Sociable Space in a City of Life

- The Case of Hanoi

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Diploma work for the Master’s Programme in Spatial Planning at Blekinge Institute of Technology, Karlskrona, Sweden
SHORT FACTS ABOUT VIETNAM*

Official name of Country:
Socialist Republic of Vietnam

Government:
Communist state

Capital:
Hanoi

Population:
81.6 million (July 2003)

Median age:
24.5 years, (compared to 40.1 years in Sweden)

Area:
total: 330 000 sq km (approx. 100 000 sq km smaller than Sweden)

Exports:
crude oil, marine products, rice, coffee rubber, tea, garments, shoes

Religions:
Buddhist, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Christian, Indigenous beliefs, Muslim

*Country data collected from:
http://www.faqs.org/docs/factbook/geos/vm.html

Cover photos:
Front: A young boy standing at the entrance of building ‘A1’ in the Nguyen Cong Tru housing quarters.
Back: Miscellaneous pictures from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
Sociable Space

in a City of Life

- the Case of Hanoi

MIKAIL BÄCKMAN & MARIA RUNDQVIST
Map showing Vietnam’s location in the Southeast Asian region.
This study, *Sociable Space in a City of Life – the Case of Hanoi*, is a diploma work by Mr. Mikael Bäckman and Ms. Maria Rundqvist, for the Master’s Programme in Spatial Planning presented at the Blekinge Institute of Technology, Karlskrona, Sweden. It was carried out as a Minor Field Study and a scholarship awarded by SIDA has partly financed it. The study began in Sweden, early 2003, when we learnt that Hanoi in Vietnam was the scene for large-scale housing developments and that there were discussions among experts about pros and cons of this modernisation process.

The field study and the major background research were completed during a six months long stay in Southeast Asia. A large part of this stay was spent in Hanoi, Vietnam. To broaden our experiences of dense urban environments we also went to Hong Kong, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia. We arrived in Asia in September 2003 and left six months later in February 2004.

The study is to a large extent based on observations and experiences from our field studies in Hanoi and introduces *sociable space* as a planning concept. It contains two redevelopment proposals for the housing area Nguyen Cong Tru, located centrally in Hanoi. The proposals aim to conceptually show how different design approach in the physical structure affects the possibilities for sociable spaces to emerge in the urban environment.
Acknowledgements

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Thank you!
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Chapter 3 Sociable Space - in a City of Life

Let’s put life in the centre of attention!

So... for whom do we plan?
Six human needs
Representational system in the urban environment

The ABC’s of Sociable Space
A. Structure...the initiator of sociable space
B. Functions...the sources of sociable space
Service and commerce
Greenery and recreation
History and aesthetics
C. Activities...the life and culture of sociable space
1. The street as a living room
2. Daily delivery of serendipity and expectedness
3. When the occasional intervenes
4. A space for challenge and learning
5. Harmony and contrast

Chapter 4 Planning for Sociable space

Refurbishment for life

The project area Nguyen Cong Tru
The structure of 1960’s Nguyen Cong Tru
The structure of today’s Nguyen Cong Tru
People and outdoor life in Nguyen Cong Tru
Greenery in Nguyen Cong Tru

The redevelopment of Nguyen Cong Tru
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Different aspects of density
From high-dense to high-rise in Hanoi
The Curitiba example
Density study for Nguyen Cong Tru
Proposals for a sociable Nguyen Cong Tru

Proposal 1
Proposal 2
Proposal overview
Illustrations
Structure - specifics
Sources - specifics
Service & Commerce
Greenery & Recreation
History & Aesthetics
Activities - specifics
1. The street as a living room
2. Daily delivery...
3. When the occasional intervenes
4. A space for challenge and learning
5. Harmony and contrast
Illustrations

The end then...

For whom and for what uses do we plan?

References

Literature
Internet
Illustrations and photographs
Report structure

1 STUDY INTRODUCTION
Introduction containing problem statement, methodological approach and aim and objectives of the study

2 HANOI - A CITY IN TRANSITION
Presentation of relevant planning pre-conditions in Hanoi

3 SOCIABLE SPACE IN A CITY OF LIFE
Discussions on the Sociable Space concept

4 PLANNING FOR SOCIABLE SPACE
Presentation of the study area and exemplifications on how the Sociable Space concept can be used when planning urban environments

Proposal 1
by Mikael Bäckman

Proposal 2
by Maria Rundqvist
Chapter 1
Study introduction

Vietnam’s economy is gradually improving and Hanoi’s population is growing. The infrastructure of Vietnam is being upgraded and large-scale housing development can be seen all over. The housing standards are today low in many of the existing housing areas in Hanoi. Apartments are small and house many residents. Due to this fact, the outdoor environment has come to function also as an extension to people’s homes and provides space for a large amount of activities that otherwise would have been performed indoors. Housing standards are however being improved and so are also people’s possibilities to lead their lives in the protected privacy of their homes. Many activities like cooking, washing clothes and doing the dishes are today commonly taking place on the streets of Hanoi, but with increased housing standards these are likely to gradually disappear.

Also the commerce in Hanoi is transforming. Shops are growing bigger and with a comfortable indoor environment and with a wide range of goods, they threat to drain the cityscape created by street vendors and small traditional front-store shops. When more and more functions and activities move indoors we consider it important to create an urban environment that people voluntary would choose to spend their time in. In many of the New Urban Areas that are being built in Hanoi today, this issue has been overlooked, we feel. The outdoor environments in these areas are empty of people despite the fact that several thousands actually live there. Our aim is therefore to study how people-friendly urban environments can be created, and how the transition from ‘necessary’ to ‘voluntary’ activities can be met by the design of the urban environment.
The study investigates the concept sociable space and explores aspects to consider when people-friendly urban environments are to be planned. As a case study, a central urban area; Nguyen Cong Tru in Hanoi, which is about to undergo total reconstruction, is used. Two conceptual proposals created for this area, aim to exemplify how different design approach affects the possibilities for the creation of a sociable urban environment.

**The study’s objective is:**
Investigate the concept sociable space and how people-friendly urban environments can be created in the context of urban Vietnam and present two redevelopment proposals for the Nguyen Cong Tru area in Hanoi.
An approach emerges

Initially we had our mind set on making plan proposals for one of the New Urban Areas that is being developed in the outskirts of Hanoi. Among other things we wanted to study how these new housing areas could be designed to better fit in with the traditional housing style of Hanoi by not making use of high-rise buildings. Many of the New Urban Areas that are being planned and developed in Hanoi today make use of high-rise buildings (see fig. 1.5) and this has been a topic for debate¹. The debate takes its standpoints both from an aesthetical and traditional angle but also from a financial and economical angle.

Our professional contacts in Hanoi consisted of people at the Architectural Research Institute. They research on architecture and housing but they also draw up proposals for different development plans. When we arrived there, they were working on the redevelopment of a housing area, Nguyen Cong Tru. The standard of housing in the area is low and its buildings are in a poor state of repair. Their task was to study how a refurbishment of the area could be accomplished, providing housing for the 6000 inhabitants already living there plus housing for 2000 more.

They showed us several plan proposals they were working on. In these redevelopment proposals, all the four-store buildings in Nguyen Cong Tru, had been replaced by 16-19 storey buildings. We felt that this area could suit our study well. We would be able to create contrasting proposals which also had a considerably high density, but didn’t make use of those much debated high-rise buildings. Additionally, the office (the Research Institute of Architecture) could provide us with digital maps over the area and a thorough investigation over the area’s current status making it suitable for our study.

We started our field study by visiting three large developing companies in Hanoi to hear about their plans and thoughts about modern housing development. We got help from people at the office arranging these meetings and they were also kind enough to help us with interpretation during meetings, when necessary.

These meetings gave us a good overview over the current planning situation in Hanoi. We then visited several of the already built New Urban Areas to form our own opinion of how these areas look and function in reality. We also studied areas under construction and plans for areas in development stage. The redevelopment plans for Nguyen Cong Tru seemed very similar to the New Urban Areas that were developed in the outskirts of Hanoi. The big difference was however that Nguyen Cong Tru is an already densely populated area and that it is also much more centrally located.

There are many housing areas like Nguyen Cong Tru in Hanoi, and we visited several of these. We saw examples of how some of these areas had been upgraded, however in a much smaller scale than what was planned for Nguyen Cong Tru. Gradually we became aware of that the housing situation in Hanoi was far more complex than we had realised prior to our arrival. Nguyen Cong Tru and other similar areas are already dense when it comes to plot coverage and inhabitants per hectare. A redevelopment of Nguyen Cong Tru intends to raise the standard of housing and living space. It then becomes a necessity to build higher if the area should be able to accommodate the same amount of people (or even 2000 more as is planned for that area!) after redevelopment. The area is surrounded by already developed areas and can therefore not expand in any other direction than upwards. We had to re-evaluate our own thoughts and ideas of how a city should best expand.

We came to the conclusion that a sustainable growth of Hanoi has to be accomplished by the use of also vertical densification and not only by a horizontal sprawl of the city. We found that if density is kept too low in the new housing areas, the sprawl of Hanoi would engulf even more agricultural land areas outside Hanoi than it already does and furthermore increase the need for transportation of people and goods.

We now faced a new problem: What are the issues to consider when high-rise buildings are used for increasing density? We could study a few high buildings in Hanoi but the areas where they had made use of high-rise buildings where not particularly densely developed. We felt that if there should be any point of making use of high-rise buildings in a housing area, the result must be an urban environment which also achieves a high floor area ratio\(^2\). We lacked experience of high-rise development and therefore we decided to change our agenda and visit cities which we believed had these kinds of environments. We added Singapore (see fig. 1.6), Hong Kong (see fig. 1.7) and Kuala Lumpur (see fig. 1.8) to our itinerary in order to gain valuable experience of high and dense urban environments.

Parallel to this we also studied Nguyen Cong Tru to become aware of important traits in the area. We could see that life conditions there differed quite much from what we saw in the more spaciously planned New Urban Areas. Since we had time to revisit our study area on numerous occasions we gradually started to get to know life in the area better. Initially we were really bothered by the fact that this nice area was planned to undergo such extraordinary redevelopment. Things were not that bad were they? Could not the buildings simply be repaired and upgraded? The more we visited Nguyen Cong Tru, the more we became convinced that the planned refur-

\(^2\) Floor area ratio – FAR – The ratio between the total floor area, including thickness of walls, and the total area of the plot. (Same as floor space index – FSI)
bishment was necessary. We felt truly divided coming to think about examples from the 1960’s in Sweden when ‘run down’ city centres was redeveloped and modernized. Were we about to repeat the mistake of those days, destroying historical remnants and urban ‘charm’ in the name of modernisation? After much agony and discussions, we finally decided to proceed with our study by keeping in mind; for whom and for what uses we plan.

Since most of the buildings in Nguyen Cong Tru are to be replaced we listed what would be possible to keep when redeveloping the area. The list however, became remarkably short and eventually consisted of only two main items that we felt were important to consider; PEOPLE and TREES. (See fig. 1.9-1.10)

(below & right) 1.9 & 1.10

There are many different trees present in Nguyen Cong Tru. They make the streetscapes and courtyards green and they provide shade for resting street vendors.

Nguyen Cong Tru, Hanoi
Through our studies in the Nguyen Cong Tru area we became aware of the existing social structure. People seemed to know, at least by face, a large part of the area’s inhabitants. When we went there with our photographs, there was always someone there to guide us to the person on the picture. We also noticed that up to three or four generations of the same family lived in Nguyen Cong Tru.

We went on with millions of questions chasing our minds. Can the neighbourly atmosphere we experienced in Nguyen Cong Tru be maintained through the redevelopment and onwards? Can the redeveloped area be designed so it still will allow people to make a living from small ‘corner shop’ businesses? Can a modern, high-rise neighbourhood be designed to create an intimate and small-scale impression?

To push the study forward we needed to state what it is that makes an urban environment people-friendly and interesting. We felt we needed an instrument for this; an instrument that fitted our way of thinking.

After visiting different housing areas in Hanoi we noticed that some public open areas appeared to attract more people than others. We became curious of what it was that made some areas attractive for people to occupy and some not. We examined diverse urban environments to be able to list the factors we believed were involved. This was later expanded by also studying what kind of interactions the urban environments could offer and what kind of expectations people seemed to have on it.

All these experiences directed us in an interesting and unexpected direction. Instead of focusing simply on how to best improve the standard of housing or what building heights should be used when planning a modern and dense ‘housing area’, our focus became the sociable spaces of the urban environments.

Since we at the time for our travelling lacked access to literature to support our thoughts, we started working on our own idea for a ‘sociable space’ concept (see page 21). Our sociable space concept therefore came to be based primarily on our observations of people and environments. Much time has been spent discussing on how these observations could be transformed into practice. We tried to isolate the sources of the sociable spaces and to categorise the activities we saw taking place there. These studies could later be deepened by field studies also in Sweden after returning home.
Maps and materials
Maps and information about our study area was kindly provided us by the Research Institute of Architecture, in Hanoi. We also got material regarding housing development projects from several of the developers we met in Hanoi. Some of the material we got was however written in Vietnamese, and we have not been able to make a full translation of these documents. We have however had translations made over parts of the texts which we believed were of particular interest to us.

Empirical studies
Observations
Our study is mainly based on observations of people, culture and urban environments. Out of our six months in South East Asia we spent around four months in Vietnam. A major part of our Vietnam stay was spent in Hanoi, but we also travelled to several other regions in Vietnam. We went to the largest cities in Vietnam and we also visited rural parts to gain a more complete view of the cultural diversity that exist in Vietnam today. We wanted to attain an understanding of where Vietnam, Hanoi and its population are coming from and where they might be heading.

Early in our Southeast Asian stay we wanted to see how countries with similar climate and similar background compared to Vietnam, regarding housing and infrastructure development. We therefore went to Vietnam’s neighbouring countries, Lao and Cambodia. In many areas we could see that Vietnam already had surpassed them with its strong economy and collaboration with international investors. The Vietnamese countryside did however in many ways still resemble the conditions of the Lao and Cambodian countryside. Visiting these two countries was to us like a visit to Vietnam’s past.

Coming to a foreign culture for just a few months you can never get a full understanding of traditions and people’s way of life, but we felt obligated to at least stay curious at all time. Buddhism is very much a living religion in Vietnam and since our study more and more became a study of everyday life it felt natural to also get acquainted to this part of the society. We were fortunate enough to have Vietnamese friends to guide us into the religious and supernatural dimension of the Vietnamese culture, arranging visits to *Pagodas* and meetings with fortune-tellers and monks.

Red envelopes with ‘lucky money’ are traditionally burnt twice a month for luck.
During our stay in Hanoi we also went to a few art gallery openings, concerts and embassy arrangements to learn one or two things about that part of the society too. By chance we ended up at the gallery opening for Mrs. Vu Giang Huong, artist, art professor and Secretary General of the Vietnam Fine Arts Association.

Her paintings often describe the everyday life from a social perspective and especially one of her exhibited paintings drew our attention (see fig. 1.14). When asked about it she explained the motif to us. She had observed that even if housing standards in Hanoi was improving immensely with modern architecture and large apartments, not everything changed in phase with this. Children were still out providing shoeshine services or selling newspapers or diverse merchandise to earn their living. The only difference was that they no longer lived in these refurbished areas themselves. This painting and the discussion we had with the artist, reminded us of the complexity of the ongoing process of housing modernisation in Hanoi.

In quite sharp contrast to the expression of that painting stands the motivation posters directed to the public (see fig. 1.15). We saw these posters all over Hanoi and they were often several meters wide and lined the streets with an attached message: 'A period marked by the acceleration of national industrialization and modernization, with a Socialist orientation' or 'To respect and preserve the national character'.

We came to understand that what initially appeared to be a simple matter of course, in fact was much more complicated. The biggest issue was not as we thought the mere replacing of old, run-down buildings with new and modern ones. Instead the issue was how this could be done without losing track of the fact that urban planning should adapt to humans, instead of hoping the streets with modern architecture and large apartments, not everything changed in phase with this. Children were still out providing shoeshine services or selling newspapers or diverse merchandise to earn their living. The only difference was that they no longer lived in these refurbished areas themselves. The design of public space and qualities in the immediate surroundings are important parts of a neighbourhood and therefore we have studied people's use of the public spaces in different types of housing areas in Hanoi. Observations have been done in different areas in different housing areas in Hanoi, in how people live today in Hanoi, and how they use the public spaces in their neighbourhoods. We have sometimes stayed in the background, observing the ongoing street life, but we have not hesitated to also invite ourselves to people's apartments and buildings or happily accepted invitations to dinners, weddings and private homes.

One thing that gave us unexpected information was our 'constant' photographing of people and places. In our study area Nguyen Cong Tru we felt people were somewhat disturbed by our presence, especially since we always used our digital camera to document people's daily life and neighborhood. It was frustrating for us, since we could not explain why we were photographing people and places. In our study area Nguyen Cong Tru we felt people were somewhat disturbed by our presence, especially since we always used our digital camera to document people's daily life and neighborhood.
there and what the pictures were for. Not many people in the area spoke English so we felt we needed to find an alternative way of communicating with them. We started to make paper copies of some of the photos we had taken of people in the area, to bring to the photographed person as a gift. This gesture was meant to show that we were not there simply for our own amusement or gain.

We could notice that people’s worries around our presence in the area loosened fairly rapidly after our new approach and that they somehow understood that we fully respected their integrity. Soon our presence in the area was even regarded as a positive break in the normal day to day life. People were eager to see who we had photographed this time and happily helped us find the person on the picture. This way we understood that there was little anonymity among the 6000 people in the Nguyen Cong Tru area. This surprised us much since we in Sweden hardly even know who the person living next door is.

Nguyen Cong Tru can be regarded being a rather poor area in Hanoi, so we felt we needed to broaden our experience of various types of housing in Hanoi. Out of curiosity we have walked the stairs up to the 19th floor of one of Hanoi’s newest and tallest buildings (see fig. 1.17). Eager to see how an apartment looked like in this new building and to get a sneak aerial view over this part of Hanoi we knocked on a door and was let in. The apartment belonged to a Korean consultant who kindly showed us his flat. The same thing happened in a new housing area outside Ho Chi Minh City where we were let in by a Korean’s language teacher. We could enquire about flat sizes and monthly rent and so forth and photograph the surroundings from above. These visits were helpful to us, in that they contrasted our visits to more simple homes in Hanoi. Hanoi and Vietnam is developing and people’s private economy reflects this. Some people have already been able to upgrade and refurbish their own homes or move to new or newly refurbished flats while others are still saving up to do the same.

A method we used when we visited houses before people had moved in was accessing roof tops which allowed us good outlooks over the new housing areas. Hanoi is so very densely built in many parts that these opportunities to get overviews really helped us understand the structure better. This kind of experience would have been impossible for us to gain through simple map studies or by staying at ground level.

4 Electricity to the building and elevator was cut that day due to maintenance. In Hanoi, rents are often lower for floors above the eight since it’s no that attractive to walk the stairs higher than that. We can relate. We know now how it feels to walk up those 19 floors…
In our studies of high-dense environments, we identified transport means as an important factor to consider. To gain valuable experience of how different transportation systems functions today and also to find out what problems there might be, we have walked, bicycled and travelled the city on the back of a motorbike. We have also used taxis and public buses. We made use of the available long distance transportation means, like trains, buses and domestic flights to gain access to more distant cities. Where people moved on foot, on bikes, the possibility for communication between people, and the flexibility to alter one’s set agenda was higher than in the more car dependant environments we experienced. Public transport was a great enhancer of the possibility for people to interact both with others and with their immediate surroundings.

What we experienced regarding transportation systems in South East Asia was that Hanoi differed from Hong Kong, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur by the advanced and well developed mass transit systems such as subways and light-rails that was available in these cities. We felt that these systems are important key conditions when building dense urban environments and that Hanoi might face a rather difficult traffic situation without radically improving the public transit system.

1.18 & 1.19 (above & below)
The Hong Kong MTR subway system (below), and the Monorail in Kuala Lumpur Malaysia (above), are both efficient public transport systems available for commuters at low cost, reducing the need for car transports within the city core.

1.20 (below)
The Kuala Lumpur mass transit system covers large parts of the city.
We found that densely populated environments have a built-in possibility to support a rich variety of sociable spaces. We could however see that density was not automatically creating these positive effects. Very centrally located areas could be completely empty of people regardless of how many people actually inhabited that area. This lead us on to the next clue, that also the structure of the urban environment had a major role to play.

In some areas, small business opportunities alongside busy streets functioned as great providers of a sociable environment. What to some people was a great place to enjoy a vivacious flow of urban life to others more had the character of ‘survival space’ where they earned their living. This seemed to be a well functioning symbiosis where both parts together created the sociable space.

From our experiences of various urban environments and from observations of people making use of them we started to form our ABC’s of the Sociable Space. We concluded that:

A. The Structure of the urban environment sets the arena for various functions and influences people’s direction of movement and choice of transportation means.

B. Functions such as service, commerce or greenery for example, answer to people’s needs in one way or another and attract people to use the urban environment.

C. Activities taking place in the outdoor environment are dependent on both structural and functional aspects to occur.

We found that these three parts: Structure, Functions and Activities were interlinked. We noticed that a pedestrian-friendly structure was an important precondition for activities to emerge and we found that the structure further worked as an arena in which various functions were active.

All the activities we could observe taking place in the urban environment had to be sorted out somehow to be possible to handle in a planning process. Eventually the following broad categories were identified as sources of the activities taking place in the urban environments: Service & Commerce, Greenery and Recreation, History and Aesthetics. They were later further developed, which is presented in Chapter 3. We concluded that these three categories comprise the multitude of factors that attract people to inhabit the urban environment. It seemed that if one or more of these sources were present, various outdoor activities then had the possibility to emerge.
Experiments
To be able to study how density and public space qualities can be achieved using different solutions, we have made model experiments. Naturally we could not experiment in full scale, so we had to find a feasible way of working in model scale. We found that the plastic LEGO system could suit our needs well. This system allowed us to create different building types with different amount of apartments in them.

The LEGO modelling gave us an opportunity to study how buildings with different heights related to each other and what kind of streetscape they created in-between. We could also study sun and shadow conditions in the model. The LEGO method we chose for our workshop experiments had its limitations but it was as we see it a very visual and direct way of studying the effects different building heights has on the density achieved. We felt this method gave us valuable information and experience about high-rise environments and the planning preconditions we faced regarding Nguyen Cong Tru’s refurbishment.

5 LEGO is a plastic ‘toy’ product created by the LEGO company and comprises of a series of small plastic ‘bricks’ which can be pieced together without the use of glue.
Theoretical studies

Since this study started by making observations, the literature studies have been used to provide a theoretical base for all these observations. In the late 1970’s, the American sociologist William H. Whyte\(^6\) performed a behavioural study on how people used the urban environment in New York. His findings turned out to be very similar to our own findings.

We have also found inspiration in books by Clare Cooper Marcus & Carolyn Frances\(^7\) and Anne Vernez Moudon\(^8\) who writes about how features in the urban environments affect people.

We learnt from Jan Gehl’s book ‘Life between buildings’\(^9\) that the physical environment can either restrain or promote visual and auditorical communication. Since our work is regarding how people-friendly urban environments can be created, this aspect is a key issue to be aware of.

When Prof. Jan Gehl lectured at our university in November 2004, he described a process where urban environments which previously was filled by people performing necessary activities, today more or less stand empty unless people are encouraged to take part in voluntary activities. This idea came as an important realization to us since this process is a pressing issue in developing countries, of which Vietnam is one. With improved economy and standard of housing the amount of necessary activities gradually disappear from the outdoor environment, making it drained of life and activities. Here our concept sociable space steps in with its focus on the creation of people-friendly urban environments.

In order to affirm our thoughts around people and sociable spaces in the urban environment, we needed to understand what it is that motivates people’s behaviour. Interesting ideas around basic human needs and our representational system, we could find in the work by the behaviourist and author Anthony Robbins\(^10\).

We also needed to study different aspects of density and found much useful information in a publication from Lund Centre of Habitat Studies, Lund University. In this volume, Building Issue 1996:3 ‘Density in Urban Development’\(^11\), Claudio Acioly Jr. and Forbes Davidson clarify issues connected to density and presents a few tools and guidelines for dense urban developing.

\(^7\) Marcus C. C. & Francis C., 1997, *People Places*, Wiley, New York, USA
\(^8\) Moudon A. V., 1991, *Public Streets for Public Use*, Columbia Univ. Pr., USA
\(^10\) Robbins, A., 2001, *Unleash the Power Within*, Nightingale Conant Corp, USA