



## City profile

## Danang, a secondary city subject to aspirational urbanism

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## ABSTRACT

Danang is the third largest urban area of Vietnam, and the only urban area of demographic and functional importance in the Central region of the country. It was previously considered as peripheral, but it has now become an emerging metropolis and a key player in Vietnamese growth, both as a magnet for investment and in wealth creation. In this city profile, we trace the urban development of Danang, from Doi Moi (reform) to the present, focusing on its emerging economy, and we analyze how a secondary metropolization process led to spatial transformations associated with planning and development strategies and urban policies. The increasingly urbanized coastal region is becoming a core element of the brand image of Danang. We present the strategies and key players involved in the unprecedented urban growth of this emerging metropolis, based on the new Master Plan to 2030 with Vision to 2050. The case of Danang City highlights the impact of desynchronized spatial planning on urbanization dynamics and reveals both the positive and negative impacts on the environment, with a critical review of recent policy, planning and management strategies.

## 1. Introduction

Recent urban studies about Vietnam have highlighted the fact that, behind globalization, which anchors the flow of capital around emblematic urban operations, more diffuse processes are at work. For example, the outskirts of the major cities are gradually being transformed (Labbé, 2016), and bottom-up dynamics are transforming urban districts through modernization of road networks (Gibert, 2018). In addition to the major trends observed in the political and economic capitals, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), smaller cities in Vietnam, such as Danang and Haiphong, have also been affected by transformations. While these secondary centers are less privileged or are further from the powerful metropolises (Goldblum & Franck, 2007), their dynamics of change need to be documented (Cosaert, 2015). Based on qualitative material gathered during four months of field work in 2019,<sup>1</sup> this work extends the literature on the emergence, unregulated urbanization and on-going metropolization of South-East Asian cities

(Bouchot, 2019; Eunhee et al., 2015; Gibert-Flûtre, 2020; Hang, 2018; Leducq & Scarwell, 2018a). The article aims to bridge the current gap between urban studies on emerging cities and urban planning theory (Balbo, 2014). Driven by metropolization, secondary cities in emerging economies are witnessing significant changes that affect their social and spatial structure (Robinson, 2002).

To this end, the article analyzes changes in Danang,<sup>2</sup> the only urban area of demographic and functional importance in the Center region of Vietnam (Fig. 1). It is the third largest urban area of the country, comprising mainly small and medium-sized towns, and it was previously considered as peripheral. But has it now become an emerging metropolis (Géoconfluences, 2019; Goldblum et al., 2017)? Our aim was thus to understand the role Danang plays in Vietnamese growth, both as a magnet for investment and in wealth creation (Bony-Cisternes, 2019), while showing the limits of the current metropolitan transition (Goldblum & Franck, 2007) and the risk of running out of steam. While a number of policy decisions have enabled Danang to move beyond its

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on statistical data obtained at the provincial level, allowing comparison with the national level and the major cities of Vietnam. It is also based on a sample of 8 interviews with urban stakeholders (at the central level in Hanoi: a deputy for the province of Danang on the People's Committee, a civil servant from the Ministry for Construction responsible for the Smart Cities program; at the local level: a development officer for Danang city-province, an architect-urban planner, a property developer) and economic development stakeholders in Danang (a company director, two founders and managers of third spaces). Finally, a portfolio of photographs showing on-going changes is compared with past and present urbanism documents.

<sup>2</sup> Covering an area of approximately 1280 km<sup>2</sup> and with nearly a million inhabitants in 2019 (740 inhab/km<sup>2</sup>), Danang comprises 6 urban districts (Hai Chau, Cam Le, Thanh Khe, Lien Chieu, Ngu Hanh Son and Son Tra), 1 rural district (Hoa Vang), and 1 island district (Hoang Sa) (Fig. 2).

initial role of relieving congestion in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Gironde & Tessier, 2015), gradually enabling it to become a regional economic hub, the process has not always been smooth, and urban stakeholders have been confronted with new problems that pose a challenge for future development. This can be seen as part of a secondary metropolization process; at the national level, this is evidenced by a shift from the previous social and spatial polarization of Vietnam to a more composite contemporary model, with intermediate cities or emerging metropolises, such as Haiphong in the north, Danang in the center and Bong Duong in the south (Tran, 2019) being added to the metropolises of Hanoi (Northern Vietnam) and Ho Chi Minh City (Southern Vietnam).

To explain the emergence of Danang, the article is divided into three sections. First, we describe the historical-political construction of urban centrality and the resources and effects of the development of tourism in Danang (Le *Courrier du Vietnam*, 2018). This includes the geographical advantages that have enabled Danang to use its spatial resources to become a participant in globalization. Secondly, we will look at the plans and projects of public and private stakeholders involved in the process of regional metropolization based on two successive strategies: development of upmarket tourism taking a pragmatic approach, and development of the knowledge economy, based on the concept of a global smart city. We examine the locations, stakeholders and temporal frames of the concomitant urban strategies that are being used to create a “smart city” through several urban planning tools and foreign direct investment (FDI). Finally, we highlight the limits and pitfalls of the regional development choices that have been made.

## 2. State of the art

### 2.1. Emergence of secondary cities in Asia

In recent years, the number of metropolitan areas in Asia has increased (Bunnell and D., 2018; Bunnell, Morshidi, & Barter, 2002),

particularly secondary cities, coastal cities or cities linked to their deep-water ports, such as Danang. This metropolization process concerns densely populated areas, and is based as much on the economic development of the coast since the 1980s as on planning and infrastructure. This article proposes a new reading of the metropolization process of secondary cities, such as Danang, a regional capital in the Asia-Pacific region. This city is undergoing transformation on such a scale and at such a pace that it can be interpreted in terms of metropolization, in which project-based urban planning plays a predominant role. Our paper examines the processes of metropolization at the margins. We seek to determine the pace, circumstances, and scale of emergence of the extended metropolis of Danang, and the actors in this process. To study this metropolization of a second-tier city, we build on the knowledge and research of Goldblum (2020) and Franck et al. (2012). These studies show that the mechanisms of internationalization of major urban hubs also concern, albeit to a lesser extent, the metropolization of secondary cities.

Based on the specific characteristics of the processes of metropolization of secondary cities (Goldblum & Franck, 2007), we examine the specific case of Danang, which is of particular interest because of the new regional configurations and the strengthening of its maritime role that make it a key global player. Urbanization is both the vector and the *modus operandi* of this rise in metropolization. The internationalization of urban development, in which foreign direct investment plays an increasingly important role, has accelerated the transformation of the city and the process of metropolization. However, the impact of foreign investment influences the form, scale and status of real estate operations to the extent that there is often a time lag between the development phase of the Master Plan, the date of its approval, and completion. Asian urbanism “can be seen as both actually existing and imagined” (Shin, 2019), and is constantly in the making across time and space, either materialized or existing only in policy documents and master plans (Watson, 2014). Danang’s urban development also reflects changes in its historical and geographical circumstances and its experiences of coping



**Fig. 1.** View of urban landscape transformation  
Source: Divya Leducq, Helga-Jane Scarwell, 2019.

with urban challenges. However, the urban aspirations underlying the Master Plan make it worthy of attention. The theoretical and empirical analysis of the urban planning of this secondary city and emerging metropolis can help conceptualize the way the future is imagined through an array of spatial practices. Relatively little attention has been paid to the way in which secondary cities engage futurity in their everyday lives and on their territory (Bunnell et al., 2017).

## 2.2. The intersection between aspirational urbanism and project-based urbanism

The process of “secondary metropolization” described above (Franck et al., 2012: 18) is based on the notion of “aspirational urbanism” (Appadurai, 2004; Appadurai, 2013; Bunnell, 2012). According to Appadurai, urban aspirations are an important driver of urban transformation, usually incrementally, and they are never simply individual (Appadurai, 2013: 67). In accordance with Bunnell, “a focus on aspirations thus enables us to get at the human driving force of urban change, both radical and mundane”. The appropriation of individual and collective urban aspirations has been made possible in Danang through consolidated local politico-economic structures that displace both the present and the future (Shin et al., 2020). Urban aspirations can be shared and negotiated by everyone - authorities, technocrats, planners, developers, political elites - and take shape according to the complexities of the context. Metropolization is understood as a dynamic and unfinished process generated by internationalization and the input of foreign direct investment (FDI). To further Danang's urban development, a new configuration of urban planning stakeholders has been formed through a network of domestic and overseas companies as well as governmental players (e.g., state-owned enterprises, government-linked companies), working closely together “to turn aspirational Asian urbanism into actionable plans” (Shin, 2019) through project-based urbanism.

This paper seeks to reveal not only neglected dimensions of the urban transformation of secondary cities such as Danang, but also opens up new theoretical perspectives of the multi-faceted experience of urban futurity. Several driving forces play a fundamental role in the metropolization of a secondary city like Danang. Historically, the exclusive economic zone constituted the “backbone” of this dynamism. Today, Danang Municipal Authority focuses on tourism, new trans-provincial roads, transnational development corridors and the international port. Finally, real estate development has become the driving force behind the production of residential stock and the reconfiguration of regional infrastructures. Are we witnessing a new stage in the process of metropolization of this secondary city, differing in nature and intensity from the processes involved in major urban centers? Until recently, this project-based urban development was mainly financed by the Vietnamese State, which wished to reinforce the country's southern structure by providing the Central region with a real economic capital. In order to finance this aspirational urbanism and the urban development projects, there has now been a shift towards the “privatization of planning” (Shatkin, 2008), and the production of vertical forms of urban development, especially in the coastal area (Shin, 2011). This vertical urbanism is linked to “processes of speculative urbanism” (*op. cit.*).

## 3. Metropolitan emergence of secondary cities: the case of Danang within Vietnam

### 3.1. Historical and political construction of a new urban centrality

Danang is a coastal city on the north-south axis of Vietnam's road, rail, sea and air transport systems (Fig. 2). In the early Middle Ages, Danang was in strong competition with the southern province of Hoi An for fishing activities and maritime trade, but after the 15th century, technical progress in the construction of deep-draught ships quickly pushed Danang to the forefront of strategic ports for trade and warfare

(Duong et al., 2001). In the 18th century, optimizing the natural advantages of the site, Danang became the largest commercial port in the central region of the country. Thanks to the imperial Nguyen dynasty, it became a base for the defense of the country. During the French colonial period, the peninsula was identified as a gateway to the Far East, playing a fundamental role in the first phase of the expansion of the city - then called Tourane. Thus, the architecture, the organization of the streets (Cornudet Act) and functions at the beginning of the 20th century were oriented towards the development of craft, industrial and commercial activities. In 1967, Danang was the political and military center for the South-Vietnamese Government and for the American army. Initiated by the U.S. Marines, the city is equipped with a military-industrial complex and modern infrastructure: a former military airport now converted to an air terminal, port and industrial areas, hangars and warehouses, road construction. Communications infrastructure and banking services then developed for companies involved in the production of oxygen, acetylene, detergents and textiles. However, as a tactical zone and border city on the 17th parallel during the devastating Vietnam War, Da Nang was confronted with a massive influx of refugees from the countryside resulting in large slum areas, and for several decades Danang lost its status of economic center. Until Doi Moi (reform) was introduced in 1986, Danang remained an under-developed provincial city. In 1996, the province of Nam Danang was divided in two, and Danang became a municipality under the direct control of central Government. The city then focused on its tourism potential to ensure its economic development.

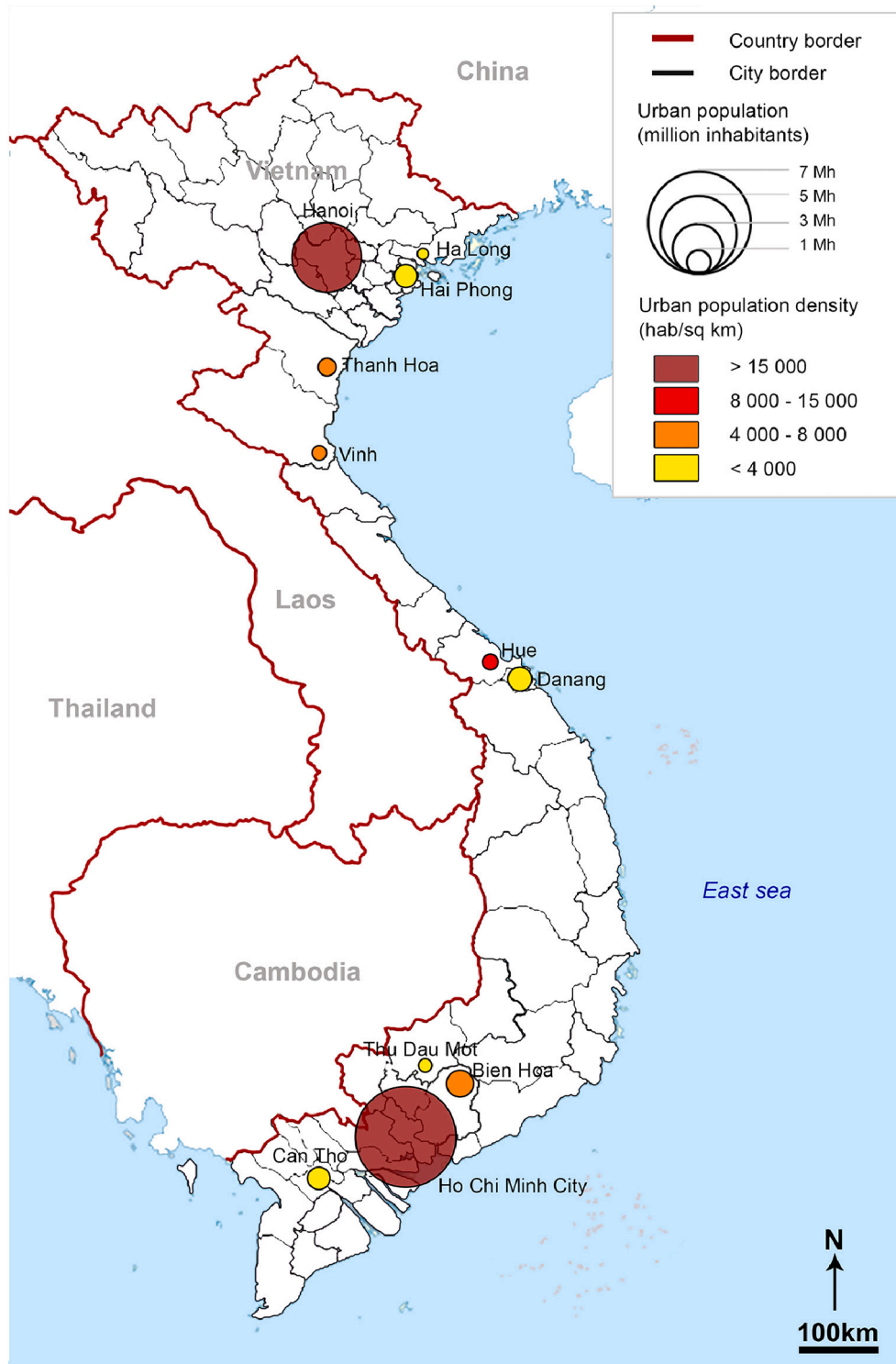
In January 1995, Nguyen Ba Thanh became president of the provincial People's Committee (PC)<sup>3</sup> of Danang. He was reelected for seven years (1996–2003) before becoming local Party secretary (2003–2012). He transformed the city. First, from the end of the 1990s, urban authorities and private investors recognized the tourism potential of 60 kms of sandy coast from Hué to Hoi An and developed the tropical beaches of Non Nuoc and My Khe (New York Times, 2019). Danang has a strong tourism potential thanks to the landscape of the Marble Mountains and the Sea Cloud Pass in the north, 400 ha of virgin forest at Son Tra in the northeast, and many heritage sites in the center (old communal houses, pagodas and temples, the largest museum of Cham sculpture).

### 3.2. The development of tourism in Danang: an indicator of emergence

For Gabas and Losch (2008: 25), the notion of “emergence”, which changes constantly and has no standard definition, involves an implicit representation of the world; it expresses recognition of the status of a new entrant to the big league. Following this definition, Figuière et al. (2019: 10–11) observed that emergence is polysemous, multilevel and ephemeral in nature. In order to examine its benefit as a tool to understand the course of development of Danang city, it is necessary to define the indicators of emergence, which also change shape over time (Bérenger & Vérez, 2019). Here, we use the development of tourism as an index of the emergence of Danang.

The development of tourism has led to spatial transformations associated with planning and development strategies (Kadri et al., 2019) and urban policies (Cazes and Potier, 1996, 1998). The recent rise of Danang is largely due to the commitment of the former dignitary Nguyen Ba Thanh, but also to the involvement of numerous international and local stakeholders (Philip, 2013; The Economist, 2015). Through his role as facilitator, Nguyen Ba Thanh established a direct line of communication between tourism industry stakeholders, the public sector, and local communities, recognizing their interdependence. He created a coalition of key stakeholders, including official tourism

<sup>3</sup> Vietnamese provinces are governed by a People's Council elected by the citizens, assisted by a People's Committee (PC), which is the executive arm. This local organization is modeled on that of Central Government.



**Fig. 2.** Danang in the urban hierarchy of Vietnam  
 Source: Helga-Jane Scarwell, Divya Leducq, Kim Ngan Ngoc, 2021.

organizations in the domains of accommodation and the restaurant sector, as well as tourism and transport intermediaries. Not only did he have regular up-to-date information about tourists and the State resources provided to the tourist sector, he also had the power and the influence needed to obtain details of investment planning for infrastructure work and tourism development projects (Hoang et al., 2016).

The work of Nguyen, van der Krabben, et al. (2018) reveals the contribution of Nguyen Ba Thanh to a shared vision and the pragmatic

construction of a consensus on the plans, objectives and actions to develop tourism in Danang (London, 2015). This action for cooperation between stakeholders in the sector was decisive, given the low level of confidence in private enterprises at the time and the political decision-makers' lack of knowledge of the tourist industry (Nguyen et al., 2018). Today, air and sea transport infrastructure facilitates tourist access to Danang (Schlaack, 2010). First, the airport, located 5 km from the city center and with its two terminals, one for domestic and one for

international flights, has become the third largest airport of the country with more than 1.5 million passengers per year (IATA Annual Review, 2019). The airport management authority aims to increase the number of direct flights operated by international airlines, mainly from South-east and East Asia (Seoul with Korean Air and Asiana Airlines; Guangzhou and Beijing with China Southern Airlines; Singapore and Osaka with Jetstar Asia Airways; as well as regular flights to Tokyo, Macau, Hong Kong, Bangkok and Singapore). Recently, Qatar Airways opened a flight from London and Paris to Danang via Doha. Secondly, the Tien Sa terminal in the deep-sea harbor serves 145,000 cruise passengers per year (Danang Port Authority, 2019). Between 2011 and 2019, accommodation capacity increased four-fold, from 8700 to more than 35,900 beds. Coastal development for tourism is the result of investment by both franchised international professionals and local independent entities. Two trends can be identified, creating a socio-spatial divide: luxury hotels or massive condo-hotels with 200 to 400 rooms on the sea front (e.g., Mélia, Sheraton, Hilton), and homestay and more modest hotels on the other side of the coast road.

In 2018, there were 7.6 million visitors to the city per year, of whom 60% were Vietnamese and 40% foreign (figures of the Danang Tourist Department, March 2019). However, tourism development is not limited to the visible metamorphosis characterized by urbanization and scheduled infrastructure construction (Richins, 2009); it also has a considerable effect on the Danang population, and it has been the vector of funding that has added to the transformation of the city.

### 3.3. The challenge of technological innovation and strategic urban alliances

Another strategic focus of the Master Plan 2030–2050 was to make Danang a modern, smart city based on the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), which have existed in the city since the installation of the American military/industrial complex during the Vietnam War. The aim was to encourage the implementation of digital technology, both for urban management and to support local economic development. In 2010, the Danang PC established several partnerships with international leaders in the software sector, positioning their region at the cutting edge of digital technologies. A memorandum of understanding on digital cooperation was signed by Danang City and IBM Vietnam. In 2011, with the support of Intel, Danang joined the Open Data Centre Alliance (ODCA) to connect all municipal data online. In 2012, as part of the World Bank's *Ecocities* program, it entered into a partnership with CISCO Systems for technological management of flows (goods, people, information). Likewise, trade agreements were also concluded with Vietnamese companies in the sector (VNPT, Viettel) to optimize electricity and telecommunication networks and to make Wi-Fi accessible throughout the area. In this way, by 2014 Danang had become one of the three pilot cities of the Vietnamese Government's *smart city* plan (Leducq & Scarwell, 2018b: 307; Courmont & Le Galès, 2019), alongside Hanoi and HCMC.

Spatially, this approach led to the creation of the Danang Hi-Tech Park (DHTP) in 2010.<sup>4</sup> Situated north west of the urban area, close to the motorway, new housing areas and the future industrial port, this multipurpose project combines office space, manufacturing and logistics zones, transportation facilities, a residential area, and recreational activities. With a surface area of 1200 ha, DHTP should become a catalyst of industrial R&D. Although the project appeared to have stalled, the Deputy Prime Minister, Vu Duc Dam, nonetheless declared at a recent business seminar that the Vietnamese Government had chosen DHTP as a pilot zone for the development of start-ups and innovation (Le, 2018). At the same time, the Danang PC increased its partnerships with leading metropolises, such as Tokyo, Seoul and Hong Kong where there were already collaborations in other domains (banking, urbanism, etc.),

hoping to obtain assets in terms of the knowledge economy. Finally, twenty-three “third places” have been created since 2016 (Fig. 7), revealing the emergence of a bottom-up, collaborative trend contributing to the creative economy (field work and interviews, February to May 2019). These third places come in different forms, with an increasing number of coworking spaces (22 in total) and a fablab. Their business strategies are also different, depending either on foreign ICT firms such as Samsung in S-Hub, shared-office developers such as Regus IWG, semi-public investment for the Municipal Library, or private commercial bottom-up management for the Enoouv Coworking Space. The coworking spaces also vary between multiple users at The Embassy (downtown café-restaurant) to occupancy of a whole floor in the Indo-china Riverside Office Tower. Finally, the type of building and neighborhood they occupy varies according to the geographical location; for example, the heritage and cultural district in the Hai Chau district on the left bank of the Han River, the central business district, or the affluent European and Korean expatriate neighborhood north of Thanh Khe. The managers of these coworking spaces seek to create synergies with other similar spaces in the cities of Can Tho and HCMC, to join national-level collaborative networks, and to create international partnerships, for example with the University of Arizona.

## 4. Strategies and stakeholders of aspirational urbanism

Danang is regularly ranked at the top of several lists (Philip, 2013): it has exceeded the average rate of annual growth in Vietnam for 20 years; it ranks 5th on the Provincial Competitiveness Index<sup>5</sup> (with 67.65 out of 100 points), above Hanoi (in 9th position, 65.40 points) and HCMC (10th position, 65.34 points) (Linh, 2013; Vcci-USaid, 2018); one of the most livable places in Asia. These results are based on several factors, linked both to the political situation and to the personality of Nguyen Ba Thanh. His temperament, together with a favorable political situation, enabled him to take initiatives for successful management of the city. For example, in 1997 he was able to take advantage of a national agreement whereby the State allowed greater flexibility in the application of national policies at the local level (Ngoc, 2015). The members of the PC were also president and vice-presidents of the People's Council, making it easier to transfer the suggestions and political solutions to the administration. In 2004, he created the Danang Young Officials Club, composed of rising civil servants under 40 years of age and who he considered to have the potential to occupy local management posts, replacing former civil servants (Nguyen, 2017).

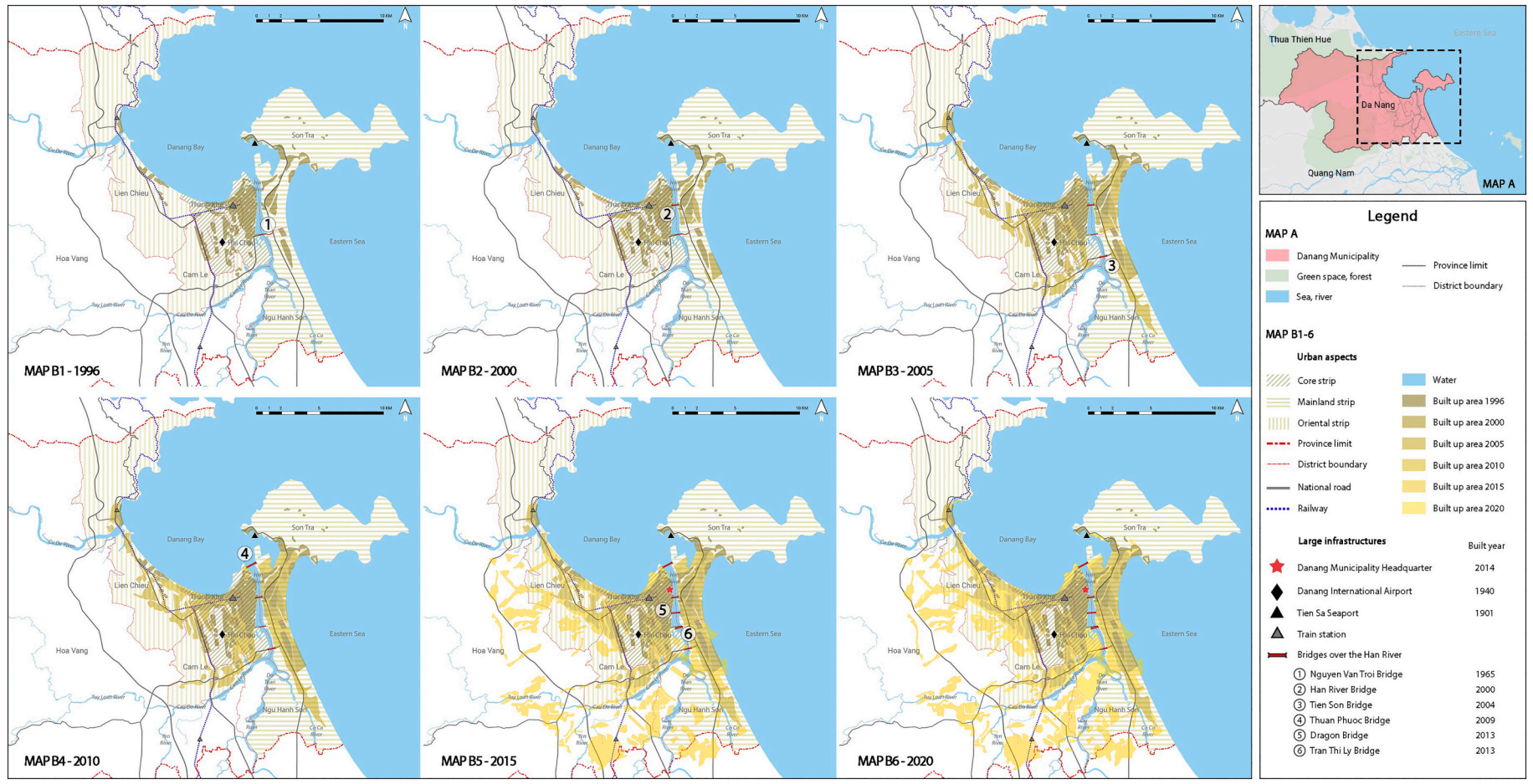
### 4.1. Efficient operational planning

Between 1996 and 2020, the physical transformation of Danang was the result of gradual urban sprawl (Dang et al., 2015) in three main strips (Fig. 3): the “core strip” corresponding to the central part of the city; the “mainland strip” on the western and southern coastal areas, and the “eastern strip”, which is an outlying area of urban development. This transformation can be explained by a succession of aspirational policies enabling the development of transportation infrastructure and improvement of the spatial layout of the city.

In 1997, in order to reduce the effects of the River Han that constituted a strong dividing line between the urban center and the outlying rural fringes, Nguyen Ba Thanh engaged firms for the construction of the swing bridge to connect the two banks (Hang, 2018: 102). This structure laid the foundation for the changes initiated by the City Development

<sup>5</sup> Created in 2005 by the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the index is revised annually for the 63 provinces of Vietnam. It measures the ease of doing business for companies and investment possibilities. Its ultimate aim is to enable the provinces to identify their strengths and weaknesses, in order to draw up policies for investment, job creation and sustainable development.

<sup>4</sup> Decision No.1979/QĐ-TTg of 28 October 2010.



**Fig. 3.** Evolution of Danang urbanization (1996–2020)  
 Source: Helga-Jane Scarwell, Divya Leducq, Ngoan Thi Pham, 2021.

Master Plan in 2002.<sup>6</sup> Hang (2018: 96) described how a slum clearance plan was carried out to meet the everyday needs of the population, particularly along the River Han (Danang Ccco, 2016). The municipal area was urbanized very rapidly, with the renovation of 600 roads, streets and alleys, and the construction of nine other bridges (Fig. 4). Gueorguiev and Schuler (2016) attributed this morphological metamorphosis of Danang partly to the remarkable charisma of Nguyen Ba Than, and partly to his ability to convince private companies, public authorities and the inhabitants of the positive outcomes expected of these “Five No” and then “Three Have” programs,<sup>7</sup> which have since been cited as an example in Vietnam and picked up by international funders (World Bank, Asian Development Bank, JICA, etc.). In this way, 3000 ha of slums were cleared and replaced by new urban zones (Nguyen, van der Krabben, et al., 2018).

Supported by flexible policies and investors' exemption from land use right payments, the city achieved remarkable results, while also attracting foreign investments<sup>8</sup> (Bony-Cisternes, 2018; Le Courrier du Vietnam, 2019): 385 million euros in 2019 compared to 250 million in 2018. Danang's share of GDP also rose (from 3.81bn euros in 2018 to 4.14bn euros in 2019); GDP per capita also rose to 3680 euros<sup>9</sup> (Gso Danang, 2019: 5–6; 37).

#### 4.2. Ambitious but unfinished metropolitan projects

The urban authorities are pursuing the previous strategy, aiming to make Danang a hub of regional expansion, and to position it among the leading Asian cities, following the example of urban development in Singapore (interview with an architect-urban planner of Danang, March 2019). However, the diversity of goals and a new team in the PC made it difficult to raise sufficient capital to complete the projects, and also resulted in a lack of leadership and consensus among the stakeholders.

The new *Master Plan 2030 Vision 2050* (Dupi, 2013), adopted following cooperation with Japan (Jica, 2010) and Korea (Seoul Institute et al., 2013), promoted infrastructure development and urban programs, but without the funds required to carry out many projects (field study, March 2019; Afd, 2017). Spatially, this plan shows the desire to strengthen the existing centrality of the Hai Chau district, through the creation of an original skyline, and to develop the outlying district of Hoa Vang through scientific and university functions (Nguyen & Truong, 2019). In Hai Chau, the headquarters of the municipal council and the administrative center have been rebuilt and expanded on the original site, the hospital has been modernized, and a cultural and sports center has been created. Through this new plan (Fig. 5), the PC encouraged the construction of Capital Square, comprising office buildings for banking, business and insurance, commercial centers and recreational areas. In this way, from 2014 to 2019, the townscape was

transformed by the first emblematic 34-storey tower housing the headquarters of the municipal council, and by an increasing number of skyscrapers.

The use of this Land-for-Infrastructure tool<sup>10</sup> (Danang Construction Department, 2013) and the support of Vietnamese property developers (Sungroup, Vingroup) by renowned international architecture and urban planning firms (De-So, 2016; Arep, 2016; Sala Design Group Hong Kong; Safdie Architects) have led to the widening of the east-west and north-south urban expressways and the landscape development of the waterfronts along the East Vietnam Sea and the Han, Cam Le, Co Co and Cau Do rivers (Fig. 6).

The development of the Hoa Vang district, which should change its use from secondary residential to a new gateway to Danang, is one of the many unfinished projects in 2019 seeking funding. Regarding means of transport outside the city, there was an ambitious plan to move, resize and redesign infrastructure systems for a huge future (interview with an operations manager of Danang city-province, April 2019), involving relocating the passenger railway station in the pericentral district of Lien Chieu, moving the military airport in Chu Lai district, separating freight and tourism functions in the river and sea ports, construction of 7 new nautical resorts, 8 bus rapid transit (BRT) lines, and 3 metro lines.

In August 2019, with a view to promoting a sustainable and livable lifestyle (interview with a member of the Danang PC, February 2019), the city appointed a Singaporean consultant, Surbana Jurong, to design a new plan based on the generic model of green cities, like many South Asian and Chinese cities (Leducq & Scarwell, 2020; Lorrain & Curien, 2018). This approach seems to be a response to the sudden drop in urban investments, a way of attracting new property developers and private capital. Through resolution no. 393/QD-TTg of 18 March 2020, the Prime Minister, Nguyen Xuan Phuc, validated the changes to the Danang Master Plan 2030–2050 so that the development policies of the city-province could be included in the national strategy of socio-economic development for the whole of Vietnam.

#### 4.3. Collaborative urban design trial

The collaboration of citizens, as stakeholders, in the planning and local government policy-making process aims to encourage people to put their tacit knowledge or user expertise towards the benefit of their city's development. Still very limited in Vietnam, the use of the participatory urban planning tool in Danang is socially and organizationally innovative, going beyond the call for fund-raising to improve the city's image in the late 1990s. For instance, citizens were invited to take part in the ideas competition for the twenty-one urban projects launched as part of the Danang Master Plan 2030–2050.

However, the urban authorities of Danang are only partially successful in achieving this goal of inclusive urban planning. In fact, the city shows signs of an economic down-turn, highlighted by several experts (Gso Danang, 2019), and it is increasingly exposed to the challenge of strong environmental constraints that need to be overcome.

<sup>6</sup> Decision N°465/QD-TTg dated 17 June 2002.

<sup>7</sup> The 5-No campaign carried out in Danang from 2000 to 2005 had five components: no hunger, no illiteracy, no homelessness, no drug addiction and no crime. Drawn up in May 2005, the 3-Have policy aimed to ensure that all citizens had a home, that all workers had a job, and that all inhabitants had a civil lifestyle.

<sup>8</sup> Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) increased from 400 million euros in 1997 to 790 million euros in 2006.

<sup>9</sup> By comparison, GDP per capita in HCMC was €5717.

<sup>10</sup> Land-for-Infrastructure (LFI) or *Doi dat lay ha tang* in Vietnamese, is a public-private partnership (PPP) created to remedy the lack of public funds for the infrastructure systems essential for development (transport, telecommunications, water, drainage, energy). Authorized since the Land Law amended by decision no. 10/1998/QH10 of 2 December 1998 on PPPs, the LFI makes it possible for land adjacent to the infrastructure or located elsewhere in the city to be conceded to the private companies that construct them, who can then sell them or use them for commercial and residential purposes. This tool, based on the idea of mutual benefits, is increasingly prevalent in Vietnamese cities, such as HCMC (Nguyen, Chau, & Sang, 2018).



Fig. 4. Strong network of roads and bridges that interconnect districts of Danang City: (a) Yet Kieu, road to the seaport (b) Cau Rong, Dragon bridge (c) Cau Thuan Phuoc, northern bay of Danang  
Source: Divya Leducq, Helga-Jane Scarwell, 2019.



Fig. 5. Renewed city center made of high-rise building (a) and place of the iconic city hall (b)  
Source: Divya Leducq, Helga-Jane Scarwell, 2019.

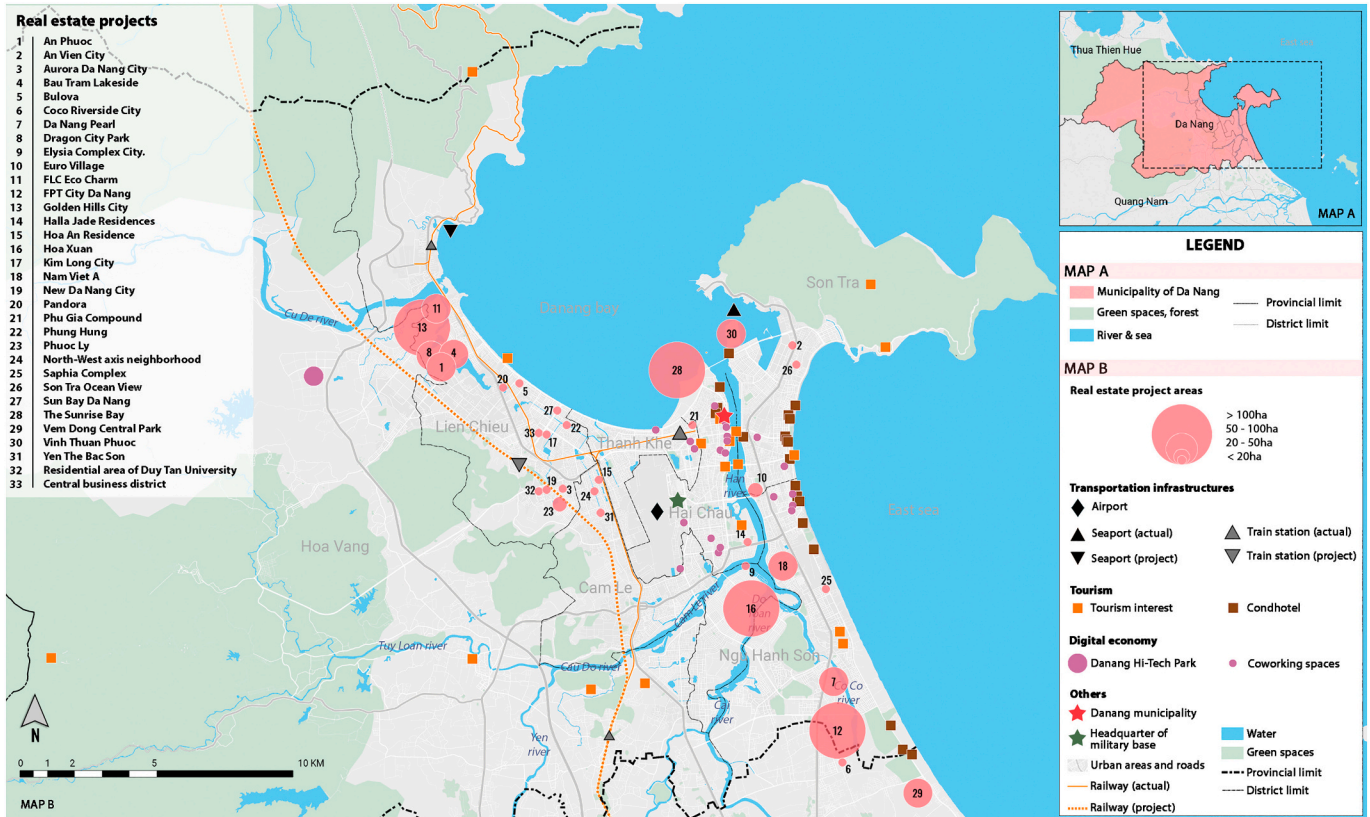


Fig. 6. Location of urban and property projects in the Master Plan 2030–2050  
Source: Divya Leducq, Helga-Jane Scarwell, Quoc Dat Nguyen, 2020.





**Fig. 7.** Three types of coworking spaces: IT incubator (a), traditional business diversification (b) and relational based (c) located in the central district of Thanh Khe  
Source: Divya Leducq, 2019.



**Fig. 8.** Fishery activities tends to decrease  
Source: Helga-Jane Scarwell, 2019.

## 5. Increasing number of challenges to overcome unfinished metropolitan aspirations

Extending the literature on South-East Asian studies, this section identifies at least three main elements that explain the gap between the theoretical and planned transformation of Danang, a secondary city of Vietnam, into a real regional metropolis. Desynchronized urban planning, and the gap between public policies and private interests, also show the failure of aspirational urbanism.

### 5.1. Uncertainty about the budget situation

During the period 2004–2016, Danang was given strong budgetary support by the State, enabling it to invest up to 32% of its GDP for infrastructure construction (Gso Danang, 2019: 37). Nevertheless, there was little land available to attract investors, and the revenue from land tax, which represented 40% of the overall revenue base for the period 2005–2010, now only accounts for 10% (Bony-Cisternes, 2019; *Ibid.*, 2019). Moreover, faced with increased fiscal pressure from the

Government and financial recentralization (Nguyen, 2018), Danang has seen a 17% drop in its fiscal revenue. This situation has slowed down flood control measures and development of the DHTP (To et al., n.d).

### 5.2. Greater environmental risks

While tourism development can be an asset (Cosaert, 1998), the number and size of sea-front hotels is exacerbating coastline erosion (Ngoc, 2016; Son, 2018). Poor drainage in the 100-m coastal strip also prompted the Minister for Construction to observe that the current system of waste water collection and treatment does not meet the needs of the growth of tourism and urban services in the Danang region (Van, 2019). And yet the city is vulnerable to climate change, with increased tropical storms, depressions and typhoons (Ihmen, 2013). The continuing rise in sea level is leading to salinization of the rivers and more floods and landslides. Further away, the district of Son Tra, 10 km from the city center, regularly experiences a shortage of drinking water. In 2019, the private Danang Urban Environment Joint Stock Company supplied homes and hotels from tank trucks at an exorbitant price (Chau,

2019). The PC sought solutions that preserved tourism more than biodiversity. However, tourist accommodation projects that had for a time been considered in the Son Tra nature reserve were halted because they did not comply with the project for recognition as a Unesco World Heritage site (Lippold et al., 2018). Over and above tourism, it is current urbanization that is causing the problems of ecosystem balance due to poorly controlled urban sprawl and persistent poor practices, such as the use of rare virgin land.

### 5.3. Desynchronized spatial planning

As stressed by the director of the Danang Department of Natural Resources and the Environment, nearly all the environmental protection black spots are due to a lack of spatial planning (Le Dinh, 2018). This is due to economic interests, and there is no strategy to monitor the pace of urbanization and projects, which leads to constant, arbitrary adjustments. The lack of synchronism and long-term vision results in illegal and constant modification of the destination of land made available to private investors (Cafeland, 2019). Indeed, the Land-for-Infrastructure tool is not clearly regulated, while it has become a key factor of the growth of property investment around the transport corridors, fed by the flow of capital from South Korea, Japan and continental China (Sehyung et al., 2015). Danang has neither the human resources for managing technical and environmental issues, nor the appropriate regulation and strategic planning tools.

Regarding the DHTP, which is one of the pillars of development of Danang, there has been an accumulation of delays resulting in a low rate of occupation of approximately 25.2%. Likewise, in the Hoa Khanh industrial zone, problems of electricity and water supply and recurring floods have also slowed growth (Chan, 2019). Moreover, companies are faced with a lack of stability of land rental costs in the business parks, which are adjusted every year by the industrial and high-tech park management board.

The rapid increase in condo-hotel projects guarantees comfortable real-estate income for the Vietnamese investors Vingroup or Sungroup, the developer of the vast Ba Na Hills resort, while displacing lower-income households. Projects like Sunrise Bay give the impression that the city has been privatized to the benefit of real-estate groups, who are alone in their ability to finance the DHTP, air and maritime infrastructure, or the extension of the new KDTM urban zones that figure in the Master Plan 2030–2050. Nevertheless, several real-estate projects have been abandoned following protests by the people of Danang about increasing socio-environmental inequalities (Tuoi Tre, 2019). For example, fishing areas have been reduced, leading many fishermen to lose their jobs (Fig. 8), and residents have observed the increasing scarcity of open public spaces.

## 6. Conclusion

This article highlights the urban metamorphosis of Danang, a secondary city, through the lens of a strategy of emergence and aspirational urbanism (Esposito Andujar, 2020). The interplay of various stakeholders led to economic and land policies encouraging several forms of centrality: regional and urban, touristic and economic, technological and digital. However, Danang, which now holds a key position in Vietnam, has two major weak points: unpredictable development of plans and projects, and poor regulation leading to ecosystem degradation. At the same time, while financial internationalization has opened up new horizons for financing infrastructure systems, it has also added to dependence on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), partly explaining why growth-generating projects have been subject to fluctuating development and delays of several years. This paper thus aims to fill a gap in the literature regarding the urban planning of secondary cities, with theoretical and practical implications. Recently, the very large private developers in Hanoi and HCMC have also started investing in road infrastructure and in property and commercial projects, taking

advantage of Danang's public metropolitan action to boost their own growth strategy. Further research on Danang's capacity to become a regional metropolis should examine the means whereby the urban authorities can go beyond local policies and the central power of Hanoi. It would also be useful to analyze the emergence of new alliances that focus on mobilizing the financial resources required to carry out the projects, while also contributing to better acquisition and integration of technical and human skills for efficient management of a coast that is under pressure.

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