

HO CHI MINH CITY 2000–2050: AN ANNOTATED ILLUSTRATION OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract: This innovative visual essay, consisting of six hand-drawn line illustrations and annotations, illustrates half a century of urban development in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam's largest city and a growing mega-urban region. Starting with anthropological documentation of urban life in the year 2000, our work engages with academic literature and speculative futures to map the transformation of the city to 2050. The possibilities we present aim to provoke discussion and reflection, contributing to rethinking policy and practice solutions and reframing a Southeast Asian mega-city in future horizoning.

Keywords: *Urban development; Sustainability; Digital transformation; Speculative futures; Vietnam*

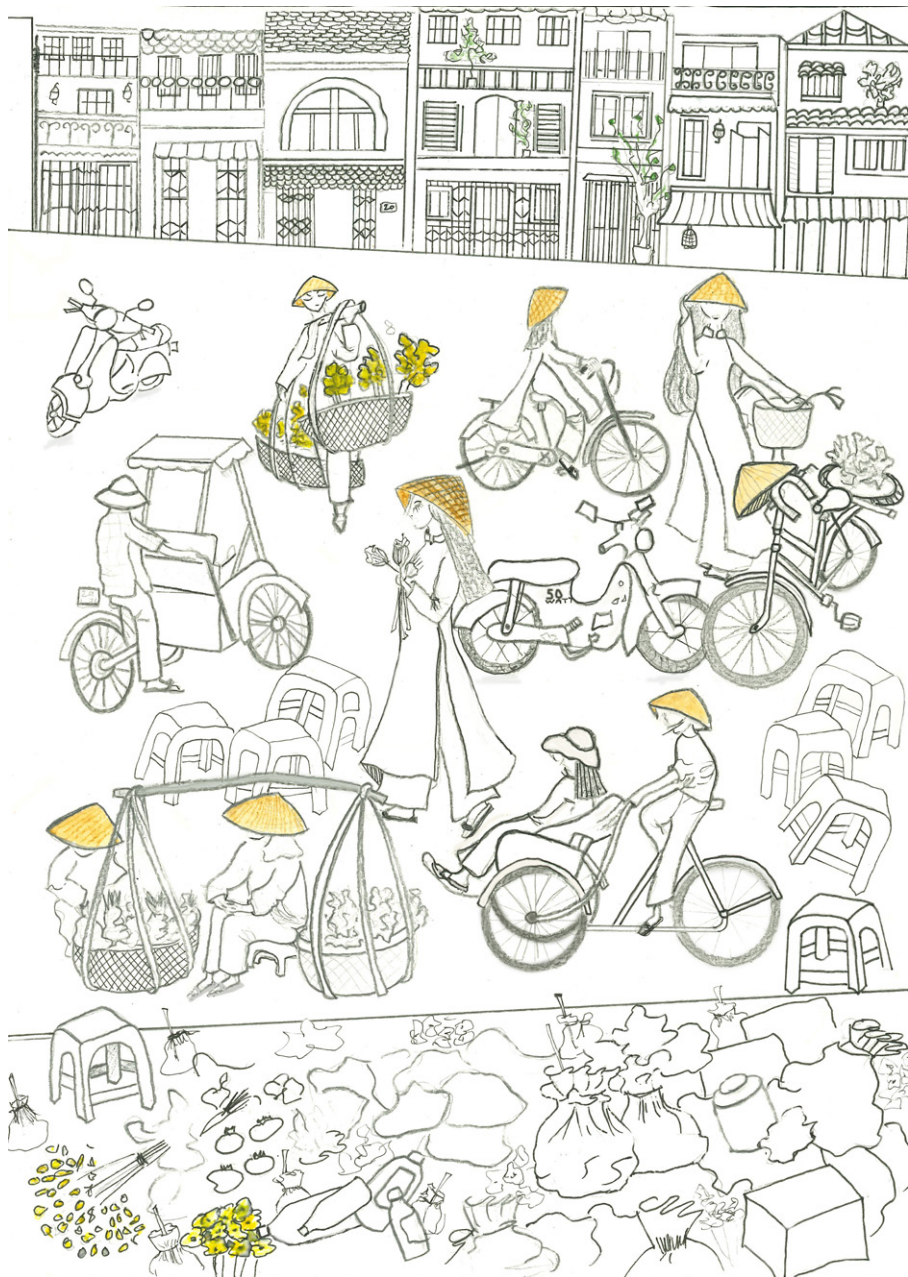


Figure 1: 2000

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) met the new millennium as a rapidly urbanising city that was still marked by post-war reconstruction. Throughout the 1990s, HCMC had become the new home for millions of domestic rural-urban migrants. They resettled in affinity communities in underdeveloped areas, in improvised housing, along the city's rivers and canals. The majority of city folk were living in high-density tube housing in narrow laneways. Acting on opportunities enabled by the macro-economic reforms of the mid-1980s, migrants and residents alike lifted themselves out of poverty through three interlinked sectors fostering social mobility: education, agricultural production, and a bustling urban informal economy. Young migrant women led new approaches to achieving relatively higher socioeconomic status through nimble fingers-work in manufacturing, salaried office administration and management, and street-based trade in goods and services. Social life in HCMC played out in public and semi-public spaces, such as the laneways of families and neighbours, and in the dormitories of workers and students. New forms of mobility, especially scooters and motorbikes, expanded work and social opportunities beyond the residential neighbourhoods. Leisure and consumption marked upward mobility, and, foreshadowing future challenges, plastic waste (more hygienic, but single-use) lined the streets.

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Figure 2: 2010

In the first decade of the new millennium, HCMC rose – both in terms of its new trajectory of economic growth and the increasing height of the city’s buildings. The built environment expanded vertically with the first iconic skyscrapers forming a city skyline and horizontally with an unplanned peri-urban sprawl. The socioeconomic environment was influenced by the emergence of new middle classes and elites. Innovation, aspiration, and optimism characterised the city. The consumers in the motorbike-riding community became highly mobile. Incomes diversified. Cash flowed. Salaries were supplemented with informal trade, micro entrepreneurship, and brokering. The real estate market boomed. Remittances flowed into the city from abroad and out of the city to the countryside. Foreign direct investment, particularly from Northeast Asia, ramped up. International brands arrived. Standards of education and healthcare improved. The state’s two-child family planning policy limited sibling networks. Economic opportunities expanded networks of classmates, colleagues, and affinity associations. Rural prosperity supported urban risk. Road tarmac was replaced. Gutters and drains were formed. Plastic waste piled up; bottles and solid packaging were tangled with soft plastic bags, drinking straws, and household items. Baseball caps were discarded in favour of helmets to protect riders.

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Figure 3: 2020

In the second decade of the 21st century, HCMC was economically flourishing, socially diversifying, and culturally pivoting towards South Korea and the hallyu wave. Then, the global COVID-19 pandemic hit. In 2020, HCMC's streets were emptied. People retreated from the streets and socially distanced from others. Workplaces stopped. Salaries paused. Remittances ceased. The world waited. In 2021, HCMC faced a 24-hour curfew that lasted for months. Workplaces Zoomed. School and universities Google Met. Online services grew. Digital wallets opened and emptied. Deliveries increased. The platform economy boomed. "Shipper" became a job. Urban wildlife flourished. Songbirds sang. The sky was a cloudless blue. Finally, the blockade was lifted. The army left. Food aid stopped. The houses opened. The population was released. Migrants were bussed away. Hands were sanitised. Fresh vegetables were wrapped in multiple layers of plastic film, takeaways in cardboard and bamboo packaging, and the streets were lined with single-use medical face masks. The city came back to life. A new awareness followed. Sustainability was on everyone's mind. Workers quit their jobs and followed their dreams. Mental health and well-being became a hot topic. The domestic electric vehicle market emerged. Vietnam committed to zero carbon by 2050.

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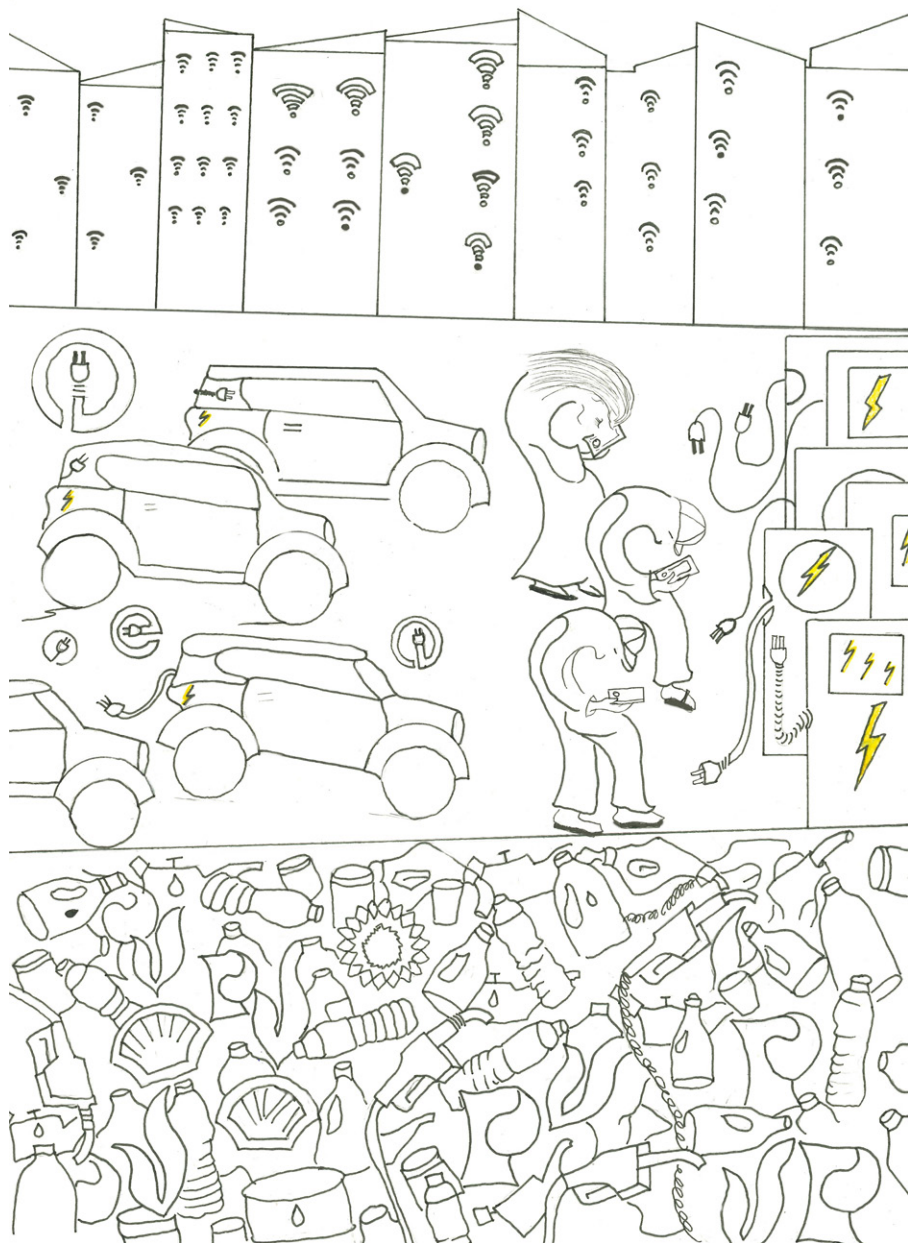


Figure 4: 2030

In 2030, urban Vietnam became quite similar to many other global cities. HCMC is “same, same” but different. The majority of city folk were still living in high-density tube housing in narrow laneways, but now residential towers fringed the metropolis. The skyline was becoming uniformly tall, digitally connected, and comfortable. Comfort became more sustainable. Efficient household appliances and furniture of managed forest products juxtaposed with the convenience of hard plastics, toxic sealants, insecticides, and cheap imports. Mountains of daily food waste indicated new levels of affluence. Motorbikes and cars became electric, clean, and silent. Citizens’ offline and online lives converged. Neighbours chatted not face-to-face but through an interface. App-based food orders and deliveries displaced the sociality of the aunties’ neighbourhood street kitchens. Social life moved from narrow streets to individual screens. Light pollution overtook noise pollution. Petrol, gas, and coal transitioned. Heavy industry was replaced with robots and hardware. Supply chains became ethical and clean. Data began to make decisions. Innovation, aspiration, and optimism prevailed. The future was brighter, lighter, and renewable. The plastic waste problem on land and in fresh waterways and oceans sustained. Waste labels became unreadable, corporate responsibility unstated. The plastic future expanded, breaking into bits, micro pollutants, and bio-accumulative stuff. Unseen petro-waste was a sludge somewhere, a smear on the underside of the ideal global development case’s CV.

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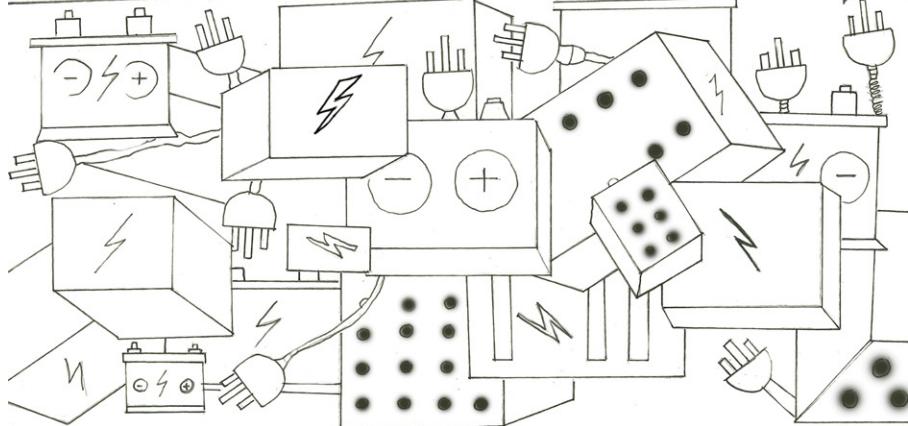
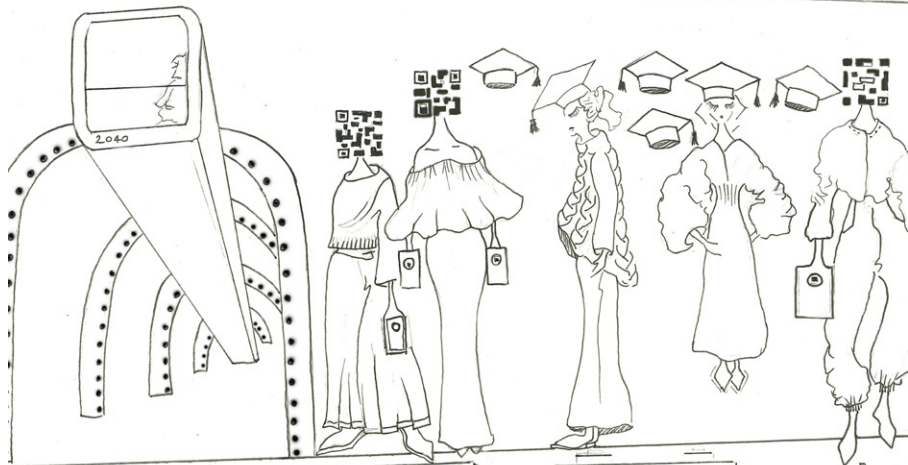


Figure 5: 2040

Four decades on, HCMC was becoming collectivised. Housing had height and repetition, tower on tower, box on box. White rendered brick, large windows, wide balconies. Smart and zero carbon living. Flat surfaces supporting trees. Shade and food in the sky. Communities shared their produce, supported their members, and sustained themselves. A single metro system, a web of mobility, replaced individualised vehicles. The land of the motorbikes was lost to history. No motorbikes, no cars in the future. Social life was interior, personal, and – as many contend – self-actualised. Heads and hands found new activities. The salaried professions declined, capabilities freelanced on an open market, and education was interdisciplinary and universal. Individuals were digitally tethered, converged, and integrated. Fossil fuels and nuclear technology were outlawed. Electrification was a historical controversy. Battery waste, EV car chassis, inverters, regulators, cables, and plugs replaced hard and soft plastics in landfills and toxic dumps. Heavy metal and rare earths reclaim industries grew. Politicians debated the merits of consensus and contestation in generating policy solutions and serving the interests of the population.

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Figure 6: 2050

HCMC became the future. Innovation, aspiration, and optimism had become its universal values. Metro lines and apartment towers formed a singular infrastructure, enclosed from sunshine, wind, pollen, and radiation. Design solutions made individual air conditioners, air purifiers, blinds and curtains, retail transactions, cash, and trash redundant. A few rebellious social outcasts were reported living wild, sleeping rough, food foraging, and singing day and night. Spontaneous human reproduction was a rare and celebrated event. The population grew through migration and redistribution. Citizenship was being reconsidered. The public debated the micro and the macro, with global campaigns for commune memberships and planetary partnerships persisting. Food animals were declared protected species. Free-range meat-eating was socially taboo. Consuming invasive species and lab-engineered protein were the norm. Saigon River flowed freely, the banks reforested and managed under a conservation treaty. Endemic species flourished. Their names were commonplace, their habitat and lifecycles documented in the content of idioms and metaphors. Words like *waste* were archived and lost relevance in daily spoken languages. Societal problems were human-centred, focused on fertility decline, the ageing population, preventing infectious disease, and addressing responsibility for human-induced disasters and climate change.

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