

Performing and ‘Rhythming’ the Neighbourhood 24/7

Methodological Learnings from Ward 14, Phú Nhuận, Hồ Chí Minh City

Marie Gibert-Flutre

Constantly in motion, Hồ Chí Minh City (HCMC) neighbourhoods are typified by an unprecedented superposition and entanglement of different social practices, “but they have nothing to do with any overall orchestration or any mass coordination of routine across the city.”¹ Our research goal was to unpack and understand this everyday performance that can be compared to a routinized urban ballet.



Fig. 1. Photo of Kiến Thiết market. (Photo by the author, 2017).

It's 11 AM in Ward 14 of Phú Nhuận district. The local market is in full swing [Fig. 1]. The local traders lure passers-by, and the waste collectors struggle to make their way through the goods-laden alleys. The customers are regulars: residents of the neighbourhood who come on foot, but also from neighbouring districts who come by motorbike to do their food shopping. Street vendors put away their goods while others set up temporary shops. They stay on the doorstep for a few hours, sometimes less, in an incessant ballet. District officials and local police watch from a distance and sometimes participate in spontaneous discussions. They don't seem to care too much about the presence of street vendors, despite the official neighbourhood rules posted on their booths. The atmosphere is very lively, and arguments are rare. In an hour, most of the street stands will have changed. Temporary restaurants will have replaced the clothing and household goods vendors.

While our team of researchers and students from the SEANNET project was still debating how to define a “neighbourhood” in a Vietnamese city, as I entered Ward 14 of Phú Nhuận once again, the answer became clear: the neighbourhood is performative. It is perpetually reinvented through the interplay of various social uses. Just as it is a key scale for public authorities to manage and control the city, so too is the neighbourhood a key scale for urban dwellers to live and perform their “cityness.” And, if the neighbourhood was a never-ending social performance, I was eager to learn the underpinning codes of its choreography.

Between acquaintanceship and the city at large: the neighbourhood as a field of forces

The popular Vietnamese saying “selling siblings who live far away to buy neighbours who live next door” (*Bán anh em xa, mua láng giềng gần*) illustrates the social significance of the neighbourhood in local city life. A neighbourhood is indeed a key place of social encounters that help one to find one's own place in the metropolis. As such, the neighbourhood plays the strategic role of a launch pad at the interface of the domestic life unit (as a place of acquaintanceship and social belonging) and the city at large. It can be seen both as an intimate place of social encounters and a field of expression of social forces, which is practiced – and thus performed – on a daily basis. As such, neighbourhoods generate many local centralities in their city. They invite to produce a place-based geography of the city that has long provided for cosmopolitan diversity and in which populations in their diversity are able to assert their agency in city-making.

Acknowledging that “the drama of co-presence and co-existence” unfolds in the everyday,² our study was mindful of avoiding a totalizing theory of the everyday: “everyday people are not always a unified, organized group but in urban settings involve a variety of people with different tactics and understandings.”³ Thus, our Phú Nhuận

neighbourhood analysis centres on dwellers, sellers, and anonymous passersby in all their diversity, providing a grounded and ethnographic perspective on local power relationships in the metropolis. Our attention to daily rhythms challenges representations of the local neighbourhood as simply a “place of belonging:” it suggests that this belonging is not guaranteed to all city dwellers on a 24/7 basis, but constantly has to be negotiated and renegotiated, even for access over short periods.

With a plethora of competing urban practices, neighbourhoods are also places of daily frictions and confrontations. Multiple claims to limited space ensure that tensions run high, especially in urban contexts where public spaces sustain the livelihood of a large part of the population, as in Vietnam. In this competitive context, constant spatiotemporal negotiations are needed to gain access to space in which to perform the activities required to secure one's livelihood. At the same time, most metropolitan areas of the Global South engage in an active rewriting of the rules of public space by arbitrating on which spatial practices can be considered legitimate. In this context, informal street vendors are among the most precarious urban actors. The literature on the competition for public space primarily focuses on the strategies of various stakeholders to gain access to urban amenities.⁴ Our research aims to add a temporal approach to the study of the power relations that constantly shape and reshape everyday uses in neighbourhoods.

Rhythm(analysis) as a critical method

In his writings generally, and in his *Elements de rythmanalyse* (1992) in particular, Henri Lefebvre describes the study of daily rhythms as the gateway to a political reading of the city. In recent years a great deal of empirical research has taken up Lefebvre's conception of rhythms.⁵ Within the SEANNET program, I mobilized rhythmanalysis as an analytic lens for investigating the political dimensions of how patterns of small, local, often overlooked behaviours are structured in metropolitan neighbourhoods. Envisioned as a praxis, it invites the researcher to consider the concrete conditions of social life that emerge from the ways in which different categories of city dwellers interact in the neighbourhood.

This approach highlights the value of ephemeral uses of local space. Like space, time is anything but a neutral container for social life: “time-sharing” is the “product” – in Lefebvre's sense of the term⁶ – of unequal everyday negotiations, intertwined with the more commonly studied negotiations pertaining to spatial access. Thus, understanding the politics of the everyday and the unequal capacity of various urban actors to access valuable timeslots in public spaces requires us to scrutinize the temporal organization of a place throughout the day, every day, and to delve into the local sociopolitical meanings of time-based transactions.

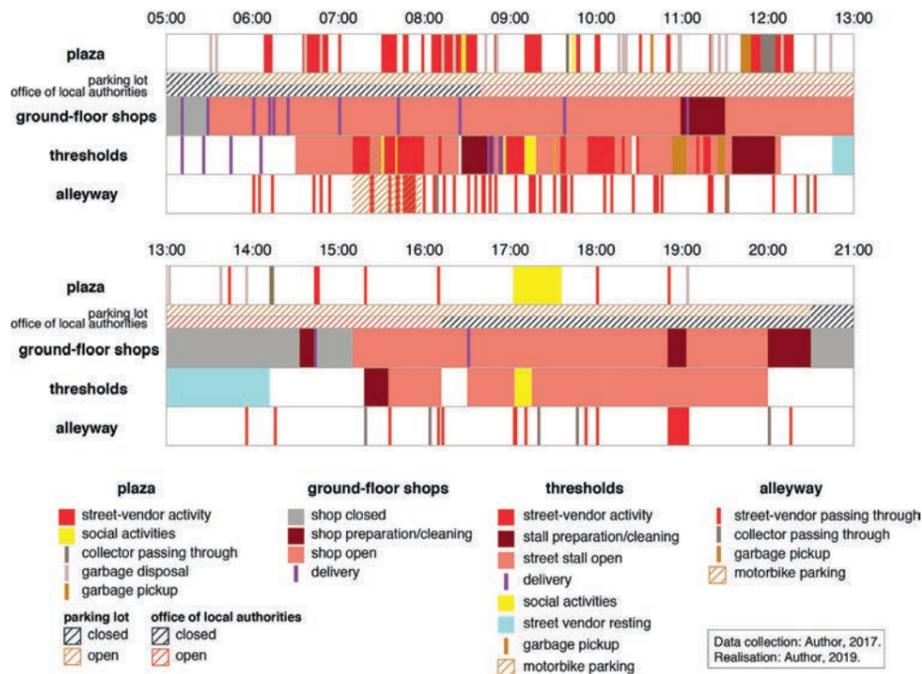


Fig. 2. The 'urban tempo' timeline: identifying patterns. (Designed by the author).

This conception of rhythm analysis implied a mixed-methods approach with (1) a preliminary draft of the data collection protocol, (2) on-site physical surveys, (3) systematic temporal observations over the course of a full day (including photography), (4) the production of a timeline representing these observations visually, and finally (5) in-depth interviews.⁷ Together with my team of SEANNET students, I collected our rhythm analysis data by means of systematic observation, from 5 AM to 9 PM on weekdays during summer and autumn 2017. Each of our field observations was formatted for use with UrbanTempo, a package I designed in the R programming language and software environment. The package contains computer code to automatically plot urban temporalities from our observational data. Ultimately it produces an 'urban tempo' timeline, which provides the basis for further critical analysis [Fig. 2]. Specifically, this timeline allows the viewer to grasp at a glance the 'sequential versatility' in the uses of metropolitan space at the local scale, and to adjust it following interviews. Unlike traditional, large-scale metropolitan cartography, the timeline draws attention to hitherto overlooked and unseen dimensions of the everyday metropolitan experience. On the basis of these preliminary visual results, we selected 30 interviewees. These were mainly people who engaged in direct social interactions during their time at the market. This allowed us to clarify not only the status of people in the neighbourhood, but also their capacity to negotiate their presence there for longer or shorter and during more or less valuable periods of time.

Evidences from Phú Nhuận

With its 10 million inhabitants, HCMC is an emerging and rapidly changing metropolis of Southeast Asia. In this context, local land conflicts – from obstacles in major projects to daily frictions in the use of public space – are multiplying and have become central to the recalibration of power, requiring constant arbitration. The first major source of land conflicts is the historically unplanned and informal urbanization process of HCMC: unclear tenancy status and dwellers with mixed administrative titles continue to pose challenges for the metropolitan authorities. As another result of unplanned urbanization, HCMC is characterized by very tight plot divisions and high population density: on average, the inner city is estimated to house around 28,000 people/km², peaking at 50,000 people/km². Morphologically, this can be traced to the ubiquity of close-knit alleyway neighbourhoods (known as *hẻm*), which are still home to around 85% of city residents and give the city its socio-spatial identity.⁸ These low-rise neighbourhoods are made up of freestanding and attached shophouses – called "tube houses" for their narrow shape – lining endless networks of alleyways just a few metres wide. This exceptionally dense network was mainly born of pragmatic moves by city dwellers during times of uncertainty over the past 60 years.

Ward 14 of Phú Nhuận illustrates the many layers of identity in the city's historical development. Its local identity is linked to the Catholic community, who settled in the area in the 1950s following their escape from the communist regime in northern Vietnam. Many local families have lived in the area for several generations and are still active in the Catholic community. Despite its high population density (around 11,000 people in 14 hectares), the ward is relatively wealthy by HCMC standards; residents are disproportionately employed as government officers.

Although Kiến Thiết is a small market at the metropolitan scale – it does not have a covered market hall, for instance – it serves as a commercial hub and a nerve centre of the neighbourhood. In the morning and late afternoon, commercial activities cover most of the small plaza opening onto Đặng Văn Ngữ street, along the mid-rise Kiến Thiết building (which gives its name to the market), and the adjacent main alleyways as far as alleyway 525 Huỳnh Văn Bánh. These activities occupy four distinct types of spaces: the ground floors of shophouses, where fruits and vegetables or clothes are typically sold; the thresholds of some shophouses, directly on the public space of the alleyway, where temporary stalls have been established; the centre of the alleyways, where street sellers stop to serve customers; and the central plaza itself, which is put to different uses over the course of the day. These four types of space are shown on our "urban tempo" timeline [Fig. 2].

A rhythm analysis of the Kiến Thiết local market: time tradeoffs and unequal capacities of negotiations

Our rhythm analysis reveals that the temporal succession of activities throughout the day results from constantly renegotiated and reiterated local agreements, in which each urban actor has a different degree of negotiating power. On the basis of our 30 interviews, we were indeed able to distinguish four types of actors, classified in terms of their capacity to negotiate and assert their position, from the local authorities and local landlords – who appear to be the real "masters of time" in the neighbourhood – to the temporary vendors and the most precarious ambulant traders who are unable to settle in locally during the valued hours of the day.

The first actors in the Phú Nhuận ballet are the local representatives of the Vietnamese state, who are responsible for enforcing the law locally. Visual propaganda is a classic way for the state to assert its local authority in organizing time and space: displays about regulations are ubiquitous. Despite these local infrastructures of power, however, our study of local rhythms also reveals a certain flouting of the state: many local rules are openly violated, starting with the fight against street trade.

The neighbourhood level in Vietnam reveals the institutional flexibility of the regime locally. Local representatives work at the

interface between the state and the local: their loyalty and obedience are not only directed towards the People's Committee, for they also see themselves as spokespeople of their community.⁹ This duality is illustrated by the expression "power of straw, stone responsibilities" (*quyền rơm vạ đá*), as their local status gives them very little leeway in either legal or budgetary matters. As many local residents of Ward 14 are in fact employed as government officers or are retired army executives, they have the capacity to negotiate directly with the local state representatives to express and assert their interests.

Owning a permanent shop on the plaza or in an adjacent alleyway allows landlords, the second category of actors, to make the most of the strategic reputation of the marketplace. First, they can operate their business during the most strategic hours of the day without having to negotiate with the local authorities. Moreover, whether they are traders themselves or not, most landlords take advantage of their thresholds by informally renting them to other vendors, who are attracted by the central location. Some even rent out half of their ground floor. The price depends on the location, but more importantly on the time slot. The morning hours are the most valued and thus the most expensive: according to our sources, the average price is around 50,000 VND (around US\$2) per metre for a full morning (although specific times of year, such as the weeks prior to the New Year celebrations, are even more expensive). This allows itinerant vendors to secure access on a daily basis. Some can afford to pay for a full morning, whereas others will rent a space just once or twice a week for a few hours. These vendors negotiate directly with the landlord, outside the framework of the law, and the process is not regulated. This example would suggest that local landlords are the true 'masters of time' in the neighbourhoods, distributing informal – and costly – trade permits for a limited time at their discretion and on their own financial terms.

While local landlords can choose their own 'strategies' to put a price on their properties, temporary vendors, the third category of actors, deploy different 'tactics' to secure their ephemeral access to the plaza. Time is a key asset in this regard: the longer they have known the local landlords and frequent the space, the more trust they gain. In return, temporary vendors are protected by their financial deals with the local landlords, and the authorities are often willing to leave them be, as their stalls usually occupy the house thresholds only. They can also secure access to electricity or water if needed (potentially for an extra fee). Most explained that spending a few morning hours in Kiến Thiết market was more profitable than owning their own shop in a less central area of the city.

The last category of local actors we identified consists of precarious ambulant traders who are unable to settle in one place during the valued hours of the day, even for a short period of time. As a consequence, we came across them only during the relatively worthless midday hours, in front of the curtains of closed shops. This last example illustrates the radically different value a space may have depending on the time of day and the unequal access afforded to marginalized parts of the population, such as rural migrants.

Implications: addressing the politics of the everyday in the neighbourhood

Our operationalization of rhythm analysis offers several insights into the daily life of a Vietnamese neighbourhood. First, it highlights the social complexity of the neighbourhood, beyond the simplistic idea of a homogenous and tight community. Indeed, if the neighbourhood is in essence a place of belonging, this belonging takes place on an unequal footing, affording 'strategies' to some, while others have to make do with counter-'tactics'.¹⁰ As our empirical analysis shows, the costs and burdens associated with an individual's negotiating power are unevenly distributed. In this sense, rhythm analysis is a promising means of investigating everyday socioeconomic inequalities from

the novel perspective of time sharing in the city. Second, fine-grained observations throughout the day revealed different degrees of informality and require us to go beyond the simple opposition between the formal and informal economy. Third, such a methodology and attention to time-sharing provides a nuanced understanding of time-sharing norms in the Vietnamese authoritarian context. By drawing attention to the notion of time sharing, our case study shows that, even under a centralized authoritarian government, power is embodied in "a web of conflict-ridden relations."¹¹ It therefore offers a heuristic model of "power effects" in highly multifunctional ordinary public spaces, where traffic, trading functions, and economic production coexist with social and domestic life, all subject to great temporal versatility.

Moreover, Vietnam is still considered a developing country of the Global South and, as such, remains largely excluded from global theoretical frameworks in urban studies. In our study, we challenge this status by refining and operationalizing the conceptual tool of rhythm analysis in an ordinary neighbourhood in Ho Chi Minh City, which contributes to the development of a cosmopolitan theoretical framework from the perspective of the 'Southern turn.' But, as a cosmopolitan framework, rhythm analysis can only achieve its full potential through fruitful comparative case studies, be it in other Asian or other metropolitan contexts, in more or less dense urban settings, under different political regimes, and through a focus on other kinds of public spaces. To this end, the standardized 'urban tempo' timeline is intended to facilitate further comparative studies.

Marie Gibert-Flutre, International Principal Investigator, SEANNET Ho Chi Minh City team, University of Paris, France. Email: marie.gibert@u-paris.fr

Notes

- Allen J (1999) *Worlds within cities*. In: Massey D, Allen J, and Pile S (eds) *City Worlds*. London: Routledge, pp. 53–98.
- Lefebvre H (1970) *La Révolution Urbaine*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Kim AM (2015) *Sidewalk City, Remapping Public Space in Ho Chi Minh City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p.8.
- Beazley H (2002) 'Vagrants Wearing Make-up': Negotiating Spaces on the Streets of Yogyakarta, Indonesia. *Urban Studies* 39(9): 1665–1683 and Qian J (2020) *Geographies of Public Space: Variegated Publicness, Variegated Epistemologies*. *Progress in Human Geography* 44(1): 77–98.
- Reid-Musson E (2018) *Intersectional Rhythm Analysis: Power, Rhythm, and Everyday Life*. *Progress in Human Geography* 42(6): 881–897; Simpson P (2012) *Apprehending Everyday Rhythms: Rhythm Analysis, Time-lapse Photography, and the Space-times of Street Performance*. *cultural geographies* 19(4): 423–445 and Otway A (2014) *Rhythm Analysis: A New Project? Preliminary Reflections on a Future Research on Marseille*. In: Erdi-Lelandais G (ed.) *Understanding the City: Henri Lefebvre and Urban Studies*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 213–234.
- Lefebvre H (1974) *La production de l'espace*. Paris: Anthropos.
- The detailed methodology is developed in Gibert-Flutre M (2021) *Rhythm Analysis: Rethinking the Politics of Everyday Negotiations in Ordinary Public Spaces*. Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space, Online first.
- Gibert M (2018) *Rethinking Metropolitan Production from its Underside: A View from the Alleyways of Hồ Chí Minh City*. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 50(3): 589–607 and Gibert-Flutre M (2019) *Les Envers de La Métropolisation. Les Ruelles de Hồ Chí Minh Ville (Vietnam)*. Paris: CNRS Éditions.
- Gibert M and Segard J (2015) *Urban Planning in Vietnam: a Vector for a Negotiated Authoritarianism? Justice spatiale / Spatial Justice* (8).
- de Certeau M (1988) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Boudreau J-A (2019) *State Theory from the Street Altar: The Muscles, the Saint and the Amparo*. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 43(3), p. 405.