous discussion about the social factors driving the spatial changes and practice in the CC context. Regardless of urban typology, whether *Hem* spaces or American-built CC, spatial changes and privatisation of public spaces begin when local residents share similar needs to extend their domestic areas or make space for everyday retail activities. To cope with the urban mutations characterised by informal building extensions and structures in CC spaces, local flat owners need to pay extra attention to the cooperative social factor unique to CC contexts, as well as, the sizes and proportions of additional constructions. Thus, enabling CC residents to transform their apartments' original structures to make them more suitable for both retail and domestic activities.

Despite the massive changes, added structures still have a sufficient level of transparency to expose the retail and domestic life around CC blocks. This phenomenon recalls Dovey's idea of transparency and adds to it. The resilience of urban transparency is not only due to limitations like lack of proper construction materials and architectural input, but also because the local community wants to retain exposure and visibility for the benefit of their retail and daily life activities. This can be experienced in the CC context, particularly, in the shared corridors of upper levels, where layers of structural changes and additional structures still visually expose business, retail, and domestic activities to the public. These spatial changes might look 'unsafe' or 'uncivilised' due to their lack of proper architectural and engineering input. Nevertheless, they encourage daily human interactions across all levels, and bring a liveability and character to local life which is essentially grounded in human encounters between the old and the young, the buyers and sellers, the locals and the visitors passing through the CC.

Figure 7.18 Various food and beverage vendors occupying the landing areas of Block A (Photographed by the author, 2018)

Home-based business and its related spatial practice are also significant aspects of HCMC's urban character, reflected in the adaptations of both public and domestic spaces to accommodate family-based retail and daily activities which appear in various urban housing typologies, such as tube-houses along *Hem* or flats in CC blocks. Home-based business is resilient and able to adapt to different built forms as seen with various types of business using similar CC flat layouts that present limited spaces as described earlier. Details of spatial changes and adaptations in the case studies of Mr N's studio-type flat and Mr B's one-bedroom flat reveal one aspect of this resilience. They display different mental and physical aspects of the coexistence of home and work in one environment. Physically, flats are adaptively used for both daily routines and work, such as shops, workshops, and classrooms. Mentally, family-based business has been part of local tradition for years. Architectural changes to CC in response to the local tradition of home-based business reflect the resilient transformations of these foreign-built CC which adapt them to everyday social, cultural, and economic needs.

In the broader context of the Vietnamese built environment, similar spatial practices and building changes can be seen in most Soviet-built housing (KTT) in Hanoi. Of these changes, Phuong Dinh writes (2011, p. 137) that local structural changes have adjusted the massive KTT blocks to be architecturally, culturally, and practically closer to the urban spaces and human scale of Hanoi's Old Quarter, which is made distinctive by retail activities, family-owned shops, and the layouts of traditional Hanoi houses. However, one major difference in spatial practice between CC and KTT is in how locals make their structural changes and additions. Phuong Dinh suggested that the spatial changes in Hanoi's KTT focus on recreating village-style settlement with little consideration of the original KTT structures (2011, p.

136; 2019, p. 313). However, the nature of spatial changes in HCMC's CC revealed in this thesis suggest that there is more consideration there for the original CC structures in structural adaptions and additions. As previously suggested, the transparency of CC façades is crucial to home-based business on all levels, while retail activities in KTT are mostly located at ground level.

Figure 7.19 (Left) Retail activities are mostly concentrated at ground level of KTT A9 in Hanoi, but are (Right) scattered across all levels of Block D in HCMC (Sketches by the author, 2017).

These differences and similarities between spatial practice and changes to Hanoi's KTT and Saigon's CC suggest several things. Because both were designed with foreign support and architectural ideas, they have not responded well to the increasing needs of local residents, including the needs of home-based businesses. The emergence of these business activities and the associated changes denote that family-based retail is an essential part of Vietnamese everyday culture. Local spatial practices of structural and spatial changes, either in CC Nguyen Thien Thuat or Hanoi's KTT, reflect the desire of local flat owners to live, interact, and work as a community who want to create better spaces to live and work in.

Understanding these aspects of home-based business and the social factor of local consideration and negotiation when making spatial changes, together with daily difficulties like the shortage of space, will allow architects, local government, and housing developers to be more open-minded regarding the spatial alterations of CC residents. This will positively contribute to mutual understanding between local residents, CC developers, and designers, and encourage the cooperation between these stakeholders which is key to any future (re)development plans for CC.

In fact, the main cause of delays in the CC Nguyen Thien Thuat redevelopment programs is that local residents have been refusing to fully cooperate with local government and the CC developers. While most CC residents approve the plans because the new design will improve the domestic conditions of

local households, they are still hesitant about their business opportunities (Huy Gia, 2019).[26] They are concerned that the new proposal does not present any opportunities for ongoing family-based retail practice. In the renderings of the proposal approved by the People's Committee of District 3, the old residential blocks are replaced by high-rise monoliths. These new designs lack the 'openness' characteristic which is part of the local practice of home-based business. Furthermore, the redevelopment programs do not include any feasible strategies to relocate present-day businesses from the CC community, nor for business opportunities in the new apartments.

Figure 7.20 Rendering of the design proposal for CC Nguyen Thien Thuat (People's Committee of District 3, HCMC)

Since the proposal requires 100 percent approval from the CC community to proceed, as stated by Mr Do Minh Long, Director of Urban Management for District 3 (Kien Cuong, 2019),[27] it is important for local government and the responsible architects to reconsider and respect local lifestyles and everyday lived experiences, including the tradition of home-based business and the local social factors which enable mutual economic benefits between flat owners. These experiences should be flexibly incorporated by professional designers, the creators of *conceived space,* into their design ideas for redevelopments. Subsequently, the local community would feel more secure, both socially and economically, in new environments and become more open and cooperative with local authorities.

While it is difficult to design or plan new architectural features to replicate the ongoing lived experience of CCs – characterised by the practice of home-based business, the everyday social life, and the related spatial practice – professionals should make efforts to empirically observe the spatial phenomenon of local additional building activities so they can unfold the architectural experience that encourages

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[26] Collected from https://bds.tinnhanhchungkhoan.vn/bat-dong-san/doanh-nghiep-bo-chay-khoi-du-an-cai-tao-chung-cu-cu-216452.html
[27] Collected from https://plo.vn/bat-dong-san/gom-nhieu-chung-cu-cu-ve-mot-moi-tai-dinh-cu-853111.html

everyday encounters, which seem to be almost taken for granted. For example, the shared corridors, together with locally made additional structures, are original CC structures with good architectural qualities and designs. The wide corridors not only provide access to private flats, but also cater to numerous retail and domestic activities.

Redevelopment plans and designs should consider the original structures because CC Nguyen Thien Thuat, together with other CC in HCMC, represents an important architectural layer of the city. These considerations should also account for the social factors which enable the local practice of home-based business and related spatial practice because they may help to solve the ongoing issues of overcrowding, deteriorating buildings, and lack of retail spaces. At the same time, they add character, liveability, and convenience to local everyday life.
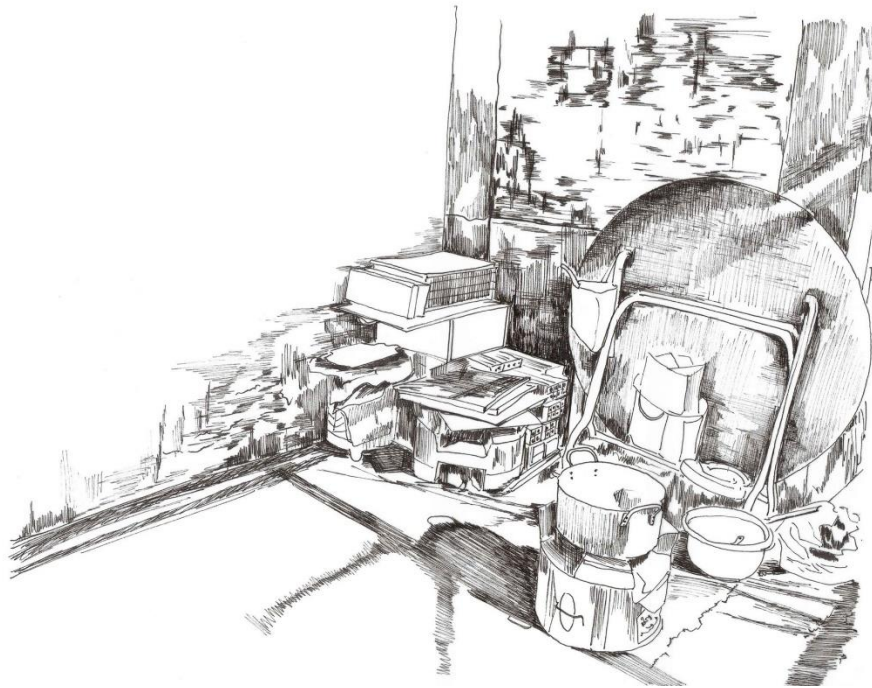
Figure 7.21 Landing of Block B is used as private kitchen (Sketched by the author, 2018)

7.3 Learning from Spatial Practice and *Phong Thuy* Beliefs in Cho Lon's *Hem*

Theoretical Implications of *Phong Thuy* Spatial Practices in *Hem*

Figure 7.22 *Phong thuy* charms and altars on a housefront in Hao Sy Phuong (Photographed by the author, 2019)

The findings and discussions of Chapters 4 and 5 have explored local spatial practices, including home-based business and its associated social aspects, as factors contributing to the physical transformation and flexible use of both *Hem* spaces and American-built CC spaces. In Chapter 6, the case studies extended the range of factors which influence spatial practice in Cho Lon to include the spiritual needs, concerns, and desires of the local *Hem* communities. Physical transformations and the local uses of public *Hem* are often due to the local belief in *phong thuy*, a Vietnamese version of the Chinese *feng shui.* Observations reported in Chapter 6 indicate that *phong thuy* beliefs are still relevant to the design, renovation, and improvement of both domestic and exterior spaces in *Hem* areas.

Phong thuy practice also requires use of residents' personal details, like their date of birth and ethnic background, which further expresses their perception of their living spaces. The explorations of Hao Sy Phuong and Ms PG's house in Chapter 6 suggested that it is essential to examine *phong thuy* practice to understand *Hem* spaces in Cho Lon, given that it has been an important aspect of Cho Lon's everyday urban experience. This section will elaborate on those findings from Hao Sy Phuong and Ms PG's house, with reference to Lefebvre's concepts of space. This discussion will hopefully help to highlight the role of *phong thuy* beliefs in shaping the spatial characteristics of HCMC, and add to broader theories of urban spaces.

Inhabitants will always strive to inject their feelings, thoughts, emotions, and spiritual desires into their home spaces (Tuan, 1977, pp. 17-18). Several spatial theorists and philosophers reviewed in Chapter 2 have discussed the motivations for this, including: to gain a better understanding of their home (Tuan, 1977, pp. 17-18); to create a sense of home (Heidegger, 1971, p. 52); or to satisfy certain everyday experiences, like a sense of comfort and security (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 341). Edward Relph coined the term 'insideness' to capture the involvement of human emotions and feelings in constructing our living or working spaces (1976, p. 49). The effects on house renovation, decoration, and preservation of certain building details or spiritual structures of *phong thuy* practices were contextually explored in Chapter 6. These, together with Relph's 'insideness', are important aspects contributing to the understanding of *phong thuy* practice, which involves integrating inhabitants' 'inside' feelings, personal identifications, and spiritual desires, with the physical characteristics and symbolic meanings of *Hem* spaces, historical landmarks, built structures, and houses.

These ideas are also in line with the *phong thuy* practices observed during the investigation of Mr C and Ms P.G improving their home spaces. *Phong thuy* involvement in the redesign and renovation of the façade, housefront, and domestic space suggests that *phong thuy* can boost the connection between the human psyche and home spaces. For example, for *phong thuy* believers like Mr C and Ms P.G, the renovations of house façade and interior spaces recommended by their *phong thuy* masters help to address many concerns regarding their businesses and everyday lives, as well as temporally ease these concerns. Spatial changes within these home spaces, including the placement of *phong thuy* charms, fittings, domestic appliances, and altars, not only provide a sense of spiritual protection, but also reflect traditions and ethnicity (Teochew, Cantonese etc.), which improves the spiritual wellbeing of the occupants.

These present findings are significant regarding the perception of ritual spaces. Spaces that are (re)designed or adapted for *phong thuy* related rituals seem to create a mental sense of space in worship activities. As seen in the detailed studies of Ms C's housefront and Ms P.G's interior spaces, specific *phong thuy* rituals are performed in certain areas in different cycles, daily, monthly, or annually. Furthermore, both Mr C and Ms P.G asserted that these rituals are important parts of their everyday lives and mental wellbeing, as well as of their family's traditions. Thus, the ritual spaces and ritual activities of *phong thuy* are cultural customs and traditions which seem to create safe mental space within home territories. The satisfaction of the residents after performing their rituals is also important for the quality of their home spaces. For instance, if the rituals performed in front of Hao Sy Phuong's

houses do not solve their real-life concerns, local residents like Mr C change the *phong thuy* charms and other spiritual talisman placed along their door lintels, as observed in Chapter 6. The attentive care of Ms P.G for her home altars – replacing offerings, refreshing decorations, and performing rituals in front of her *ong dia* altar – are part of a ritual space where Ms P.G expresses her commitment to the customs and beliefs of *phong thuy*.

The creation of *phong thuy* ritual spaces to satisfy everyday spiritual needs adds a new dimension to Lefebvre's concepts of space. This dimension, spiritual spatial practice, can be seen where occupants make, design, and change their living spaces according to their spiritual needs and desires. In the context of Cho Lon's *Hem*, spiritual spatial practice can be experienced in Hao Sy Phuong where residents apply *phong thuy* and its related rituals to spatial changes to their housefronts and façades, as well as privatising certain public spaces of the *Hem* for spiritual needs.

However, spiritual spatial practice in Hao Sy Phuong is not only the province of those equipped with intensive *phong thuy* knowledge, like Mr C, but also of those who only know *phong thuy* by observing and following their neighbours' practices. As described in Chapter 6, some locals who do not have intensive *phong thuy* knowledge consider their pets as spiritual charms, after observing their neighbours doing so. The placement of *phong thuy* charms, like paper amulets and ornaments, along their door lintels may also come from the recommendations of neighbours. Therefore, *phong thuy* practices here often seem to be spatial changes and adaptations by locals to fit their habits and routines, without their fully understanding *phong thuy*. To these residents, such spatial changes and adaptations are simply customary methods shaped and nourished by everyday interactions with those who have a better understanding of *phong thuy* practice. It seems possible that this simply customary practice of *phong thuy* is due to several factors.

Figure 7.23 A paper amulet shaped like a chicken foot is less perishable than a real one (Photographed by the author, 2020)

The first could be the local stories associated with specific areas or spaces within the *Hem*, like the stories concerning the haunted eastern entrance of Hao Sy Phuong. Because it is part of their everyday space and home territory, the negative aspects of the eastern entrance can affect the sense of comfort and security of locals here. These concerns drive the majority of them to take steps, either by consulting with *phong thuy* masters or seeking advice and guidance from neighbours, to reverse these negative aspects. Secondly, *phong thuy* practice is part of everyday life for its practitioners, like Mr C, yet other residents might not fully understand *phong thuy,* but simply adopt and imitate their neighbours' customs to mitigate their own spiritual concerns. Finally, in Hao Sy Phuong spatial changes and adaptations for *phong thuy* reasons are concentrated on exterior elements like housefronts, façades, and entrances, which can be observed from public areas. These observations enable local residents to study the meanings of these *phong thuy* practices, including worship activities, symbolic meanings of charms, and use of other spiritual talisman, via everyday interactions with their neighbours.

These observations provide significant evidence that *Hem* communities generally perceive *phong thuy* practices and their spiritual aspects as local customs, by both those who fully understand *phong thuy* and those who do not. In particular, *phong thuy* beliefs and their related spiritual spatial practices amongst those who view them as simply customs further strengthen the sense of community in Cho Lon's *Hem*. As described in Chapter 6, residents of Hao Sy Phuong have used *phong thuy* and its applications to identify where to make necessary structural changes, not only to their home spaces, but also to the public spaces and structures of the *Hem*, which encourages residents to participate in preserving the character of Hao Sy Phuong. This includes the continuous care of local altars, the gateway banner, and other local landmarks, as described in Chapter 6. Hence, *phong thuy* and the related spiritual spatial practices greatly contribute to the community's sense of identity, despite differences in ethnic backgrounds.

The above discussions suggest that there should be at least some consideration of *phong thuy* when renovating or (re)designing the houses and living spaces of residents who regard *phong thuy* as a local custom. Despite the increasing popularity of *phong thuy* after *Doi Moi*, people who practise it simply as a local custom are often underrepresented and tend to be taken for granted by their own community. This neglect extends to local government officials who disregard the role of *phong thuy* in everyday life. As explained in Chapter 2, HCMC's government has integrated *phong thuy* perspectives into its recent new planning, construction, and renovation projects, but *phong thuy* has not yet received adequate attention in the architectural preservation of older urban spaces, including the *Hem* areas of Cho Lon.

The consequence, as discussed in Chapter 6, is that the spiritual roles of historical landmarks within Hao Sy Phuong are usually disregarded. In other Cho Lon *Hem*, historical landmarks have been either demolished or renovated with little reference to local customs and *phong thuy* beliefs. Furthermore, official ideas of a modern, civilised, and progressive society often outweigh local residents' concerns about their *phong thuy* issues. This disparity is clearly due to a lack of respect for local belief systems like *phong thuy* and its and architectural applications, which may enhance individual and community wellbeing in *Hem*.

The following section will discuss the architectural characteristics of *phong thuy* practice in *Hem* spaces. As demonstrated in Chapter 6, *phong thuy* beliefs influence structure designs at different levels, including in the public *Hem*, on house exteriors, and in interior layouts. The discussion hopes to provide insight into how *phong thuy* might affect residents' perceptions of their own living spaces, which in turn influences design, renovation, and alteration of these spaces, as well as how *phong thuy* shapes their everyday routines. It also hopes to reveal how certain aspects of *phong thuy* and its related spatial practices have influenced the architectural characteristics of *Hem* spaces, the lived experience of local communities, and local customs.

Architectural Implications of Spiritual Spatial Practice in Cho Lon's *Hem*
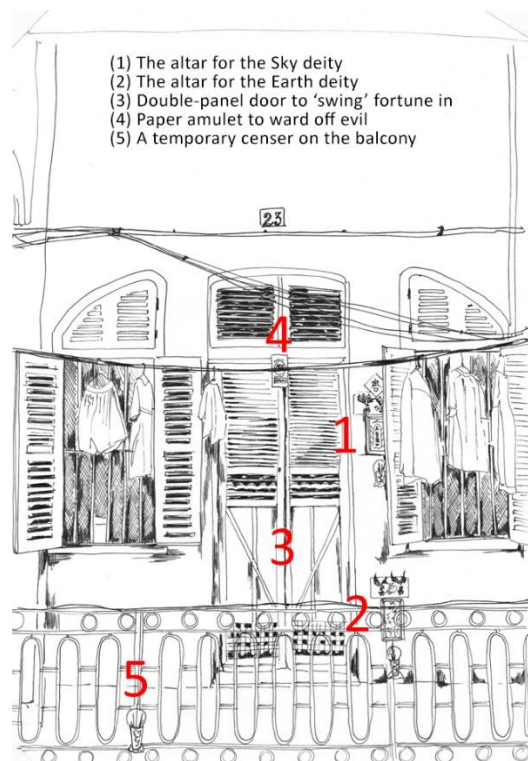
(1) The altar for the Sky deity
(2) The altar for the Earth deity
(3) Double-panel door to 'swing' fortune in
(4) Paper amulet to ward off evil
(5) A temporary censer on the balcony

Figure 7.24 Typical spiritual features of a house façade in Hao Sy Phuong (Sketched and produced by the author, 2020)

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The previous section discussed how local customs regarding everyday life and the spaces within Cho Lon's *Hem* are influenced by *phong thuy* and its related spiritual spatial practices. It also gave several reasons for the local adoption of *phong thuy* practices as everyday customs. In brief, *phong thuy* practice and its spiritual aspects unveil the symbolic meanings of spaces based on their physical characteristics, such as building shapes, landforms, or the surroundings. These meanings can differ between residents depending on their personal identities, nevertheless empowering all with a deeper understanding of their lived spaces and suggestions for improving their homes. Essentially, these findings illustrate the interrelationship between the physical characteristics of a space, its spiritual aspects, and the occupants' lived experiences. Phuong and Groves (2010, p. 17) also captured this interrelationship and extrapolated from it that *phong thuy* practice might increase the respect of residents for their homes, both physically and spiritually.

However, the findings of Phuong and Groves suggest that this respect occurs exclusively between the occupant and his/her home, as between the shop-house in Hanoi and its owner examined in their article (2010, pp. 9-16). However, these findings also apply to a broader context. Findings from Chapter 6 indicate that in Cho Lon's *Hem* the respect aspect of *phong thuy* exists not only at the domestic or family level, but also at the neighbourhood level. Local residents of Hao Sy Phuong not only respect their neighbours' *phong thuy* practices and the associated spatial changes of housefronts, many also participate in community-initiated programs to maintain historical structures and local landmarks. It is worth mentioning that these residents do not share kinship and come from different ethnicities and backgrounds, as outlined in the contextual review of Cho Lon in Chapter 1. The discussion of this section will now look at some architectural features emerging from *phong thuy* and its related spiritual spatial practice, in order to reveal the contribution of *phong thuy* to the built environment of *Hem* spaces, ranging from house interiors to public *Hem* and their landmarks. It will focus on how these aspects influence *Hem* residents to adopt *phong thuy* as an everyday local custom for creating better living spaces.

The process of examining *phong thuy* aspects of home spaces and their physical characteristics may involve the complex rules of *phong thuy*, but the spiritual meanings of home spaces are often also quite comprehensible in relation to everyday life experiences. For instance, the different domestic areas in Ms PG's house represent certain aspects of her family's wellbeing, such as family harmony, health, fortune, and prosperity. Such *phong thuy* aspects of home spaces are often incorporated into later strategies to further improve them via physical adjustments, including placing *phong thuy* charms and house

decorations. These physical adjustments are also done to accommodate the performance of *phong thuy* rituals by the house's occupants.

Because some of these physical adjustments and many *phong thuy* rituals take place in public *Hem* spaces, such as housefront and doorstep areas, their exposure presents opportunities for neighbours who are keen to adopt *phong thuy* practices to improve the spiritual aspects of their house. *Phong thuy* practice is not exclusively a private matter of exchanging identity between the home and its occupants; *Hem* residents often practise *phong thuy* by adopting their neighbours' practices, which seems to extend the application of this local spiritual practice. As described in Chapter 6, several residents of Hao Sy Phuong have adapted their housefronts for raising chickens as spiritual *phong thuy* charms. These spatial practices are not necessarily based on their own personal identities or concerns, but are often done in imitation of their neighbours.

There are several possible explanations for this. People in HCMC usually prefer to settle in places with human presence. Places lacking human presence are generally avoided as deserted, cold, and unliveable, reflected in a traditional Vietnamese proverb – *nhat can thi, nhi can lan* – which means 'It is best to settle in a cosmopolitan area, and near a market.' The proverb promotes human presence and constant human activity as key guidelines for choosing a place to settle. These ideas are also consistent with general *phong thuy* principles regarding the association between human activities, the physical characteristics of a space, and the related *phong thuy* factors. Places constantly enriched with human activity and physical landforms which generate a sense of welcoming and warmth are usually associated with good *phong thuy*. On the other hand, places with bad *phong thuy* lack human activity and their physical landforms generate a sense of coldness and desertion. For instance, the eastern entrance to Hao Sy Phuong is associated with negative *phong thuy* aspects because its tunnel pathway lacks natural sunlight and communal activities. In the case of Ms P.G's house, the nearby kindergarten is associated with bad *phong thuy* when there are no children there.

Hence the merely customary, rather than devout, practice of *phong thuy* by many residents of Hao Sy Phuong is perhaps a way to counter some negative aspects of the *Hem* reflected in local stories, physical characteristics, and human activities. Even for those who practise it as simply customary, *phong thuy* and its spatial practices like placement of charms or (re)decoration of houses, help to foster a sense of home to counter the local stories about the haunted gateways. *Phong thuy* rituals, including worship activities and tending personal charms, boost personal attachment to home spaces and potentially ease these concerns. For those with intensive understanding of *phong thuy*, the constant presence of their

neighbours performing rituals and making physical changes to improve their homes also helps to soothe their own concerns regarding Hao Sy Phuong's negative aspects.

This discussion of *phong thuy* and its related spatial practice observed in Cho Lon's *Hem* further suggest some possible extensions to Relph's concept of 'insideness'. Personal emotions, feelings, and identities, or 'insideness', are not the sole influence on experiences of spaces (i.e. designing, making, changing spaces) and their *phong thuy* aspects. One's own 'insideness' can also influence another person's perceptions of their space and influence their experience of it. This situation can be found when local residents without intensive *phong thuy* knowledge base their home improvements and physical changes on their neighbour's knowledge of *phong thuy*. The architectural implication of this theoretical extension of Relph's concept is that spatial changes around *phong thuy* beliefs scale up from the domestic realm to public and community spaces.

Even though *phong thuy* knowledge and practice has become increasingly popular and widely applied to different urban scales, from small-scale residential projects to large-scale government construction and other property development, tensions still exist between the government and local residents, despite people on both sides being *phong thuy* believers and practitioners. However, if residents raised their *phong thuy* concerns with the local government, they would likely be deemed superstitious and irrational. Recent urban policies also discourage many housefront rituals, like throwing rice and salt onto public streets, burning joss paper, and lighting large amounts of incense. On the other hand, government building projects whose architecture, built forms, and landforms reflect *phong thuy* practice are applauded as reflecting Vietnamese tradition. Clearly, this tension is caused by a lack of official understanding of *phong thuy* and its associated spatial changes at residential and neighbourhood levels, often made to provide spaces for everyday spiritual activities, including worship, household rituals, and other ceremonies.

Figure 7.25 *Phong thuy* rituals usually take place in specific areas of Hao Sy Phuong housefronts (Photographed by the author, 2019)

The need to acknowledge and resolve this tension is urgent, because the spiritual characteristics of *Hem* in Cho Lon have been rapidly vanishing in recent years. *Hem* landmarks which host spiritual activities have been disregarded by local officials. Furthermore, rundown local historical landmarks do not receive adequate government support or appropriate preservation guidelines. Eventually, these landmarks are abandoned or redesigned by local officials, with new structures having few or no links to the historical and traditional context of the *Hem*.

This situation arguably suggests that *phong thuy* practice should be considered a tool in the conservation and preservation of the historic Cho Lon area, including its *Hem*. The architecturally significant aspect of *phong thuy*, as earlier discussed, is that it puts the connection between personal identities, backgrounds, and the physical characteristics of spaces into everyday consideration as a way to improve the spiritual qualities of spaces. *Phong thuy* charms and rituals are often deployed as local customs to achieve certain desired qualities. Charms and rituals also connect the histories of *Hem* spaces to present everyday life. These connections not only build up the personal attachment between residents and their homes, but also the social value of *Hem* spaces and landmarks, by fostering a sense of community and liveability.

Figure 7.26 (Left) A senior resident of Hao Sy Phuong enjoying the breeze in her housefront garden; (Right) Chatting with a neighbour below (Photographed and sketched by the author, 2019).

These viewpoints are in line with the clarification of preservation advice issued by the President of the HCMC Architectural Association, architect Khuong Van Muoi. When professional designers, urban planners, and conservationists plan renovation of Cho Lon's historical houses and areas: "Preservation and conservation of heritage in Cho Lon should respond to and enhance the livelihood of its community, rather than turning this heritage into a museum for the sole purpose of tourism. Understanding local needs, including any spiritual-related concerns, is the key to go about (re)designing and renovating these heritages since they inherit, live and associate their life with these historical houses and area. The historical façade and architectural features on the building skins can be architecturally preserved, while their private areas can be readjusted and renovated according to the living standard and routines of their respective owners, as well as their everyday rituals" (KTDS, 2018).

Figure 7.27 The architect Khuong Van Muoi (Collected from KTDS, 2018)

7.4 Future Research on *Hem*'s Spatial Practice

This research largely builds on the spatial concept of Lefebvre and other thinkers to interrogate spatial practices, including the ongoing tension between government's planning perspective and local everyday use of *Hem* spaces. In particular, this thesis has employed the ideas of *conceived space* and *perceived spaces* as the point of departure to suffice the research aim as stated earlier. Another idea of space in the conceptual triad by Lefebvre, *lived spaces*, which is not covered within the scope of this thesis can open up some directions for future studies on *Hem*. For instant, future studies can look at spatial practice in *Hem* in HCMC through the works and life of local composers, musicians and visual artists whose 'lived experiences' reveal different dimension of space in *Hem*. As mentioned in Chapter 2, a villa in *Hem* 47 Pham Ngoc Thach used to be the home of Trinh Cong Son, one of the most prolific song writers in Vietnam. Studying the influences of his popular music and songs on shaping the way people use space will add to current research on spatial practice. Further research can also be done on the works by visual artists, such as Richard Streitmatter-Tran, whose photographic artworks, for example *Cities and Strangers* (2005), focused on *Hem* and the life of the scavengers and transgenders. Such study will reveal additional perspective on the contribution of these marginalized groups of people to spatial practice.

Chapter 8. Conclusion and Design Recommendations for Spatial Practice of Ho Chi Minh City *Hem* Space

Figure 8.1 Local vendors and shop owners extending their establishments along the pathway of *Hem* 84 Bui Vien Street
(Sketched by the author, 2020)

8.1 Conclusion

My research journey looking for the answers to the research questions about the spatial practices in HCMC's *Hem* has been a challenging task, albeit enjoyable. It is challenging because the research required me to stand apart from my personal experiences and investigate the everyday spaces and life of *Hem* from different viewpoints. Nevertheless, these personal experiences, being a *Hem* resident, my interest in the changes at the apartment blocks, and my encounters with *phong thuy*, have contributed insight into this research. Throughout the research, one thing that was clear is that the present-day condition of HCMC's *Hem* and *Hem*-style spaces are not only shaped by government planning and (re)development efforts, but also by the everyday needs of local residents and associated changes to both physical and social spaces. The aim of this thesis, as stated in Chapter 1, is to get a better understanding of spatial practice through examining the nature of architectural and spatial changes occurring in *Hem*. It also sets out to explore how the everyday life of *Hem* residents influences those changes. This aim has been achieved via first-hand studies of physical architectural characteristics and

related human activities and experiences in three locations, each represents one important layer of the built environment in HCMC.

The research hypothesis, as stated in Chapter 1, has been also examined via these three case studies. Key ideas from spatial theories and architectural literature outlined in Chapter 2 enabled the examination of the hypothesis from the architectural and interior design perspective and provided a framework for data collection and analysis. Discussion of findings from the case studies highlighted the contribution and implication of different forms of spatial practices in *Hem* to broader spatial theories as well as architectural literature. These contributions and understanding have also addressed the research questions.   This final chapter will bring together the research findings discussed in the preceding chapters to make some conclusions.

Research findings on the practice of small-scale retail activities, such as home-based business and vendors, and local belief regarding *phong thuy* practices in three representative *Hem* as presented in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, reveal the spatial and social roles of *Hem* in the creation of urban structure and the everyday life of *Hem* residents and communities. This leads to the first conclusion that rapid urbanisation of HCMC with global-style development, such as the megacity model and the 'Civilised and Modern City' campaign with *Hem* widening projects, will not be the only factor that impacts the spatial transformation of thousands of *Hem* in the city. Spatial practice in *Hem*, as represented by local everyday life activities, including home-based retails, vendors, spiritual practices, and associated physical spaces, is also an influential factor, if not the most influential, to the making and transformation of *Hem* environment. These are evident in the present-day conditions of *Hem* spaces in different urban contexts, where the practice of home-based businesses and other retail activities have driven the architectural alterations of public and domestic spheres in either the typical *Hem* (*Hem* 60) or *Hem*-style spaces of the American-style apartment blocks. *Hem* spatial practice, as manifested through ritual practices of *phong thuy*, has also played a key role in the making of *Hem*'s built environment in HCMC's Chinatown, where local residents have relied on such ritual practices to make, change and maintain both communal and private spaces within *Hem*.

Secondly, the study of the resilience of *Hem* spatial practice, either at the typical *Hem* or *Hem*-style spaces, reflects and extends existing theories of space, such as those by Lefebvre and his peers who elucidated the concept of *perceived spaces* (spatial practice) and its relationship to *conceived spaces*. As discussed in Chapter 7, what is significant about spatial practice in different contexts of *Hem* is the symbiotic relationships between the creators of *perceived spaces* (local residents and small business

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owners), in dealing with the mutual use of spaces in *Hem* and spatial changes in *Hem*-style apartment blocks. Such symbiotic relationships were not limited to the permanent residents, but also extend to the vendors who do not reside in *Hem* and are welcomed as co-users of spaces. Everyday negotiation, acceptance, and compromise between these stakeholders influence the physical changes to *Hem* spaces and *Hem*-style apartment blocks. Besides the more tangible factors, such as the critical need for spaces and changes made by the government policies, the symbiotic relationships between local residents and business owners represent a grassroots social practice that is not always noticeable but influential as a key factor enabling the creation and transformation of spaces in *Hem*.

Thirdly, the resilience of spatial practices in *Hem* is demonstrated through the adaptive uses of physical spaces by local residents and small-scale business owners in different urban settings. This is particularly evident in apartment blocks, where spaces were not originally made in favour of local culture and everyday needs. The architectural and spatial changes to accommodate family-based businesses and other everyday life activities at the American-style apartment units present another example illustrating the gaps between different modes of spatial experiences, *conceived space*, and *perceived space* or the spaces of *voyeurs* vs. *walkers,* as theoretically discussed in the existing literature. It is worth noting that these changes reflect the local process of spatial appropriation needed by local residents and business owners, the creators of *perceived spaces*, whose symbiotic relationships are instrumental in closing the gaps that are not fully addressed by the creators of *conceived spaces* (governments, designers and policymakers).

Finally, the study of *phong thuy* practice in HCMC's Chinatown discussed in Chapters 6 and 7 highlights the significant role of various cultural and social factors, such as local belief systems and personal and collective identities in the making of *Hem* spaces. *Phong thuy* practices in *Hem* disclose the symbolic meanings of both domestic and public spaces derived from their physical characteristics, such as building shapes, facades, and orientation, measurements of entry doors, location of entryway to *Hem,* and the surroundings. These meanings are often changed by the personal identities of each of the residents, yet providing all with a better understanding of their lived experiences and suggestions for improving their homes and neighbourhoods. *Phong thuy*, which involves integrating inhabitants' 'inside' feelings, personal histories, and ritual practices, with existing physical characteristics of *Hem* spaces and houses, is adopted as part of the design process to improve both *Hem* built environment and the mental wellbeing of the local residents. *Phong thuy*-related rituals and spiritual beliefs adopted by *Hem* residents generate a mental sense of space. This is significant as it adds another dimension of spiritual

spatial practice to Lefebvre's conception of space. This spiritual spatial practice is reflected in the process of making and improving residential and neighbourhood spaces according to spiritual needs. This spiritual spatial practice has become an essential part of *Hem*'s everyday life, culture, and customs, which appear to provide local residents with safe mental spaces within the domestic and public domains of *Hem*.

The customary and popular application of *phong thuy* by most residents in a *Hem* like Hao Sy Phuong illustrates and extends Relph's spatial idea of 'insideness'. Human experiences of spaces as manifested through the process of making and improving spaces are not only defined by personal emotions, feelings, and identities, or 'insideness'. One's own 'inside' experiences of her or his spaces can influence the perception and experiences of other persons with their spaces through *phong thuy* practices. This is evident in the popular practice that local residents, who do not have a good knowledge of *phong thuy*, make and change their homes with direct references to their neighbours' application of *phong thuy*. This collective nature of spatial practices around *phong thuy* is unique to *Hem* in HCMC's Chinatown, and it results in culturally significant experiences of space created by local residents who are Vietnamese-Chinese, one of the major ethnic groups in the City.

Ho Chi Minh City's *Hem* presents a mixture of architectural typologies that are characterised by clusters of the tube-shape house of different styles, CC blocks, and Chinese-style settlements. The residents who live in *Hem* come from different walks of life, ethnicities, and backgrounds, a diversity created by the turbulent history of Saigon. HCMC has gone through massive changes in a very short amount of time, spanning the end of French colonisation, the US-supported era, the strict Socialist period, and now the globalising period since *Doi Moi*. Despite many *Hem* being physically limited and underdeveloped, *Hem* residents and communities have still chosen to call these places home for generations. One thing that has helped *Hem* residents to overcome the physical limitations of *Hem* space is the unique sense of community where everyone respects one another as close neighbours, regardless of their ethnicities, backgrounds, or social status. Given that networks of almost 4000 *Hem* and their spatial practices make up most of the city's urban grain, it is safe to say that the spatial experiences in *Hem* will continue to be a constituent, if not dominant, part of Ho Chi Minh City. This thesis has stressed the significant roles of *Hem*'s spaces in the making of urban characters and everyday life in HCMC. Therefore, the future images and livelihood of HCMC will be not only represented by new high-rises and urban areas with global-standard infrastructures but also the resilience of both physical and cultural spaces within the city's intensive network of *Hem.*

8.2 Recommendations for Design and Planning Practices

This thesis ends with some recommendations for future research as well as design and planning practices regarding *Hem*'s spaces in HCMC. These recommendations are implications of findings from the case studies of *Hem* in three different urban contexts discussed in the preceding chapters: Chapter 4 with an examination a typical *Hem* that can be found in many places in HCMC; Chapter 5 with an investigation of '*Hem*-style' spaces in American-style apartments; and Chapter 6 with an exploration of the cultural and social aspects of *phong thuy* in a historical *Hem* in the HCMC's Chinatown. Given the ongoing changes to the built environment in HCMC and the lack of guidelines specifically on *Hem* spaces, the recommendations coming out from the three case studies and subsequent conclusions explained earlier, would help to maintain key aspects of spatial practices in *Hem* identified in this thesis as being valuable to the local livelihood and the characters of the city. These recommendations also serve as a foundation for further development and application coming from other research on spatial practice with a similar urban context.

(1)   'Threshold Spaces' - Building Setbacks in *Hem*

A building setback is a distance between the laneway or street line and the front wall of a house. As shown in Chapter 4, building setbacks are important to *Hem* as they offer spaces that contribute to the local livelihood. Building setbacks are thresholds between the domestic and public spaces, provide spaces for retail and commercial activities that ensure basic everyday needs and incomes for local residents and traders. HCMC has thousands of *Hem*. However, it appears that spatial practices supporting local livelihood in *Hem* 60 as examined in this thesis are not fully acknowledged by local authorities and planners. Local residents and traders, who have no other option but to use open spaces in *Hem* to make a living, are often the target of 'cleaning up' by local police. Building setbacks and associated spatial practices in *Hem* 60 are not the outcomes of a formal planning process but the local routine of using open spaces for all sorts of everyday needs, such as buying and selling groceries or meals, that have been traditionally practiced for hundreds of years in HCMC. Building setbacks should not be defined as merely physical spaces with measurements but also by the flexible uses of the setbacks in support of local livelihood. Any plan to change to *Hem* in the form of renovation, expansion, or renewal should allow enough building setbacks that accommodate spatial practices as mentioned earlier. These building setbacks and associated spatial practices may exist in one form or another as soon as they ensure that local traffics either by motorcycles, bicycle, or pedestrian, are not interrupted.
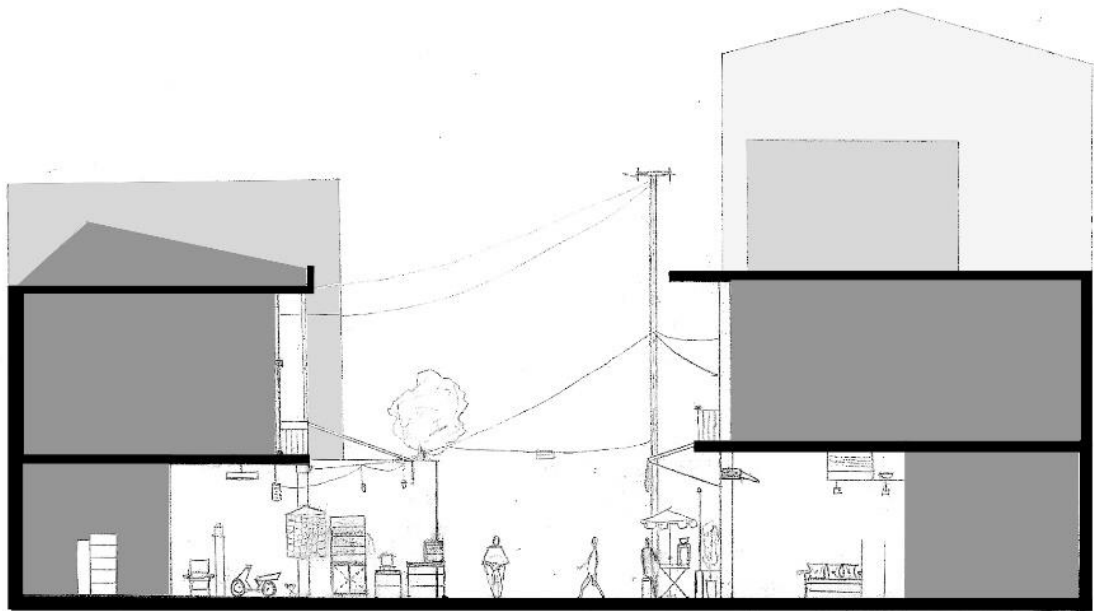
Figure 8.2 Building setback used for cater beverage stall in *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang (sketched by the author, 2017)

(2) **'Squat' Houses in *Hem***

The study of *Hem* 60 in Chapter 4 reveals the phenomenon of houses and structures that were built without formal permits. To get extra spaces for living and home-based businesses local residents 'squatted' in open spaces between houses in *Hem* making either new residences or additional rooms to existing residences. They look dilapidated and generally unsafe due to a lack of proper building materials and legal titles. Given that 'squat' houses are not the focus of this thesis they form part of spatial practices in *Hem* for decades and are worth mentioning as they are often seen as the causes of local ownership disputes and delay to plans to change spaces in *Hem*. Ownership issues regarding squat houses are usually complicated and might need another full research to come up with a good solution. However, one thing this thesis has raised is the need for local decision-makers to look into the issues of squat houses as part of their larger plans to improve the livelihood in *Hem*. A radical solution to the issue, such as cleaning up all squat houses as a way to improve *Hem* space might not work as local families have lived and worked in them for decades. Any plan to remove the squat houses in *Hem* should be always supported by a relocation plan to ensure that relocated families are provided with similar opportunities to live and make a living. Any plan to maintain the squat houses in *Hem* should be supported by a settlement plan that includes but is not limited to structural, design, financial, and administrative supports, ensuring safe structures and legitimate spaces for local families. The squat

houses should be also maintained in a way that they will not interrupt the local traffics and other retail activities in *Hem*.
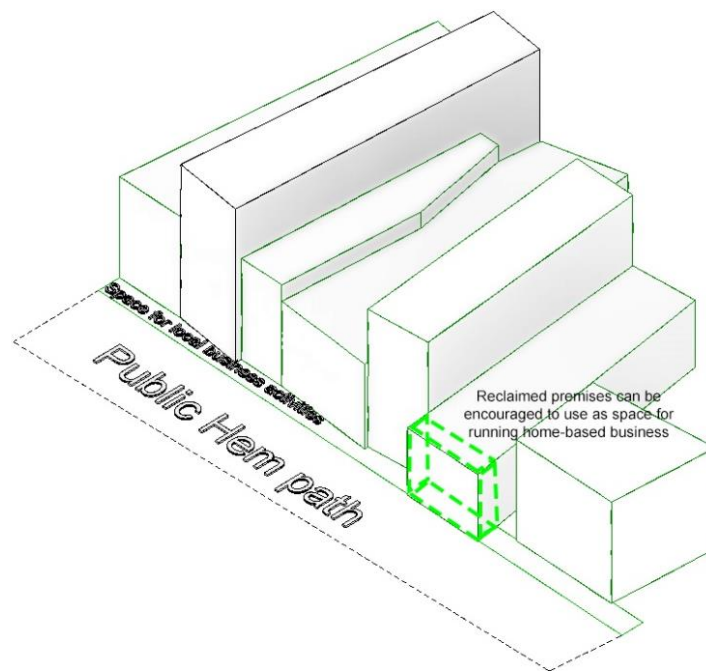
Figure 8.3 A proposal to deal with encroached area and properties in *Hem* space (illustrated by the author, 2020)

(3)   Street Vendors in *Hem* and in *Hem*-style spaces

The studies of *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang Street and Nguyen Thien Thuat apartment blocks in this thesis have shown that street vendors and their spatial practices form parts of local everyday life contributing to the urban livelihood. Most street vendors live on very low incomes, which are mainly generated from their small-scaled trading activities. *Hem* 60 and *Hem*-style spaces in Nguyen Thien Thuat apartments are vital to the life of street vendors and their families. Local residents and business owners in *Hem* also receive essential and affordable services, such as food and groceries, provided by the street vendors. However, the important roles of street vendors in *Hem* appear not to be fully acknowledged by the government given that they are the most vulnerable traders with no local permanent addresses. Together with informal building additions, street vendors are usually criticised as the causes of local traffic issues and uncivilized urban images by the authorities. Therefore, they are usually forced to stay away from public spaces in *Hem* by local police. Future plan to change *Hem* spaces should take into account the positive roles of street vendors in the everyday life of small urban spaces like *Hem*. Banning street vendors from using *Hem* spaces may not work as their spatial practices have been traditionally part of urban life in HCMC for hundreds of years. The use of space in *Hem* by street vendors should be

planned with consideration of the use of building setbacks discussed earlier to make sure that shared uses of public spaces are accommodated and local commuting is not interrupted.

Figure 8.4 Street vendors tend to station at the house front areas within *Hem* (photographed by the author, 2017)

(4)   Spaces for Family-based Businesses

Family-based businesses have been a traditional practice in HCMC for hundreds of years. Spaces accommodating family-based retail activities are often seen in tall and long 'shop-houses' that line up local neighbourhoods, streets, and laneways in most areas of the city. The studies of *Hem* 60 Ly Chinh Thang and Nguyen Thien Thuat apartment blocks in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 respectively show that family-based businesses are an integral part of local life. Given the social, economic, and political changes to HCMC, the local practice of family-based business appears to be very resilient and acts as a key contributor to the formation and transformation of domestic spaces as well as public spaces. While family-based businesses are constituent parts of residential spaces in traditional home settings, such as local shop-houses, they were originally not included in the making of modern home settings, such as Nguyen Thien Thuat apartment blocks. However, as part of the local everyday need, family-based businesses have been brought into this modern home setting by local residents who have customized the homogenous layout of their flats in response to both socio-economic changes of the city and specific family business needs. Family-based businesses were up and down due to different levels of government control. The re-emergence of family-based businesses is significant as it reinstates the sense of domestic spaces as a place for both living and businesses in the apartment blocks, a housing type that is commonly perceived as a place of residence only. Future changes to *Hem* and existing apartment blocks should take into account the spatial practices regarding family-based businesses, as

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they are culturally and economically important to local residents. This includes not only the use of private spaces on the ground levels for retails but also the possible uses of some public spaces as extensions of family-owned shops, such as spaces that are immediately in front of private-owned shops, landing areas, and corridors of apartment blocks. Such possible uses of public spaces should be planned with consideration of the use of building setbacks and building additions to make sure that local traffic and circulation in the public spaces are not interrupted.
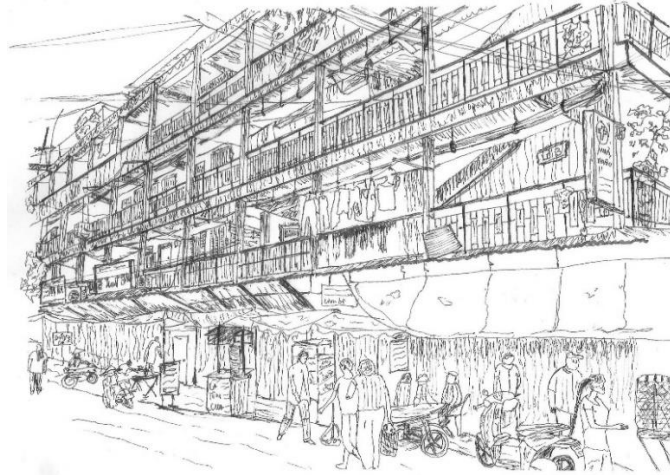
Figure 8.5 A busy morning full of retail activities (sketched by the author, 2018)

(5)   Resident-Initiated Spatial Changes and Building Renovation

The study of CC Nguyen Thien Thuat in Chapter 5 suggests that spatial transformation and building renovation in the flats reflect the local need for extra spaces for extended families and the tradition of running family-based businesses. To make a living most flat owners renovated and added structures to make spaces for home-based businesses. Such spatial changes were possible due to both individual and collective efforts of local residents who want to make their homes better places for generating necessary incomes. Flat owners, who are close neighbours usually discussed spatial constraints to come up with a shared solution to change their flats. This local initiative should be further encouraged, supported, and incorporated in future renovation or reconstruction of old apartment buildings in HCMC. The roles of professional architects and engineers in these processes are critical because they can help to ensure that the building works meet structural standards and do not affect the use of public spaces. Designers also should advise on the use of building materials in the renovation works to make sure that the completed projects meet individual needs and budgets while respecting the overall structural and visual integrity of the neighbouring flats. This will not only result in spatial changes addressing the

critical need for extra spaces but also strengthen the social bond between local residents via their involvement in the renovation of neighbouring flats.

Figure 8.6 Local of Block A discussing opportunities for joint-business (photographed by the author, 2016)

(6)   Respecting the Local Belief and Related Spatial Practice

As discussed in Chapter 6, *phong thuy* and related spatial practices have been essential parts of a ritual and spiritual life contributing to the sense of well-being needed by local residents in *Hem* in HCMC, including those in Chinatown. *Phong thuy* practices, which are particularly important to the making of *Hem* with historical value like Hao Sy Phuong, involve examination of some important aspects of *Hem* such as physical characteristics of buildings and surrounding landscape, histories of the local community, and personal background of local residents. Despite its popularity, changes to *Hem* as discussed in Chapter 6, suggest that there is a lack of a good understanding and respect from local decision-makers regarding residents' concerns about *phong thuy*. This gap is one of the key issues causing a delay in local attempts, either from the government or local residents, to maintain the historical characteristics and sense of well-being in *Hem*. As far as people are concerned, key aspects *phong thuy* practice in *Hem*, such as the orientation of gateways, entrance doors, and houses, the uses of *phong thuy* charms and altars should be taken into account in plans to maintain and change *Hem* spaces. Doing this, on the one hand, will highlight not only the physical value of *Hem* spaces but also the cultural significance as expressed through local beliefs and customs embedded in *phong thuy* practices. On the other hand, respecting local practices of *phong thuy* will help decision-makers, local residents, and designers to come up with a common plan when building up the sense of well-being in *Hem* spaces.
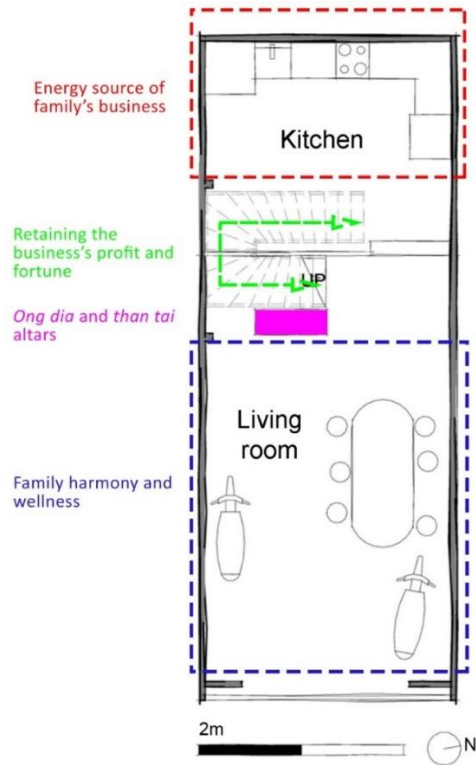
Figure 8.7 A *phong thuy* spatial analysis of Ms. P.G house (produced by the author, 2020)

(7)   Appreciating the 'Spaces' and Culture of Ethnic Communities

There are 54 ethnic groups that contribute to the cultural diversity in Vietnam. As discussed in Chapter 2, the Vietnamese-Chinese is one of the largest ethnic groups forming a constituent part of Ho Chi Minh City's population, economy, and society. The culture and lifestyle of the Vietnamese-Chinese together with their settlement pattern represent one important layer of the built environment in the city. As discussed in Chapter 6, spatial practices, explored in HCMC's Chinatown in general and Hao Sy Phuong in particular, present cultural and social significance as manifested in both physical and immaterial aspects of the built environment in *Hem*. Physical significance is illustrated through the architecture and setting of two-level houses with shared corridors along both sides of *Hem*, the presence of ritual and spiritual objects at shared spaces, and private spaces in *Hem* such as community altars, family shrines, *phong thuy* charms, and paper amulets on the building façades and inside the houses. Immaterial significance is reflected in the local belief system, such as the popularity of *phong thuy* practices with embedded community, ethnic and personal histories, and identities. Another aspect that makes *Hem* spaces like Hao Sy Phuong unique is the general atmosphere of quietness and tranquility that are different from most other *Hem*. Future plans to change *Hem* and houses inhabited by ethnic groups, such as the Vietnamese-Chinese communities should be guided by a full appreciation of the spatial characteristics

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and ritual practices that are not only important to the life of local residents but also contribute to the cultural richness of HCMC.

Figure 8.8 Historical structures and landmarks should be preserved as connections between the history, the community images, and their well-being at the present day (photographed by the author, 2020)

8.3 Final Remarks

The built environment of Ho Chi Minh City particularly the *Hem*, has gone through significant changes as the result of many historical influences: irregulated densification during French colonisation with the development of Chinatown; blending into American-style housings rapidly constructed during the war; post-war difficulties with strict socialist policies; *Doi Moi* with rapid urban development and ongoing attempts to be modernised.

Despite those changes, key aspects of spatial practice in *Hem* have remained resilient and always been sustained by the local pattern of life, which essentially includes the tradition of running small-scale businesses and everyday spiritual practices. The seven recommendations presented have responded to that local pattern of life – its compact network of *Hem* and *Hem*-style spaces with small and adaptable interiors, symbolic meanings embedded in spiritual objects, a neighbourhood life of vendors, symbiotic relationships, home-based, family-based businesses, a willingness to share, change and an acceptance (even of the external and imposed influences) but always a referring back to both personal and collective identities.

Appendix

The research project ID is SHR Project 2018/330 and it was approved by the Subcommittee (SHESC) of Swinburne's Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC) on 9 October 2018. Collected data, data analysis, and samples were kept private in a secure hard drive within the Swinburne Candidate Research Office. All data collection during the fieldtrip was conducted ethically, with Ethics Clearance granted by Swinburne's Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC). All participants signed consent forms, drafted in accordance with Swinburne Research Ethical Practice requirements and standards. To protect the privacy of the participants, their names have been coded. Interviewees who are professional designers and academics agreed to have their names published in this thesis. No potential for conflict of interest was recorded between the investigator and the participants of this thesis. Attached image below is the approval letter from Swinburne's Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC).

SHR Project 2018/330 - Ethics Clearance

Sally Fried <sfried@swin.edu.au>
Tue 9/10/2018 11:50 AM
To:
Cc:
To:

SHR Project 2018/330 - Interrogating 'Saigon Space': Spatial Practice in Laneways of Ho Chi Minh City

Approved duration: 09-10-2018 to 01-12-2019 [Adjusted]

I refer to the ethical review of the above project by a Subcommittee (SHESC-Other) of Swinburne's Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC). Your responses to the review as e-mailed on 9 October 2018 were put to the Subcommittee delegate for consideration.

I am pleased to advise that, as submitted to date, ethics clearance has been given for the above project to proceed in line with standard on-going ethics clearance conditions outlined below.

- The approved duration is **9 October 2018** to **1 December 2019** unless an extension is subsequently approved.

Figure A.1. Ethic Approval letter for commencing this doctoral research (screenshot from the candidature email)

As earlier mentioned, part of this thesis was extracted and published as conference paper. This initial research was presented at the international conference, Colonial and Postcolonial Landscapes: Architecture, Cities, Infrastructures, hosted by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the University

Institute of Lisbon (ISCTE) in June 2018, funded by HDR funding from FHAD, Swinburne University. The research paper examined the spatial transformation of an American-built apartment building – *chung cu* Nguyen Thien Thuat in District 3 – which developed from my Honours thesis. During this study of *chung cu* Nguyen Thien Thuat, it was identified that spatial transformation between the blocks was very similar to many *Hem* spaces. The apartment building was erected within what used to be mazes of *Hem* in District 3. The layout of apartments has internal routes shaped similarly to *Hem* routes, with life between the blocks intertwined with neighbourhood *Hem*. The examination of CC's architectural transformation in this presented paper was inspired by the conference's theme – post-colonial theories.

Figure A.2. Presentation Certificate from the Conference's Committee

Glossary of Local Terms and Words

Am phan	Negative place, world of the dead
Ao dai	A traditional Vietnamese dress
bach nien hao hop	A well-wish for newlywed couple
ban tho dat	Altar for Earth deity
ban tho troi	Altar for Heaven/Sky deity
Bat quai	An octagon reflective mirror for *phong thuy* uses
Ben Tam Ngua	Horse bathing station
Binh phong	Protective screen for *phong thuy* uses
cau binh an	A ceremony for safety blessing
Cho Lon	Chinatown area of Saigon
Chung Cu (CC)	Apartment housing
Chuong cop	Tiger cage
Com Tam	Broken rice
cung vong linh	A ceremony for wandered/lost spirit
Dao trang	Communal worshiping place
Do thi van minh hien dai	A modern, civilised City
Doi Moi	Economic reform
Duong co	Positive place, world of the living
Feng shui	Wind and water, a Chinese practice for choosing habitable site
Hem	Laneway/alleyway
Hoi quan	Assembly Hall
Hu Tuc	Backward rituals
Kham, Can, Chan, Ton, Ly, Khon, Doai, Can	Name of the eight trigrams in *phong thuy*
khu ban co	Chessboard area
Khu pho van hoa	Civilised neighbourhood
khu tap the	Apartment block – commonly used by North Vietnam dialect
kim hue	Golden ball for *phong thuy* decoration

kim, moc, thuy, hoa, tho	The five elements in *phong thuy*: metal, wood, water, fire, earth
Lo ban	A *phong thuy* tool for measurement
Long chim	Bird cage
long mach	Dragon path – a rare *phong thuy* aspect bring prosperity
luong duyen mien man	A well-wish for newlywed couple
Mon quan vuong ta	Entrance/Door guardians
mon than	Entrance/Door guardians
ngu hanh	five elements
ngu phuc lam mon	Five blessing shall enter this place/hosue
Ngu Quy	A star sign on lo ban ruler
nguyen ven	Whole, completed
nha cao, cua rong	Tall house, big gate
Nhat can thi nhi can lan	It is good to stay near city centre and market
Non la	Conical hat
Nui xao bo	Vietnamese pasta
Phong thuy	A Vietnamese version of Chinese feng shui
phuc	Auspicious
quy nhan	A star sign on lo ban ruler
quyen loc	A star sign on lo ban ruler
Sinh khi	A star sign on lo ban ruler
So ho khau	Household documentation
ta khi	Bad energy
tai vuong	A star sign on lo ban ruler
than hong	Peacock feather for *phong thuy* decoration
Than tai	God of fortune
thien quan	Officials of heaven
Thien Y	A star sign on lo ban ruler
tho dia	God of Land
Tho dia cong	Another name for God of Land in Southern Vietnamese dialects

Thuoc lo ban	A *phong thuy* ruler for measurement
Tien an, hau cham, minh duong	Lower front, higher back and looking toward waterbodies
Tien dien, trung dien, chanh dien	The front, middle, main allotment of Assembly Hall
tu huyet	A star sign on lo ban ruler
vuong khi	Good energy
Xe om	Motorcycle-taxi driver
Xoi	Sticky rice
xom cu lao	Hard working neighbourhood

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