Highlights

> The aims of this project are twofold. First, to understand the patterns of emergence and disappearance of 'independent art spaces/creative hubs' in Hanoi which are operated by or attract youth. Second, to investigate how the founders and users of creative hubs either believe they are, or actually are, transgressing official and cultural norms with regards to their use of/actions in such spaces.

> For the purposes of this study, creative spaces or hubs are defined as including some sort of art-linked creation/creativity. This might be linked to visual art, music, dance, clothes and other goods design and creation and meetings and exhibitions regarding any of these. Co-working spaces might also be present, but we are not focusing on sites that are only dedicated to co-working; nor are we interested in spaces that are predominantly IT hubs. However, in a larger creative space, these features, plus bars and cafes might also be present.

  – What are the motivations and strategies of the individuals creating/organising/appropriating creative hubs in Hanoi? What rules and norms do they transgress (if any), why, and how?

  – While the tenants of these creative spaces might not be youth themselves, we are interested to know: how are youth being considered in the creation of these spaces by others (if the creators are older), and how do youth interact with these spaces and in what roles?

2020

TRYHANOI
biến chuyển
không gian
giới trẻ

YOUTH TRANSGRESSION IN THE VIETNAMESE CREATIVE CITY

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THIS CASE STUDY LOOKED AT 13 CREATIVE HUBS IN HANOI IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND THE PATTERNS OF EMERGENCE AND DISAPPEARANCE OF SUCH SPACES, THEIR IMPORTANCE FOR THE CITY'S YOUTH, AND WHETHER/HOW THEIR USERS AND FOUNDERS ENGAGE IN TRANSGRESSIVE ACTIVITIES.

What was done this year

> Finalization of survey of the literature and production of an annotated bibliography on the question of creative hubs and creative city discourse/policy in East and Southeast Asia;

> Interviews with 30 founders, tenants, and users of 8 creative hubs in Hanoi (in addition to the 50 interview conducted the previous summer at 5 hubs);

> Coding and analysis of all interview data produced in Y2 and Y3.

What is planned for the next year

> Continuing data analysis and developing publications based on results

> Review one article based on the interviews (these could also be presented at conference depending on opportunities)

Type of products envisaged in the coming year

> Scientific Publication;

> Presentation at a conference.

Preliminary results

> **A critical survey/analysis of the literature** shows that creative hubs and districts have been emerging in East and Southeast Asian cities for several decades with many commentators and enthusiasts hoping that these hubs would provide support for great democratisation within illiberal regimes. Yet there is little evidence that this is occurring, with many newly formed creative hubs becoming branded and commercialized districts instead of possible rallying points for political change. While investigating the emergence of creative hubs in East and Southeast Asian cities, we investigated the possible reasons why their democratic possibilities have not been reached. We found that while the arrival of creative hubs has spurred new forms of municipal governance to mediate between the needs of artistic communities and urban growth, these are not necessarily more democratic. Building on four city cases, we found that the development of creative hubs/districts has instead resulted in two governance patterns. First, a pattern of 'liberated surveillance', with artists free to create, but with their work nevertheless highly surveilled, censored, and commercialized— underlining the fact that more creativity does not necessarily lead to more democratic or liberal societies. Second, a pattern of 'governance testing', with bottom-up grassroots efforts, municipal policies, and policy circulation leading to experimentation in governing strategies and, in turn, novel forms of management of creative activity. We argue that the importation of theories regarding Western creative hubs/districts into the Asian context obscures the local dynamics at play and, in turn, we attempt to develop a new conceptual framework that moves away from Western-centric approaches.

> **The preliminary analysis of interviews conducted at 13 creative hubs in Hanoi** prompted our team to conceptualize these spaces and their activities as a form of political engagement. Our analysis (still ongoing) points towards the concepts of "informal life politics" or "living politics" coined by the Australian historian Morris-Suzuki (2017). These expressions refer to "locally generated practical responses to crises" (ibid: 6) through which groups of people "try to act out aspects of the change they seek in their everyday lives, through autonomous collective responses" (ibid: 2). The key idea here—and that which is most relevant to our case study—is that informal living politics groups don't advocate for changes so much as they try to be that change if only at a very local and small scale.

> In line with this, our analysis suggests that creative hubs are involved in an experiment to redefine and expand Hanoi's socio-cultural norms. From the more benign to the most radical, Hanoi's independent spaces all seek, in one way or other, to push Hanoi's socio-cultural normative limits/boundaries outwards. Reflecting each space's individual goals/ambitions, this experiment takes different forms, including:

1) attempts to create/support a youth subculture characterized by a more socially inclusive/tolerant, freer, and more collaborative social environment than typically exist in Hanoi (notably in the case of spaces for youth wherein regulations, conformity, or low tolerance for difference, and competition are common);

2) Raising awareness of and promoting new or under-considered art forms (ex: contemporary visual art and dance, experimental video and music) to Vietnamese society in general and to youth in particular;

3) Creating spaces of emancipation from state controls/censorship, from conservative social norms and economistic life views seen as oppressing youth, and inhibiting their capacity to create and experiment. In line with this, several hubs explicitly promote and cultivate alternative values and ways of thinking and being among youth (individuality, non-conformity, critical thinking etc.)

> In the Vietnamese context, this gives hubs an inherently transgressive/subversive character. Their discourse and activities confront and disturb both the socio-culturally conservative segment of Vietnam's urban society and institutions and norms upheld by the party-state. This is encapsulated in a participant's remark "In Vietnam, freedom has to exist within a framework… When the government sees an activity that is developing outside of that framework, they see it as transgressive and do what they can to eliminate it" (16).

> We have started to analyse how hubs pursue their transgressive project and, in particular, how their leaders and users navigate Hanoi's constraining social and political environment. Strategies identified so far include: evading state controls (e.g. not applying for official permission to host and event), trying to stay under the radar of the authorities (e.g. by keeping the hub small), hidden scripts (e.g. hiding political activities in abstract art), self-censoring, targeting and training youth, using foreign/international agencies (such as the British Council, UNESCO or embassies) as diplomatic shields, going virtual, tapping unto the high socio-cultural capital and insider/outsider status of hub founders/leaders.
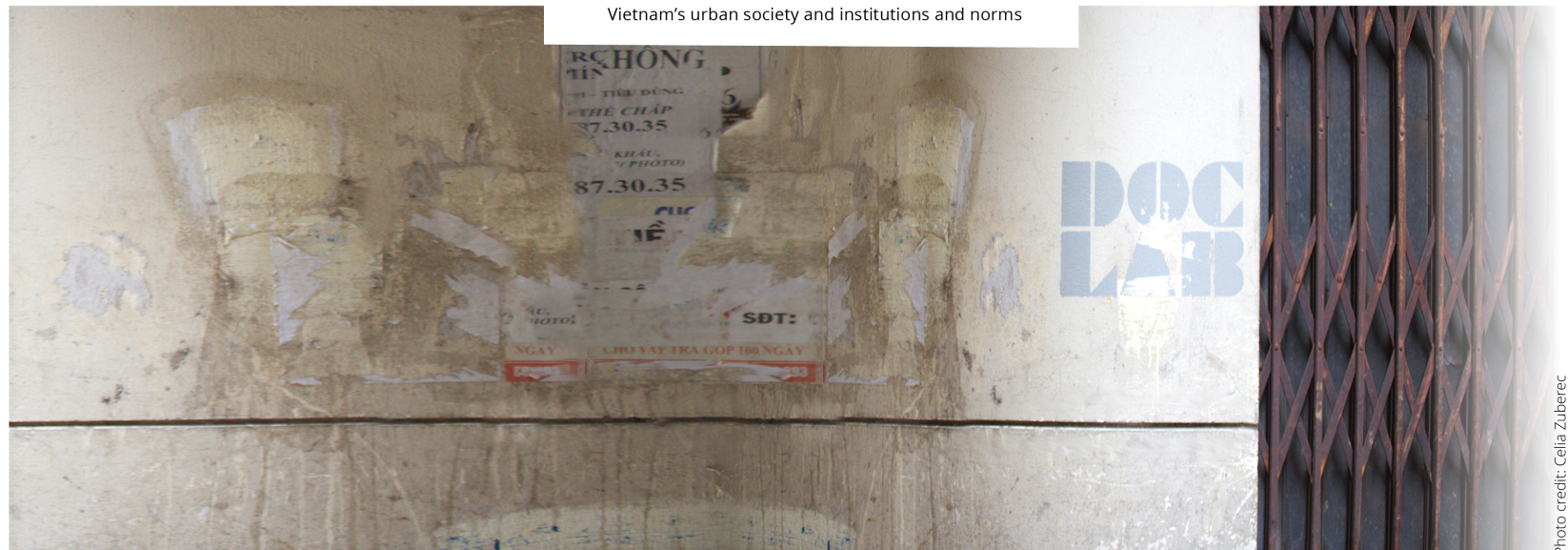

Photo credit: Celia Zuberec