Hanoi is one of Asia's most charming cities. Nestled in a bend of the Red River, this compact city of 2.7 million residents is dotted with lakes, and its backstreets are lined with tall, narrow town houses festooned with balconies and elaborate ornamentation. French colonial buildings frame its tree-lined boulevards. On crowded sidewalks, shoppers haggle over produce, street vendors cook food on braziers, and women in conical hats deliver everything from bricks to dragon fruit on pole-borne baskets. Through it all, motorcycles, bicycles, and cars stream in a chaotic flood of traffic that rises with each economic uptick.

A thousand years after its founding, nearly 40 years after American bombs stopped dropping, and 25 years into the doi moi policy of economic liberalization, Hanoi is at a crossroads. As rising incomes transform the motorcycles into cars, it is easy to see dysfunction ahead.

Will Hanoi become another Bangkok, choked with traffic and filled with international chain stores? Or follow Manila, where wealth and poverty, malls and garbage dumps...
A GROWING RIVER CITY PONDER ITS FUTURE.

BY SUSAN K. MOFFAT

sprawl side by side? Will it wipe out most of its historic neighborhoods, as Beijing has done? Or will Hanoi succeed in maintaining a unique character defined by lively neighborhoods of small-scale town houses with first-floor shops and punctuated with Buddhist pagodas, French villas, and lakes and rivers at every turn?

In July, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung signed into law an ambitious master plan for the city that aims to establish it among the ranks of the world’s great modern capitals while preserving its essential qualities. The country’s leaders began preparation of the plan in 2008 with the goal of creating a vision in time for Hanoi’s millennial anniversary in 2010, but approval was delayed by controversy over its content. In a country that is still under one-party Communist rule, the heated debate was a striking example of how the government is gingerly exploring the value of a more open public process.

Challenges

Some of the debate focused on moving the national governmental center to a satellite city west of Hanoi—an idea that has since been rejected. But much of the discussion centered on the city’s relation to its lakes and waterways, which present many of its most daunting planning challenges. Water is at the core of Hanoi’s identity: The city’s founding myth concerns a dragon arising from the Red River, and Ha-noi means “in the bend of the river.” The city arose gradually over the centuries from marshland, and today is surrounded by some of the most productive rice paddy and delta land in the world.

Hanoi, which lies well below the rainy season level of the Red River, depends on extensive dikes for its existence. But development has leapt over the barriers and is getting dangerously close to the water. On the other side of the city, the smaller To Lich River, which once carried royal boats among palaces, is now a stinking open sewer. Only a fraction of the city’s liquid waste is treated before it pours into the To Lich and other rivers and lakes. And hundreds of the city’s iconic lakes and ponds have been filled in for development, crippling the city’s overloaded stormwater systems.

The master plan had to address many other issues. Public transit is inadequate, and there are no high-speed arterials within the city. The air is thick with dust and soot from vehicle exhaust. While Hanoi has avoided the sprawling slums of many Southeast Asian cities, many people are inadequately housed, and high rises have sprouted randomly around the city rather than clustering in well-planned districts. Meanwhile, the city’s immensely productive urban agriculture and aquaculture sectors are threatened by rising land prices.

In 2008, the government more than tripled the area of the Hanoi administrative region to encompass more than 3,300
Is Seoul a Model for Hanoi?

South Korea and Vietnam have a fraught relationship shaped by their shared experience of division into communist and capitalist halves, the participation of more than 300,000 South Korean troops in the Vietnam War, and intensive investment by South Korean companies in Vietnam in recent years. Manufacturing and construction firms including Hyundai, LG, Samsung, Daewoo, and Posco are active in Hanoi and throughout the country.

In 2007, the Seoul Metropolitan Government offered its development and planning expertise to Hanoi, presenting a plan that envisioned $7 billion in high-density development, flood control, and urban parkland along 25 miles of the Red River, which separates the urban core from newer development to the north. (The development proposal was created before the recently approved master plan.) In exchange for providing parks, flood control, and transportation infrastructure, developers would gain access to newly created or diked land.

The Seoul Metropolitan Government thought its own success could be emulated. Like Hanoi, Seoul has a very large river—the Han—flowing through its center. With 27 bridges, an efficient public transportation system, and thousands of acres of waterfront parks and trails, Seoul has created a city with a single identity despite the major barrier of the river.

Seoul is the capital of a country that in 50 years has gone from being poorer than many African nations to becoming one of the world’s most prosperous and technologically advanced. And although Seoul is the second largest metropolitan region in the world (after Tokyo), with 24 million people, it has escaped many of the miseries of other Asian megacities. Seoul is now a clean, mobile, and highly functional metropolis that has an increasingly vibrant architecture and design culture.

So it was something of a surprise to some Koreans—and perhaps the Vietnamese leadership who invited them—when a number of Vietnamese architects, planners, and citizens pushed back against the Red River proposal. The South Korean penchant for concrete was not to some Vietnamese tastes. The opponents argued that high rises lining the river did not reflect the culture of Hanoi, that a lack of public transit to the new development would increase congestion, and that armorng the river could lead to more rather than less flooding and impact fertile delta lands downstream. They were concerned with the need to relocate up to 150,000 people within the proposed development area. Density, they argued, should be focused on higher ground farther from the river.

Although Vietnam’s Communist Party makes all final land-planning decisions and controls the press, architects and engineers have some ability to critique planning proposals through their professional associations. Their comments in this case appear to have had some influence on both the Red River development proposal and the Hanoi master plan.

“The Red River is very tough, not like the waterways in Bangkok or Shanghai or Seoul or other cities in Asia,” says Pham Ngoc Dang, leader of a professional association of civil engineers, who argues that the riverbanks should be reserved for environmentally sound methods of flood control. “If you change nature too boldly, it will create consequences.”

Tran Huy Anh, an architect who is part of a citizen’s group called Action for the City, points out that much of the Red River lies within China—Vietnam’s traditional nemesis—and thus is beyond Vietnam’s control. New dams upstream could impact how water flows through Hanoi.

One prominent scholar and artist puts his thoughts about the river’s seasonal variations in poetic form. “The Red River is delicate and capricious, like a girl. You must treat it gently, with lots of open space,” says Hoang Dao Thuy, who has written many articles on Hanoi’s landscape. “A concept like the Seine or the Danube is impossible.”

The Hanoi Urban Planning Institute, an agency of the Hanoi city government, recommended that the Red River proposal be revised to reduce the intensity of waterfront development. “The plan should not only be about concrete and flood control,” says La Thi Kim Ngan, director of HUPL. “There are important ecological areas, and the islands will be parkland to maintain natural systems.”

For now, the Red River development proposal is on hold, and the latest draft of the Hanoi master plan establishes a lower level of density along the river than originally proposed.

A plan of national importance

The master plan aims to preserve Hanoi’s special character while facilitating economic growth and a better quality of life for residents. More than just a blueprint for a city and its residents, it is a nation’s expression of its identity and ambitions.

Vietnam is a medium-sized country of 88 million people in a region dominated by giants China and India. And in Asian terms, Hanoi is a middling city, smaller than Ho Chi Minh City 700 miles to the south, and fortunate to have avoided the fate of Tokyo, Seoul, Bangkok, and Manila, all if which are burdened with the twin tasks of serving as economic and political capitals. Hanoians seem to prefer a livable city to a megacity; bigness for its own sake does not seem to be a local value.

The master plan was prepared by a Korean and American team hired by the national Ministry of Construction. The team, known as PPJ, includes Perkins Eastman of New York, Posco Engineering—one of South Korea’s largest engineering firms—
and Jina, Inc., an architecture and planning firm from Seoul.

"Hanoi has the potential to be one of the great world capitals if it doesn't lose its special charm," says Bradford Perkins, chairman and CEO of Perkins Eastman, who has worked extensively throughout Asia. "They know they must avoid the mistakes of many cities in China," where unbridled growth has often destroyed precious historic and environmental resources.

The PPJ plan draws in part on a 2007 plan for Hanoi known as the HAIDEP plan, which was produced by the Tokyo-based planning firm Almec. That earlier plan identified key historic and landscape resources, but it predated Hanoi's expansion. The new master plan echoes the approach of many European cities, preserving a low-rise historic core and concentrating density at the outer rings, with a firm edge at the fourth ring road to stop urban sprawl.

Some 70 percent of the land within the jurisdiction is to be preserved as open space, including farms and greenbelts. A projected population of nine million by 2030 and 11 million by 2050 will be accommodated in five satellite cities and the historic core, and served by a subway system and four ring roads. The densely packed streets of the city's Old Quarter near the iconic Hoan Kiem Lake are to be protected from large-scale redevelopment.

"The goal is for Hanoi to keep its identity while growing its economy," says Jiyoun Lee, senior associate partner at Jina, who coordinated a team of Vietnamese, Korean, and American planners and navigated the byzantine system of inter-ministerial approvals needed.

The city's lakes and ponds will be preserved, not filled in for more buildings. Density will instead be focused along the outer ring roads and—to some extent—along the Red River.

Along the Red River

The fate of the Red River is perhaps the most controversial planning issue in Hanoi. Unlike many urban rivers, the Red River remains largely wild. Its name derives from the 100 million tons of reddish sediment it carries from China's Yunnan province to the Gulf of Tonkin each year. Ranging from a half-mile to nearly a mile in width within the city limits, the river has sandy banks and islands that shift with the seasons and are lined with farmland—even in the center of the city. The river swells from shallow stream in the dry winter to a torrent in the wet summer. Because of this wide variation, the city does not have a significant port, and there is little industry along the water.

Establishing the Red River as the center rather than the edge of the future metropolis presents a significant urban design challenge. Unlike the Seine in Paris or the Thames in London, the Red River is not a tame flow that draws the city together, but a much wider and unpredictable presence that divides it.

Today, a half-mile-wide swath of vegetable farms lines the southern bank where the river deposits its alluvium, and more farms occupy midstream islands. The ubiquitous fresh greens served with pho noodles in Hanoi's street stalls often make the one- or two-mile journey from riverside field to table by motorcycle or bike.

This farmland is being encroached on by more than 75,000 homes built in recent years outside the dikes, directly in the path of floodwaters. These settlements, which have been built without official approval, are not riverside shacks (except for a few pockets), but substantial neighborhoods of five-story brick and stucco houses and shops.

The 2007 HAIDEP plan proposed relocating these residents to safer ground and reserving a wide swath of riverfront as floodplain, designed as parkland. At about the same time, a Korean team led by the Seoul Metropolitan Government presented a competing vision consisting of intensive high-rise development along the river. This development proposal, which was not a master plan for the city but one that focused only on the waterfront, met stiff resistance among many Vietnamese architects and planners (see sidebar).

The PPJ master plan represents something of a compromise and leaves many riverfront details to be determined in the future. However, the general concept envisions nodes of high-density development along the river that will help pay for needed infrastructure improvements.

Historically, while the Red River defined the northern and eastern edges of the city, the city's western edge was outlined by the much smaller To Lich River. Today, the To Lich runs in a concrete channel through the heart of dense urban districts. In places, the To Lich brings to mind Amsterdam's canals, lined as it is with walkways and streetlamps and four- and five-story buildings.

The To Lich has great potential as an urban amenity, but it stinks from the raw sewage that pours into it. Moreover, since its elevation is below that of the Red River, the To Lich fails to perform its chief function of draining urban neighborhoods. The problem has been made worse by the filling of lakes and ponds for development. During catastrophic rains in 2008, severe flooding was caused not by the Red River breaching its dikes, but by the failure of the To Lich and other parts of the city's stormwater system to convey urban runoff.

The good news for Hanoi is that many of its most valuable assets, particularly the historic Old Quarter and lakes and ponds throughout the city, are beginning to be protected. But succeeding in the tasks of managing its other water resources, of housing its people, and of moving goods and more than six million people within its borders, will depend not only on the vision laid out in the new master plan but on finding the infrastructure funding resources to carry out the plans. Hanoi's challenge is to harness new development to help finance the city's needs without destroying its unique and delicate fabric in the process.

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