



Evolution of Commercial Facilities in New Urban Areas of Hanoi: Potential of Sustainable Neighborhood-level Third Place Making

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Abstract: Shopping contributes largely to how people feel part of and enjoy KDTMs (Khu Do Thi Moi - new urban areas) - the carefully planned new sites, well provided with infrastructure, and very attractive of Hanoi in the market economy. Among the three facilities that are rated as most important by KDTM's residents - education, health care, and shopping, the third is considered a pure civil space. This space clearly reflects the changes of politico-economic context and decision-making actors. Participation of the private sector in the newly formed market economy after a long period under State-run subvention and the consumerism entailed various ways to develop neighborhood-level commercial facilities. This paper aims to analyze and discuss on: firstly, the neighborhood-level commercial facilities have 'promptly' updated the changes in Vietnam's political-economic; secondly, the classify of KDTMs has resulted in a corresponding differentiation of commercial facilities according to the will of the project owners and the target consumer-resident; finally, facing the global 'death' of shopping malls, the KDTMs malls are trying to find themselves a new 'vitality': they are be-ing 'publicized' to (re)create the third places in KDTM, that encourage social interaction in the limited spaces - intersperse public and private practices.

Keywords: Hanoi, KDTM (Khu Do Thi Moi - new urban area), commercial facility, shopping mall, third place

1. Introduction

1.1 Situation and Background

Since 1986, after Doi Moi, entering period of economic reform, globalization, and urbanization, Vietnam has launched a new strategy: project-based housing development, differences in the economic value of land and the sharing of housing stock with the private sector (World Bank, 2011). After the first seven pilots KDTMs (Khu Do Thi Moi - new urban areas) in 1997-1998 (Pandolfi, 2001), this model was widely spread in suburban areas of Hanoi, as well as other growing cities in Vietnam: agricultural areas were filled quickly by residential and became newly living areas of the city (Tran M. T., 2016; Tran M. T., 2018; Tran, Chu, & Pham, 2019) and promoted as a new city-(re)making concept in post-reform policies (Tran H. A., 2015). These carefully planned new sites in terms of a well-equipped infrastructure are attractive for the upper and the new middle class of Hanoi (Waibel, 2004). Besides, it also has garnered a great deal of attention lately, especially by foreign researchers interested in the urbanization process in the post-Doi Moi era (Labbé & Boudreau, 2011).

According to Vietnamese housing policies, the model of KDTM created a modern residential environment under the form of investment ‘package’ which covers three crucial factors KDTMs = Technical infrastructures + Social facilities + Housing (Government of Vietnam, 2006; National Assembly of Vietnam, 2009), where social facilities include public works, health care, culture, education, sports, trade facilities at neighborhood level. The State ‘relies on’ project owners, private sectors, in establishing KDTMs, including housing production and associated utility services. That transfer of responsibility is often called ‘socialization’ in Vietnam (that is, the society ‘helps’ the State to perform some tasks that the government implement). This term has come to imply the individualization of responsibilities and the privatization of public goods (Nguyen M. T., 2018), in order to make full use of social resources to materialize the country’s socio-economic development goals (National Academy of Public Administration, 2000).

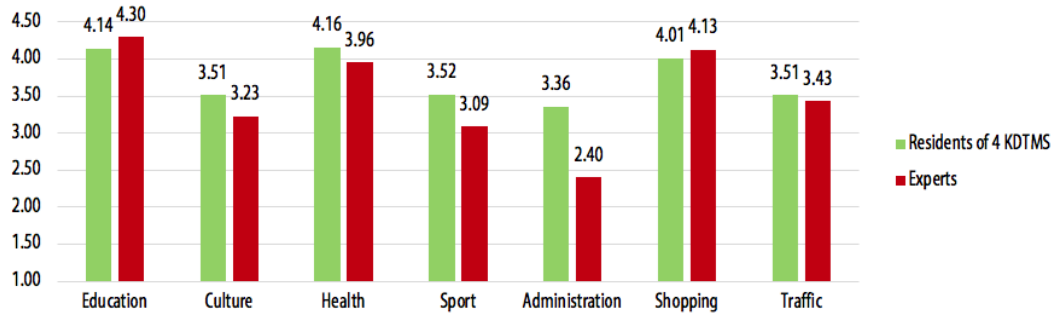


Fig. 1 - Comparing the assessment on the necessity of 7 common types of public services and facilities in KDTMs (Likert scale: 1 - very unimportant, 2 - unimportant, 3 - neuter, 4 - important, 5 - very important)

In a survey where 50 experts and 213 were randomly selected as interviewees in four KDTMs in Hanoi, three types of utility services were rated as more important: education, health and shopping, which are stimulating activities of KDTMs as a real residential area (Fig. 1). Education and health care are considered to be public and essential services to socio-economic life of the community and generally provided by the State. Other commercial utilities are provided under the market mechanism based on supply and demand relations between the project owners and clients. Therefore, the establishment of commercial facilities is relatively ‘free’, depending on the context and intentions of the KDTMs project owner. In other words, while education and health care are viewed as ‘institutional spaces’, commercial facilities are literally ‘civil space’ in KDTMs in Vietnam.

One of the most favorite facilities in KDTMs is the shopping mall, a comfortably designed, combined with their connected residential apartment to become fully self-sufficient communities. Shopping malls become an effective marketing tool for real estate products provided by KDTM. In this study, we focus on the research questions:

- How have neighborhood-level commercial facilities changed over time with the socio-economic mechanism transformation involved in the production of spaces?
- What is the nature of commercial facilities production, especially shopping malls in KDTMs?
- Facing the global ‘death’ of shopping malls (Sanburn, 2017), how have malls in KDTMs of Hanoi been ‘revitalized’ to become attractive and potential sites as a sustainable neighborhood-level third place?

1.2 Material and Method

As a precondition for this paper, we conducted literature review on three key concepts:

• *Third place* - This concept was developed by Ray Oldenburg in his 1989 book *The Great Good Place*. The ‘third places’, where people meet, congregate, and communicate, are critical for relationships: they enable socialization and support outside of the home and workplace, and they also serve vital community roles via stimulation, support, protection, and care (Finlay, Esposito, Kim, Gomez-Lopez, & Clarke, 2019). Oldenburg's view of a third place with eight characteristics are (Oldenburg, 1989): (i) Neutral ground; (ii) Leveler (a leveling place); (iii) (Playful and happy) conversation; (iv) Accessibility and accommodation; (v) Reservoir of regulars; (vi) A low profile; (vii) Playful mood; and (viii) A home away from home. Third places are home-like in terms of Seamon’s five defining traits: rootedness, feelings of possession, spiritual regeneration, feelings of being at ease, and warmth (Seamon, 1979). There is relationship between the presence of third places and perceptions of the quality of life: people have access to third places enhance their perceptions of the quality of life in their community (Jeffres, Bracken, Jian, & Casey, 2009). The third place is the destination to go, in order to gather, socialize with others or watch other people for the people who often visited the places (Mehta & Bosson, 2010).

• *Local shopping malls* - They are increasingly being recognized as important third places, functioning as nodes of social interaction (Nowek, 2016). In addition to social benefits, these third places also contribute towards environmental as well as economic benefits. For this reason, the benefits in terms of third places are divided into direct and indirect categories, where the former are related to social sustainability and the latter to economic and environmental sustainability (Cilliers & Goosen, 2008). Local shopping malls function as unique public spaces for social interaction, which provide a context

for sociability, spontaneity, community building and emotion expression. As potential sites of health and human flourishing, these shopping malls - semi-public spaces - play an important role as spaces for social engagement in adhoc, but significant ways (Mawer & Kiddle, 2019). Despite this, the community feels unable to participate in design decisions due to their being in private ownership. Globally there has been a trend towards privatization of public spaces, a trend closely linked to neoliberal ideology (Larner & Walters, 2000). In this light, western societies are mourning the loss of 'pure public life', meanwhile, we are failing to recognize and support any public life which is occurring in privatized spaces, such as shopping malls (Brill, 2001; Mawer & Kiddle, 2019). This binary conception of public and private space fails to take account of the way in which communities have made claims to private spaces such as malls (Mawer & Kiddle, 2019).

- *Neighborhood* - This is a dynamic and ever-evolving concept, custom-made to fit contemporary professional and theoretical contexts as they arise (Kallus & Law-Yone, 2000). There was transformation in the meaning of the neighborhood idea in both theoretical and practical discourse - adjustments over time from a humanistic approach (the neighborhood is defined by the identity of the relationships among people in the context of their living environment), to an instrumental approach (the neighborhood is as an appropriate scale for the making of the city, perceived as a system, operating within another system), and then to a phenomenological approach (the neighborhood is seen as a unique urban entity by profound and continued bonds between site and people) (Kallus & Law-Yone, 2000). The neighborhood can also operate as a self-governing unit while maintaining a specific system of decision-making. The perception of the neighborhood as a social unit often legitimizes its community-based action. Thereby different aspects of the neighborhood - educational (schools), organizational (community centers), commercial (shops and private services), or managerial (public services) - become also the generators of social life (Kallus & Law-Yone, 2000).

In order to answer the research questions, this article uses the following methods: (1) *Literature review*: this paper is based on desk study aiming at establishing the current background and context for the relationship between neighborhood-level commercial facilities and development of KDTMs in evolutionary of Hanoi, identify practical examples, and establish critical issues; (2) *Qualitative methods*: After behavioral observations of the users and the use of neighborhood-level commercial facilities in KDTMs, interviews were conducted with the main questions: In addition to shopping, what do you go to commercial facilities of your neighborhood for?; Who do you go there with or who do you meet?; How do you feel about the spirit and atmosphere in commercial facilities of your neighborhood?; (3) *Quantitative methods*: Survey in KDTMs for rating the level of resident's satisfaction on the necessity of public services and facilities, including commercial facilities, in KDTMs; (4) *Syntheses and comparison*: Review the survey results to answer the research questions by comparing the results with the hypotheses, the information of different KDTMs.

2. Neighborhood-Level Commercial Facilities: Modernization and Legalization

2.1 Traditional Neighborhood-Level Commerce: From Village Markets to Downtown of Hanoi

Public utilities in traditional Vietnamese villages are relatively simple, typically including communal house-temple(s)/pagoda(s)-market. Communal house is a public building with a relatively specific role in community life, standing in the central position both physically and psychologically. This place is a multi-tasking facility that hosts various community activities, such as administration, legal adjudication, cultural festivals, art performance, entertainment, etc. Temples or pagodas are also public buildings that are embedded with religious functions, characterized as a separate area in the village. Contrary to the aforementioned sacred spaces, market is purely 'secular'.

Traditional Vietnamese society does not attach much importance to trade, at the lowest of the 'four occupations' ladder: 'scholars-peasants-craftsmen-merchants'. Consequently, commercial facilities were relatively inactive in rural areas, where agricultural production was more appreciated. Therefore, market was sometimes paired with the other two constructions to create an economic-religious complex (market-pagoda) or an economic-political-religious complex (market-communal house) (Nguyen M. T., 2017). Depending on the village size, there would be a market to serve the village or group of villages. Considering the self-sufficient way of life, village markets were not held daily but only periodically, and those market sessions would mainly be a place to exchange 'outside' products, also to communicate with the 'outside' world. This was the occasion for people to meet, eat and exchange information when the hard, busy cultivator life offered them little opportunity to interact. Thus, the market had become an expected 'periodic' third place. Later, when economic conditions in villages improved, the demand for shopping increased accordingly, and some households sold the essentials in their home grocery stores, restaurants. These spaces became the gathering site during free time - another third place when market sessions were absent.

Operation of commercial spaces in rural areas was mainly a response to the needs of local people rather than an outcome from government's trade policies. However, in urban areas, commercial neighborhoods were formed more evidently. Commercial spaces were integrated into the townhouse's frontage along the roads and, hence, creating commercial streets, gathered to form trade associations, where people exchanged raw materials and goods. Thus, in addition to official centralized markets, roadside stalls created a kind of linear 'unofficial' market - where people could trade freely, exchange goods and information right at the available area of their house. "The city was set up around a market" (Gourou, 1936). The ancient Hanoi was once named 'Ke Cho' (those who live in the market). The current

commercial center, the core of Hanoi, was known primarily as the ‘36-street’ zone, which had been physically established on the economic and social cohesion of trade associations - a form of cooperation based on professional interests, voluntariness and equality between small private ownerships (Doan, 2001). Hence, the commercial district was considered as a type of civil society organization parallel to and separate from the administrative, military blocks of the city and national authorities.

2.2 Commercial Facilities of Modern Residential Neighborhoods: From ‘Subventionism’ to Liberalism

After 1954, the free-market was at the time, in principle, not recognized in the socialist economic model in the North of Vietnam. The State established a its trading system in cities where labor is concentrated (Nguyen, Huynh, Nguyen, Trang, & Vu, 2019), especially in new residential.

KTTs (Khu Tap The - collective housing blocks) - the socialist settlements had been developed in Hanoi since the 1960s because of the profound influence from the housing production and distribution method of the Soviet Union's planned subsidized economy. Each KTT had a public center area with neighborhood-level public facilities, usually cultural center (for the meeting, performances...), sports center (indoor, outdoor sports ground...), shopping and catering (canteen, restaurant, State-owned store, general merchandise store...). There was no market and private shops in these KTTs. The State decided on prices and distribution flows of commodities by means of a ‘rationing system’ and through State-owned stores (Maruyama & Le, 2012) that became ‘centers of power’ that maintained strong influence on people’s daily life. Commercial utilities were institutionalized and ‘nationalized’, thus, no longer a pure civil space.

After 1986, with the Doi Moi policy, the private business system flourished once again after a long period under control and restraint. Almost every house was once again made use of its frontage as a retailing (Waibel, 2004). The traditional bazaar network, specially, markets in residential areas, was also reactivated (Maruyama & Le, 2012) with variations, including temporary markets, spontaneous markets, street markets that made use of vacant spaces, or along carriageway. The 1990s - the post-subsidy period witnessed public goods and self-supply services thrive in any possible space, which entailed difficulties in urban space management and loss of control. Besides, many small roadside shops, shopping centers, and wet markets now provided a variety of products and services for various income groups. Consumers could easily find both foreign and local products, expensive and inexpensive, an impossibility before the economic reform (Maruyama & Le, 2012).

In the last few years, however, since about the start of the new millennium and institutional restructuring measures, the State/public sector has regained its leading role in urban development activities (Waibel, 2004). The KDTM, partly based on the KTTs formula being tweaked to fit better the new context, emphasizes the synergy between housing production and compulsory public utility production at neighborhood-level (urban-level public facilities are promoted). Under globalization, new spatial models and ideologies were imported to KDTMs, including shopping malls.

2.3 Process of Legalizing Neighborhood-Level Commercial Facilities in New Residential Areas

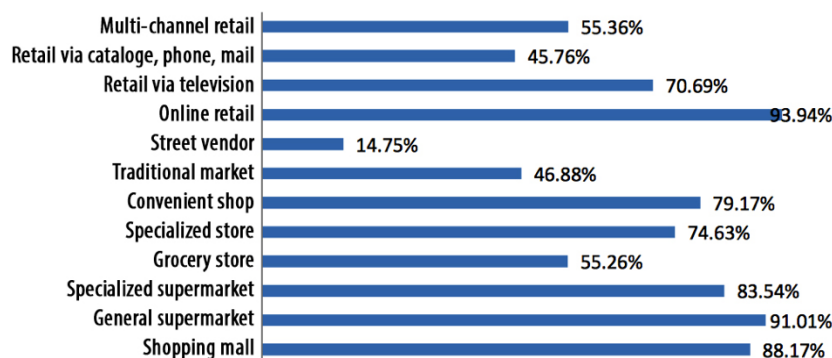


Fig. 2 - Evaluation on the development prospects of retail models in the next 3-5 years (WTO and International Trade Center, 2016)

In 1993, the supermarket model made its first appearance in Vietnam (WTO and International Trade Center, 2016). Now, Vietnam is still in the early stages of retail modernization (Maruyama & Le, 2012). Businesses assessments show that, traditional retail models (street vendors, traditional markets) are no longer appreciated, the outlook belongs to modern retail methods (online retail, supermarket, shopping mall) (WTO and International Trade Center, 2016) (Fig. 2). Currently, with the popularity of consumerism in Vietnam, shopping malls are hailed as a marvel of commerce, as a hub for retail activities as well as a community social space. Due to significant competitive advantage when compared to other KDTMs, project owners invest shopping malls into their KDTMs that are considered as not only a neighborhood-

level commercial facility to serve its denizens' needs - the 'insiders', but also a city-level commercial facility to entice 'outsiders'. Traditional markets are almost eliminated from official commercial facilities in KDTMs.

The Manor (4.4 hectares) was the first KDTM in Hanoi with an integrated shopping mall named The Garden. This building was completed in 2007, with a total floor area of 27,000 m², six floors and three basements. Then, in 2010 and 2011, Vingroup developed - in succession Vinhomes Royal City (12 hectares) and Vinhomes Times City (36 hectares) on land of relocated industrial facilities in Hanoi. This enterprise brought a 'new' model for neighborhood-level commercial facilities by arranging a 'shopping mall' in basements and two floors of the high-rise apartments: Vincom Mega Mall Royal City (200,000 m²) and Vincom Mega Mall Times City (230,000 m²). The service radius of these commercial centers has exceeded the neighborhood-level and has enhanced the nature of commercial facility creation, physically and psychologically, for residential areas.

However, it seems that changes in the legal framework related to trade facilities are much slower. In 1996, when the Vietnam Building Code on Urban Planning (Ministry of Construction of Vietnam, 1996) was first issued, the market was the only commercial facility mentioned among neighborhood-level public facilities with a target of 0.2-0.5 ha/project. This provision was kept unchanged in the revision in 2008 (Ministry of Construction of Vietnam, 2008). However, until 2019, the newest National Technical Regulation on Construction Planning was updated with "The total floor area of supermarkets or convenience stores of the new residential areas shall be converted into an equivalent amount of market land" (Ministry of Construction of Vietnam, 2019). It means that the Ministry of Construction has 'accepted' the presence of new commercial forms (supermarkets, convenience stores) in residential projects but still takes the market as the 'standard'.

In 2004, the Ministry of Industry and Trade issued the Regulations on Supermarkets and Shopping Malls (Ministry of Trade of Vietnam, 2004) that seems 'separate' from the system of the Ministry of Construction. In the Market Design Standard, which was updated in 2012 (TCVN 9211: 2012, 2012), markets in urban residential areas are considered class III, with a radius of service up to 1,000 m for about 15,000-20,000 people. Also, in this year, in the decision that approved the wholesale and retail network development plan in Hanoi by 2020, with a vision to 2030 (Hanoi People's Committee, 2012), the city wants to restrict provision of markets in KDTMs/new towns, and at the same time, to convert some existing urban markets into supermarkets and shopping malls in combination with retail function. Thus, there seems to be a 'misalignment' in the legal standpoints of commercial facilities in residential areas. It shows a certain hesitation and confusion in management regulations.

3. Observable Findings from The Situational KDTMs in Hanoi

We selected three typical KDTMs to conduct qualitative observations: (1) Linh Dam; (2) Ciputra; and (3) Times City. These KDTMs represent three different generations and three different development strategies, and thereby, support observing more comprehensively how philosophies on commercial facility development in new residential projects evolve over time.

3.1 Linh Dam - a 'pop-KDTM'

Linh Dam was the first generation of KDTMs, established in 1997-1998 by a State-owned enterprise specializing in urban development and housing (Housing and Urban Development Corporation - HUD under the Ministry of Construction). Linh Dam was designed when the market economy was just formed, and the society had changed but not noticeably, especially in Hanoi, where there was still much attachment to the subsidized economy that had profoundly affected ways of life in a 'transitional period'. The designers did not predict such quick a change in way of life as a result of economic change when consumerism is increasingly evident in urban lifestyle.

Commercial facilities are the most apparent evidence of the 'hesitation' of both the project owner and the designer when the older commercial types (markets) were not integrated, while new commercial types had not taken shape, either. The lower part of these first-generation apartment buildings had not been commercialized, thus, resulted in relatively limited commercial spaces. To ensure the daily food supply, people had to go to the markets in surrounding villages. In order to satisfy on-the-spot needs, many non-commercial spaces in the KDTM were converted fully into commercial spaces (service and catering stores) by the owners. Temporary markets were held spontaneously, owing to the 'ignorance' of the authority and project owners, to serve the inner and outer residents because of the 'convenience-first' habit.

Therefore, sidewalk in Linh Dam KDTM has been transformed into an attractive commercial and service space, despite prohibition and regular formal patrol. Also, restaurants on ground floors of the apartment buildings make use of the sidewalk or the front to expand the business, and hence, chaos in controlling public spaces (Fig. 3, 4, 5). Putting legality of these activities aside, spontaneous commercial spaces show an apparent spirit of the third place.



Fig. 3 -The pavement is considered as an extension of commercial facilities in Linh Dam (<http://cafef.vn/chung-cu-to-kien-35-40-tang-chi-chit-do-thi-mau-linh-dam-dang-nghet-tho-20161201101919728.chn>)



Fig. 4 - Street vendors, temporary markets are everywhere in Linh Dam (<https://doisongvietnam.vn/nhung-hinh-anh-xau-xi-nhech-nhac-tai-khu-chung-cu-hh-linh-dam-52613-3.html>)



Fig. 5 - People use public spaces (roadways, sidewalks) for commercial activities despite ban signs (<http://cafef.vn/chung-cu-to-kien-35-40-tang-chi-chit-do-thi-mau-linh-dam-dang-nghet-tho-20161201101919728.chn>)

On the other hand, due to uncontrolled population growth, the initial plan of 25,000 people turned out to be a population of nearly 70,000 people (Khuat, 2016), and therefore, supply of commercial facilities becomes out of control, especially since 2015, when the HH apartment complex, including twelve 35-40 floor buildings with 20 apartments/floors came into operation. The whole structure of KDTMs’ commercial facilities collapsed when overloaded, and spontaneous commercial space issues were repeated as in the older residential areas of Hanoi: Such a high spatial-economic density and intensity of trade activities cannot be found anywhere else in Vietnam (Waibel, 2004). From a model KDTM - an exemplary for later KDTM generation, Linh Dam gradually became popularized to become a ‘pop- KDTM’ by the ‘very popular’ commercial activities.

3.2 Ciputra - a ‘gated-KDTM’

Established in 2002-2003 by a foreign interdisciplinary enterprise (Ciputra Group - Indonesia), considered as the second generation of KDTMs, Ciputra was developed with a new approach in Hanoi (and Vietnam) at that time. With the desire to create a ‘little Europe’ in the heart of the city, this KDTM was developed entirely differently from the majority of other than KDTMs: gated-KDTM to meet the needs of separate neighborhood of the new wealthier, thanks to changes in the economy, (and also some foreigners who were ‘not familiar’ with and could not blend in Vietnamese society). In other words, household revenue increased, and changes in consumption appeared among the rising middle class, who asked for higher quality, safer goods. Ciputra was built in that context. The KDTM has a barrier and four

gateways controlled by security guards. Therefore, the inner spaces are only reserved for its residents to show their ‘privileges’ compared to those who are not. Public spaces in Ciputra, along with the activities of residents, are also controlled by security guards. Therefore, these spaces are often kept quiet and clean to create a ‘superior’ image opposite to the bustling public spaces often seen in the city. Thus, it seems that the public spaces in Ciputra are not really ‘third places’ in the sense that Oldenburg envisioned.



Fig. 6 - Ciputra shopping mall is arranged separately from residential areas and status quo
<http://reatimes.vn/du-an-tttm-lon-nhat-ha-noi-ciputra-mall-bo-hoang-7-nam-truoc-ngay-hoi-sinh-3445.html>

In terms of commercial facilities, because of the ‘little Europe’ image, definitely there is no market or traditional Vietnamese restaurants in Ciputra. The conversion of houses into commercial spaces and street trading is wholly forbidden here. There are few restaurants, coffee shops, convenience stores, health and beauty salons. To ensure convenience for residents, the KDTM has set up an additional shopping mall (Ciputra Hanoi Mall) on a 7.3 ha plot (compared to the total 301 ha area of the KDTM), which is completely separated from the residential area by a major road. This project commenced in 2010 and was expected to serve in 2014. However, only the foundation has been built, then stopped and abandoned (Fig. 6). In 2018, the project was restarted after being sold to another project owner, became a city-level independent commercial space under a new name - Lotte Mall Hanoi - a complex consisting of shopping malls, supermarkets, cinemas, hotels, offices, and aquariums according. Thus, up to now, theoretically, the residents of Ciputra still do not have real commercial facilities of their ‘own’. Those who seek (other) services, and commercial options need to go to other parts of the city (Geertman, 2010). ‘Isolated’ from the bustling of civil society outside the fence, Ciputra is like a ‘peaceful oasis’ in the heart of the city. However, its dependence on the city's commercial facilities turns it into more a ‘commuter town’ than a self-sufficient gated KDTM.

3.3 Times City - a ‘lux-KDTM’

Established in 2011 by a domestic interdisciplinary enterprise (Vingroup), Times City - belongs to the third generation KDTM, was commenced in 2011 on an area of 36 hectares of two relocated industrial factories. Targeting middle-class consumers and above - those who can afford to buy a home and willing to spend for a better life, Times City seeks to create an ‘iconic’ living environment - a ‘lux-KDTM’, a separation and self-sufficiency model with the on-the-spot services and commercial facilities. This KDTM consists of twenty-three 27-35-story apartment buildings. One ‘giant’ shopping mall named Vincom Mega Mall Times City, with a total floor area of over 23 hectares, was opened in 2013 (Fig. 7). It is the second and the largest one of three ‘mega malls’ attached into KDTMs developed by Vingroup. It is also expected to become the most crowded shopping mall in Hanoi with a series of high-end brands. The philosophy of this new mega mall is to emphasize the “convenience and experience first” approach to keep customers interested when “the retail market tends to be personalized, and then everything will be drawn towards a unique experience, customers are willing to spend more for their enjoyment” (Bang-Tam, 2019). The first essential customer groups are the residents of the KDTMs where the shopping mall (acting as a neighborhood-level commercial facility) are located, and the second covers the residential areas in vicinity of the mall (acting as an inter-residential or city level commercial facility). Along with real estate consumers, this shopping mall also targets young, dynamic, creative, and civilized people who always request for ‘unlimitedness’ in product and service experiences.



Fig. 7 - Masterplan of Times City and the television news mentioned that Vincom Mega Mall Times City was crowded during the holiday and this was also the venue of Vietnam Idol 2016 casting round (<http://vnews.gov.vn/trung-tam-thuong-mai-dong-duc-ngay-nghi-le>; <http://vnmedia.vn/van-hoa/201603/soi-dong-vong-so-loai-vietnam-idol-tai-ha-noi-526589/>)

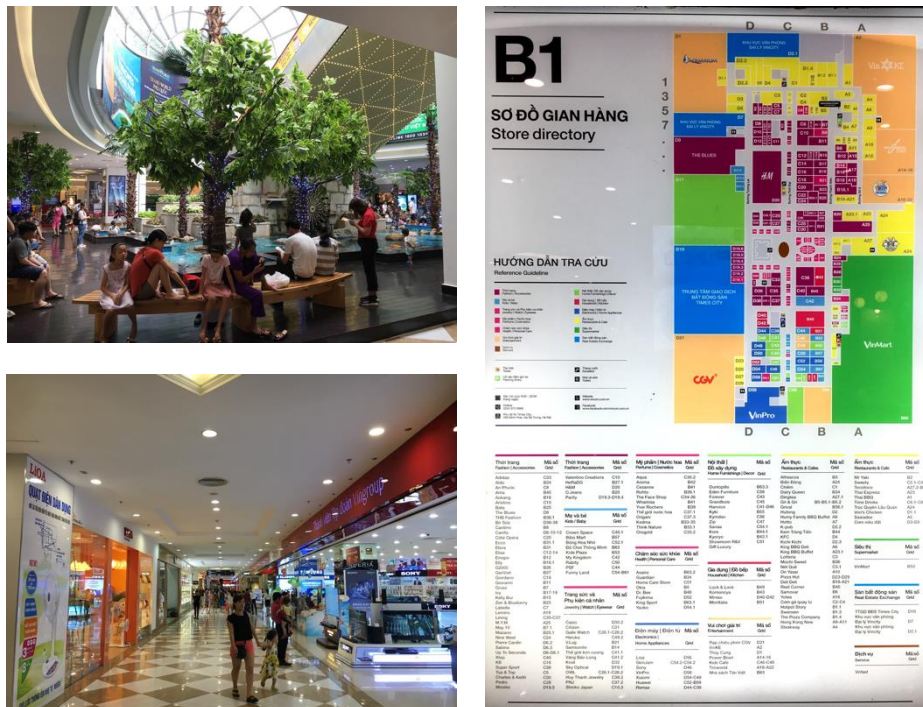


Fig. 8 - Spacious, air-conditioned space has not only enticed people to shop but also more than that

The most important difference of Vincom Mega Mall Times City is its location in the connected basement of the buildings. On one hand, there has been no regulation on the density of basement construction work in effect in Vietnam, and the project owner is relatively ‘free’ in increasing the basement area. On the other hand, making use of the basement for commercial facilities in quite a small construction site (36 ha) becomes a relatively ‘wise’ way of the project owner. However, operating these ‘enclosed’ spaces is much more complicated than in open public spaces, often due to air conditioning and artificial lighting requirements. Therefore, broadcasting the ‘all in one’ motto, Vincom Mega Mall Times City is like ‘underground commercial streets’ similar to the urban structure on the surface: grid pattern walkways creates different size of ‘blocks’ (Fig. 8). It has been observed that, on holidays or hot days, drastically increased number

of visitors would come for services as well as enjoyment of the air-conditioned environment. Besides, the commercial facilities at the lower part of the apartment buildings, mainly convenience stores or restaurants, and cafes, are strictly managed for protection of the ‘luxury and cleanliness’ image. The use of sidewalks for businesses is also strictly controlled and warned by security guards. No spontaneous trade is allowed in Times City (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9 - The sidewalk in Times City KDTM is strictly controlled to create a better image for the shops on the lower part of the apartment buildings.

4. Discussion on the Commercial Facilities in KDTMs

4.1 Desire to Become a Real Third Place of Commercial Facilities in KDTMs: As Practical, As Gathering, And as Home

Business people clearly foster social benefits that go beyond the mere provision of goods. Their business settings generate important forms of interaction, with real meaning for such facets of neighborhood life as a sense of belonging, rootedness, social trust, and managing difference (Steigemann, 2019). Malls have also become important meeting places, especially for young people and seniors.

Markets in the past Vietnamese residential models demonstrated the social communication function besides the original function of trade, becoming the third place. But now, supermarkets and shopping malls are the ‘chosen’ ones to replace conventional markets. Can malls become a crucial element in the communities’ lifestyles? The key is to shift the emphasis from ‘shopping’ to ‘enjoyment’, and to create an actual third place where all can relax and regenerate in today’s complex and stressful world.

According to the idea of Victor Gruen, the man known as ‘father of the modern shopping mall’, malls would connect to residential and commercial space, medical care, libraries, and other public spaces. Therefore, shopping malls attached to KDTM will be accurate to the original purpose, and at the same time, have a competitive advantage in terms of social influence through the greater number of regular on-site customers than the independent one.

Conversely, retail is as a component to attract residential tenants (Vo, 2019). While many Vietnamese select a home for its resale value, others seek community, a place to connect with others, where they feel at home. That means the commercial spaces are providing something more valuable to customers than pure merchandise. This mix of consumerism and neighborhood structure went from being an architectural expression to a real neighborhood-level idea and proposal.

Creating third places via commercial facilities and motivating people to explore and engage with KDTM could very well be one of the future success stories of real estate marketing. The target residents of KDTMs are new tiers of average and high incomes, those with a high demand for quality of life but less time, thus, willing to spend on on-the-spot facilities. They choose to shop in malls for they believe such markets offer them a convenient shopping environment, as well as high-quality, origin-verified products. They are not only concerned with the quality and prices of products but also the quality of the stores they visit. They tend to enjoy going shopping in safe and comfortable environments as home.

4.2 Ambition of Shopping Malls in Kdtms: From The Neighborhood-Level Third Place to The City-Level Third Place

In Vietnam, supermarkets or shopping malls are internationalized commercial spaces, the embodiment of the modernization and integration. It is probably the common trend in developing countries where the accelerating expansion of supermarkets is driven by the following factors (Maruyama & Le, 2012): (1) rising incomes, urbanization, and increasing pressure on consumers’ time; (2) retail-related foreign direct investment (FDI) liberalization, along with competitive domestic retail investments; (3) pro-supermarket policies by municipalities, or even conversion of wet markets to supermarkets; (4) recent food safety crises; (5) modernization of procurement systems, especially for processed and semi-processed products; (6) fund availability. Therefore, it is easy to understand the motivation in government strategies on these modern commercial spaces development instead of the traditional one (market) in urban areas, especially the KDTMs.

Advertised as a pioneer in the ideas and lifestyle, KDTMs always pay attention to creating a new fashionable living environment by timely adopting global styles and trends. Therefore, while the core of KTTs is built on non-commercial facilities such as schools, cultural houses and sports fields, KDTMs take shape from commercial constructions and facilities that have become an identity-making factor. The emergence of shopping malls in the KDTMs brought a new type of indoor air-conditioned public space. Improved income and climate change have made Vietnamese people increasingly prefer air-conditioned spaces, especially in severe weather conditions – too hot, too cold, or too rainy. So, enclosed malls have offered patrons the advantage of climatic comfort and shelter from the noise and traffic which characterizes other shopping venues. Malls in KDTM have been turned into an attractive place to carry out a variety of activities, and shopping is not the main reason for the customer to come. They are also utilized as the venue for cultural events, performances in holiday seasons, becoming a ‘destination’ for all. For example, The Garden Mall in The Manor KDTM is known as a regular venue for TV shows such as Vietnam Next Top Model, Vietnam Got Talent, Got To Dance, or events like Thailand-Vietnam Fruit Fair 2012, Taiwan Excellence 2013, as well as many annual ‘imported’ festivals such as Halloween, SantaCon.

Thus, not only based on the physical scale but also the activities and events, malls in KDTMs have exerted considerable influence beyond being neighborhood-level commercial facilities. Even, these shopping malls have ambition to become shopping destinations different from conventional shopping places. It can also be understood as a giant retail store that combines the attributes of several categories of stores: the variety of a department store, size of a mass merchandiser, and low prices of a discount store.

Through observations and by studying development strategy of Vingroup, it can be seen that the Vincom Mega Mall Times City is following the direction of a destination store when implementing many methods that Berman and Evans listed in their study (Berman & Evans, 2013): (1) Be price-oriented and cost-efficient to attract price-sensitive shoppers; (2) Be upscale to attract full-service, status-conscious consumers; (3) Be convenient to attract those wanting shopping ease, nearby locations, or long hours; (4) Offer a dominant assortment in the product lines carried to appeal to consumers interested in variety and in-store shopping comparisons; (5) Offer superior customer service to attract those frustrated by the decline in retail service; (6) Be innovative or exclusive and provide a unique way of operating or carry products/brands not stocked by others to reach people who are innovators or bored. Not only can visitors consume products and services in a variety of ways within the mall, the mall itself offers experiences that are consumable (Bloch, Dawson, & Wong, 1994). With the advantage of being the leading business branches of a large interdisciplinary corporation in Vietnam, the combination of Vinhomes (specializing in the supply of complex residential real estate products) and Vincom (specializing in operating and developing the chain of shopping malls) turned Vingroup's KDTMs into destinations in both aspects: lifestyle destination through housing values, and commercial facility destination through combination of catering and recreation services. Thus, compared to Linh Dam and Ciputra, whose project owners are merely construction and real estate businesses, Times City is undoubtedly superior in scenery and living conditions for residents.

5. Conclusion On Potential of Sustainable Neighborhood-Level Third Place: Needing A Multidimensional Policy?

Thus, with three initial research questions, we have come up with interesting and practical findings that could open up the next in-depth studies of the commercial facilities in KDTM.

Firstly, the neighborhood-level commercial facilities have ‘promptly’ updated the changes in Vietnam's political-economic. Initially, they are purely civilian spaces spontaneously formed based on the need to exchange goods and information in traditional farm-villages. Then, they step by step go through being firmly institutionalized in KTT to become ‘compulsory’ spaces under the strict control of the centrally planned economy, and being enterpriseized in KDTM lately. Although no longer institutionalized, commercial facilities show their roles and benefits, both physically and mentally, in new residential projects in the form of KDTM: They become ‘indispensable’ spaces in the community's life, value-added adding value and attracting new residents. In the context of integration and modernization, globalized commercial facilities (such as supermarkets, shopping malls) gradually replace the neighborhood-level traditional commerce (like traditional markets), which is considered ‘out of date’ and is discouraged and even eliminated in new residential projects.

Secondly, the classify of KDTMs has resulted in a corresponding differentiation of commercial facilities according to the will of the project owners and the target consumer-resident: From the popular commercial spaces in pop-KDTMs that anyone can use to the high-end ones in target-selective lux-KDTMs, from secluded commercial spaces in the gated-KDTMs that emphasizes quietness and avoids the ‘outsiders’ to the completely open commercial spaces, integrated into the residential spaces, attracting more than just its residents. As such, project owners have full discretion on these commercial spaces' production and operation as a kind of ‘profit’ to offset the costs of their ‘responsibility’ for institutionalized public spaces. Commercial facilities at KDTMs are increasingly ‘modernized’ in the form of ‘all-in-one’ shopping malls, which are comfortable, air-conditioned, well managed, and controlled, in contrast to spontaneous and self-managed traditional markets, shops. However, this ‘modernization’ has made us utterly questionable about these spaces' publicity when they are viewed as ‘pseudo-public spaces’ that do not meet Oldenburg's eight characteristics of truly third places.

Finally, facing the global 'death' of shopping malls, the KDTMs malls are trying to find themselves a new 'vitality' when integrating two levels of service: neighborhood-level - serving the needs of its residents ('insiders'), city-level - attracting 'outsiders' through diversifying activities, of which shopping is only a component. With the size and nature entirely determined by the project owner, these commercial buildings are being 'publicized' to (re)create the third places in KDTM, in which: (1) malls as practical - a place that satisfies the residents' needs of food and material, (2) malls as gathering - a place to strengthen community and social relations outside the private house, and (3) malls as home - where people feel free and comfortable, safe and secure, and able to interact with people. More precisely, the malls' socio-spatial and material features in KDTMs encourage social interaction among mostly unacquainted people and connect different people in the limited spaces - intersperse public and private practices.

The transformation of the economy, the influence of globalization, and consumer attitudes have triggered various reactions to the KDTMs' neighborhood-level commercial facilities. However, with the growth of e-commerce, commercial facilities' existence is threatened for pure shopping purposes. Becoming a genuinely third place will help them be 'reborn'. In order to do just that, the question is whether there should be a multidisciplinary policy on the necessity and legitimacy of commercial facilities in new residential projects.

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