

Redefining Public Space in Hanoi

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Abstract

The introduction of the economic reform program, *Doi Moi*, in 1986 opened the door for private sector development in Vietnam, as well as the country's integration into the world economy. As Hanoi is the national political centre, it occupies an important role in Vietnam's transformation process. The capital has become a major hub for socio-economic development. Whereas "Hanoi was renowned for its quiet streets in the 1980s" (Drummond 2000: 2382), nowadays it is characterised by its bustling street life. Public spaces, such as streets and sidewalks, are appropriated by private individuals for mostly small-scale economic activities. Existing green parks are privatised in order to cater to the growing demand for leisure space. At the same time, official spaces like Ba Dinh Square or Ly Thai To Square are occupied by Hanoi's residents for sports and gatherings. Thomas (2002: 1621) regards this a contestation of the state-defined landscape by local people. In other words, the state's defining power for the urban image is challenged by a multiplicity of spatial producers.

Research focuses on the development of public spaces in Hanoi. Embedded in the discipline of urban sociology, this project aims to contribute to the discussion about the correlation between the public sphere as a sociological/political category and the materiality and practices of public space. According to Sennett (2008), the public sphere is a crucial element of urbanism. Furthermore, as Eisenstadt and Schluchter (2002: 12) indicate, there is a strong relationship between the public sphere and civil society, along with political and economic liberalisation. Therefore, the question remains whether public spaces in Hanoi are an expression of a public sphere or a prerequisite for its development.