Performing and ‘Rhythming’ the Neighbourhood 24/7
Methodological Learnings from Ward 14, Phú Nhuận, Hô Chí Minh City

Constantly in motion, Hô 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.” Our research goal was to unpack and understand this everyday performance that can be compared to a routinized urban ballet.

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, our research 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.” 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. Our research aims to add a temporal approach to the study of the power relations that constantly shape and reshape everyday usages in neighbourhoods.

Rhythm(analysis) as a critical method

In his writings generally, and in his Elements de rythmanalyse (1991) 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. Within the SEANNET program, I mobilized rhythm(analysis) 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 term — 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.
This conception of rhythmanalysis implied a mixed-methods approach with (1) a preliminary draft of the data collection protocols, (2) site-specific physical surveys, and (3) systematic temporal observations over the course of a full day (including photography), (4) the creation of a timeline representing these observations visually, and finally (5) in-depth interviews. Together with my team of SEANNET students, I collected our rhythmanalytic 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. 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’ temporalities that are common to the 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. Based on our pragmatic, quantitative visual results, we selected 30 interviewees. These were mainly people who engaged in direct economic activities. Our interview questions were deduced from our preliminary observations and our emerging hypotheses. In our interviews, we asked about the challenges and benefits they encountered in their everyday urban life, in terms of time and space. Unexpected patterns emerged from our analysis, which allowed us to refine and develop our approach. For instance, our “urban tempo” timeline [Fig. 2] shows, the costs and burdens associated with the informal economy were sometimes more than the benefits. However, we also found that local landlords were able to prevent their tenants from evicting them, even though they were not protected by law. This allowed us to understand the importance of local social networks and informal mechanisms in the maintenance of the urban rhythm. Our operationalization of rhythmanalysis offers several insights into the daily life of Vietnamese residents in an urban neighbourhood. It highlights the social complexity of the neighbourhood, beyond the simplistic idea of a homogenous community. It underscores the diversity of local actors and their strategies to adapt and survive in an urban environment. The rhythm of the local community is shaped by local practices and mutual understandings. The local community is characterized by the coexistence of various social groups and economic activities. The rhythm of the local community is influenced by the interaction between the local residents and the government. The government, power is embodied in ‘a web of connections’ that defines the relationship between the local community and the state. This web of connections is characterized by the centralization of power in the hands of the state. The result is a distortion of the social fabric, which is characterized by a lack of communication and coordination between the local community and the government. The government’s role in the maintenance of the urban rhythm is often limited to the enforcement of laws and regulations. The local residents, on the other hand, are responsible for the maintenance of the urban rhythm. This is achieved through the establishment of informal social networks and economic activities. The rhythm of the local community is characterized by the interplay between the local residents and the government. The government’s role in the maintenance of the urban rhythm is often limited to the enforcement of laws and regulations. The local residents, on the other hand, are responsible for the maintenance of the urban rhythm. This is achieved through the establishment of informal social networks and economic activities. The rhythm of the local community is characterized by the interplay between the local residents and the government. The government’s role in the maintenance of the urban rhythm is often limited to the enforcement of laws and regulations. The local residents, on the other hand, are responsible for the maintenance of the urban rhythm. This is achieved through the establishment of informal social networks and economic activities.