

Inside Dong Xuan Center: Vietnamese quasi-street in Berlin.

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Abstract

The street is a worldwide conventional human sign, a tool for moving and defining open space, a reassuring common feature of any major human settlement. This strikingly familiar public feature is the core of social confrontation and integration. Yet there are cases in which the street morphs into versions that question our understanding of its essence as a public space.

The Dong Xuan Center is a covered market situated in the Lichtenberg neighborhood in eastern Berlin, an area just outside of the Ringbahn at the edge of the ongoing gentrifying process. The center is named after the homonymous market in Hanoi and it is an important institution for Berlin's Vietnamese community.

The center is hosted in 5 prefabricated warehouses covered with solar panels within a dull industrial area from the GDR times. The anonymity of the surroundings exacerbates the exceptionality of the content: the inner space consists of street-like corridors flanked by Vietnamese shops, supermarkets, restaurants, bars and barbers. The atmosphere of specificity and otherness inside the Dong Xuan halls caused the general press to define the center as Berlin's "little Hanoi"<sup>1</sup>.

This definition is provoking because it suggests that the main feature of this de-facto shopping mall is its urbanity and its cultural specificity, as opposed to the hostility and genericity of the actual neighborhood that surrounds it.

The case of Dong Xuan center allows us to challenge the traditional definitions of "street" and "urbanity", while also reflecting on the relationship between general and specific and on the anthropological value of the street in the field of social integration.

## 1. The Dong Xuan Center in Lichtenberg (Berlin)

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<sup>1</sup> Flamm, S. (2013). *Dong Xuan Center: Mit Haut und Knorpel*. [online] ZEIT ONLINE. Available at: <http://www.zeit.de/2013/11/Dong-Xuan-Vietnam-Berlin> [Accessed 5 Mar. 2016].

During the eighties a consistent number of vietnamese immigrants arrived to East Berlin, most of them settling in Lichtenberg to work for Elektrokohle, the only producer of graphite in the GDR<sup>2</sup>.

After the Wende part of the vietnamese community remained strongly radicated in this area and, taking advantage of the opening of borders, converted its economy into an import export enterprise. The Dong Xuan Center was opened in 2005 by Vietnamese investor Nguyen Van Hien and rapidly became a landmark for the neighborhood and an extraordinary example of cultural integration. The vietnamese community transformed a private, industrial, half demolished block into a sort of public space, or better, in a small city in the city. Dong Xuan is not an *enclave*, rather it has open borders and no cultural obstacles.



Figure. 1: collocation of Lichtenberg neighborhood and Dong Xuan Center  
(source: google maps)

The Dong Xuan Center is named after an homonymous market in Hanoi, originally built by the French occupiers in 1889 as a new architectural feature for the soon-to-be colonial capital of French Indo-China. The original covered market's main feature was expressed by the five arches that defined the facade of the complex. Made of stone, they gave access to large roofed spaces built in galvanised iron. It was known by the French as “Les Halles” of Hanoi.

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<sup>2</sup> Esser, B. (2016). *Lichtenberg, Berlin: A Sketch from the Ground — Failed Architecture*. [online] Failedarchitecture.com. Available at: <http://www.failedarchitecture.com/lichtenberg-berlin-a-sketch-from-the-ground/> [Accessed 15 May 2016].

After a devastating fire in 1994 the whole complex was rebuilt, maintaining three of the five characteristic French-style facades, but also intensifying the interior with a general modernisation and the addition of extra floors.<sup>3</sup>

Contrary to its Berlin mirroring, the Dong Xuan Market is located in a densely inhabited area at the center of the Vietnamese capital and constitutes a common tourist attraction.



Figure. 2: Dong Xuan Market in Hanoi (source: chodongxuan.org)

## 2. Architectural survey (a tool for investigation)

We consider our architectural and spatial survey of the Dong Xuan Center as a fundamental step for investigation. We specifically focused this campaign on the measurement of surfaces and volumes with the intention of creating a precise analytical basis to fuel our deconstruction process.

*2.1 Urban situation* - Although the center is freely accessible on multiple sides, the main entrance gate is located on Hertzberger Strasse, where the visitor is welcomed by a prominent sign that symbolized the entrance to the area. The renovated brick building that marks the entrance of the center is also part of the Center and hosts the center's administration. The office building was part of

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<sup>3</sup>Anh, P. (2009). Le marché Đông Xuân et ses valeurs culturelles. *Le Courrier du Vietnam*.

Elektrokohle and strongly marks the rooting of the local vietnamese community to the old abandoned factory that was the main reason for their arrival in GDR.

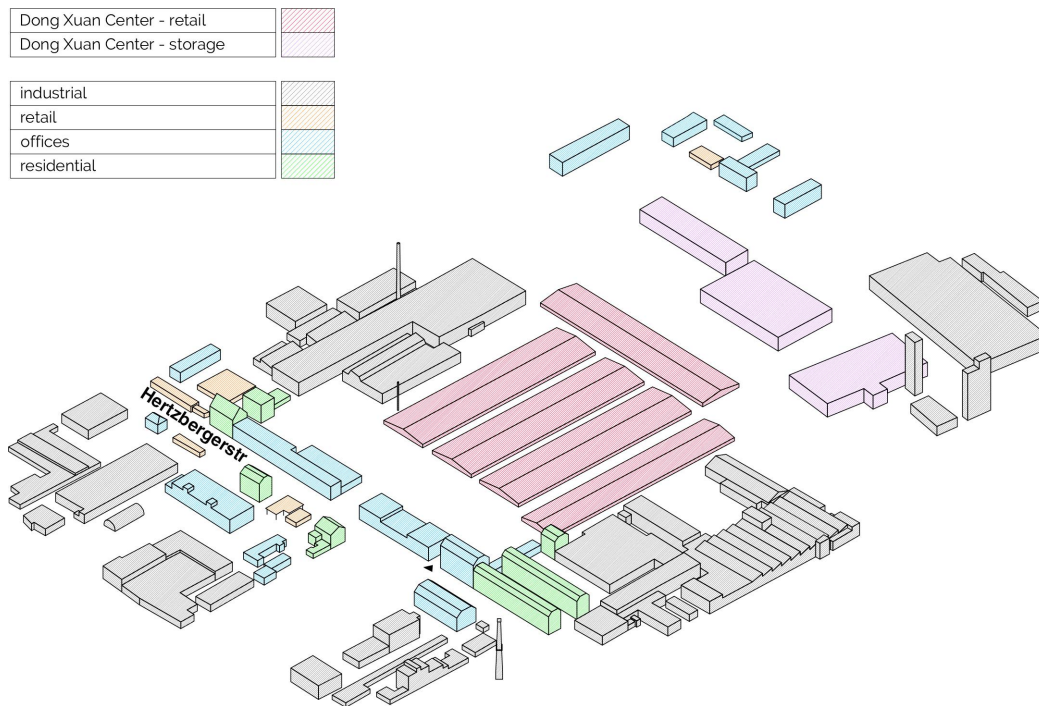


Figure. 3: urban context and functions

*2.2 General morphology* - The main bulk of the center is composed by 8 prefabricated warehouses built on the site formerly occupied by graphite production plants. Located behind the office buildings that face Herzbergstrasse, the warehouses cover a total surface of 39 000 square meters. 28 000 square meters (Halle 1,2,3,6,8) are dedicated to retail space and are completely and freely accessible. The rest is storage space and it is the only part of the complex that is not accessible to the general public. Most of the free surface is occupied by an extensive parking lot with manoeuvre areas for the delivery vehicles, amounting to more than 900 parking spaces. The only green area is located at the South West corner of the plot near the entrance, a small garden surrounded on two sides by the administration building.

With the sole exception of the office building the whole complex develops on the ground floor only.

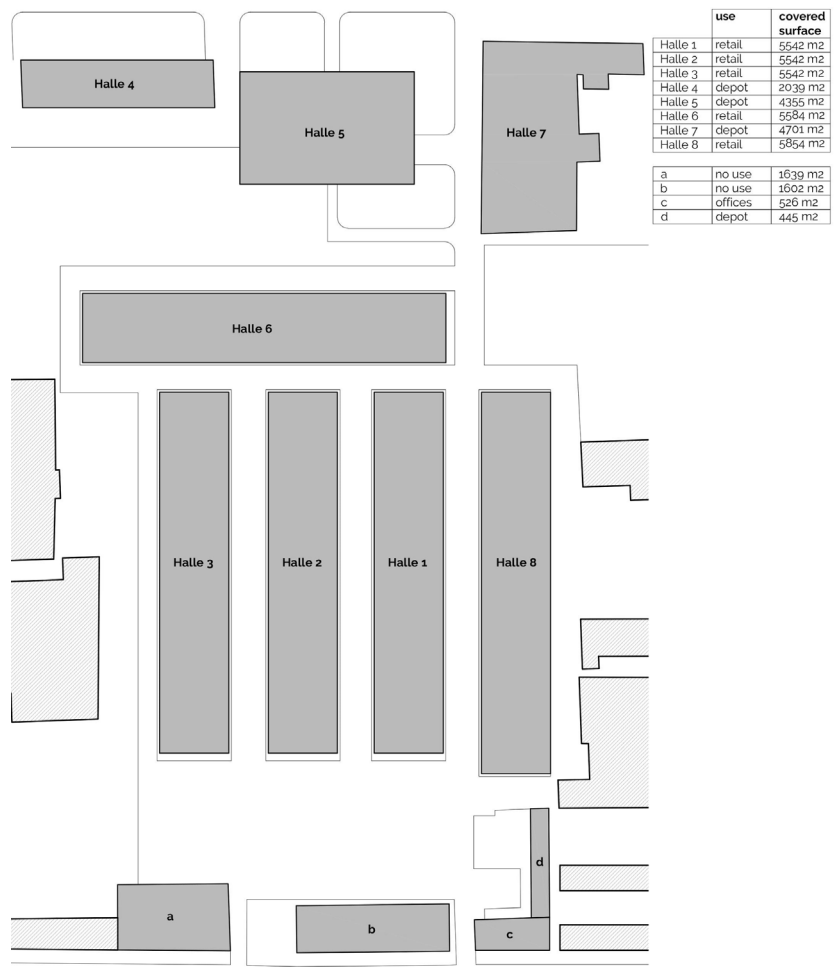


Figure. 4: footprint and surfaces

2.3 Circulation - In the exterior space pedestrian and vehicular fluxes are mixed. The distance between the buildings is strictly related to standard maneuver dimensions for delivery trucks.

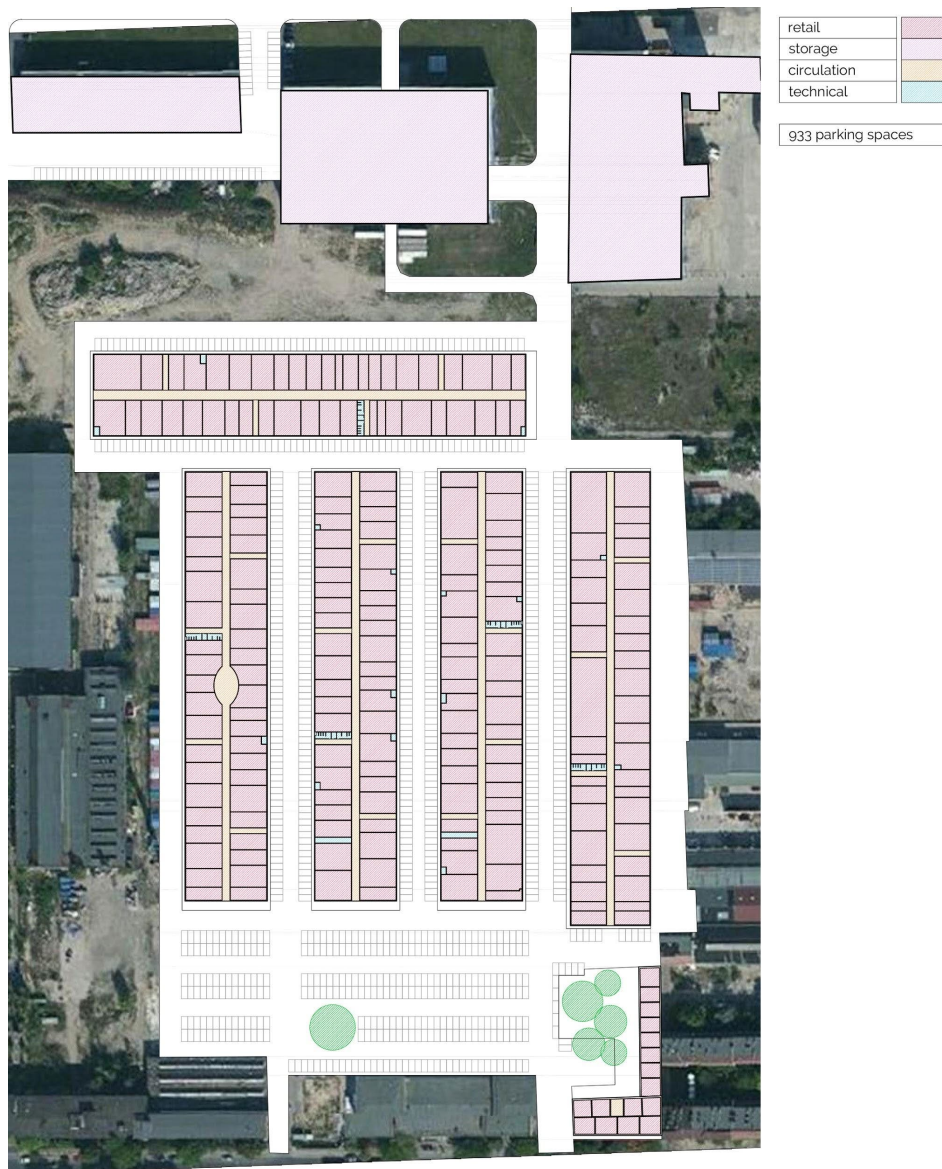


Figure. 5: functions (source: google maps)

The interior circulation space is organized around straight longitudinal corridors, around 3 meters wide. Transversal movement is guaranteed by small passages that also serve as access for the bathroom areas.

The elliptical square-like space in Halle 3 represents the only irregularity in this system. Exterior pedestrian only areas are limited to pavements that surround the buildings that are occasionally occupied by outdoor areas and sheds for the customers of the restaurants.



Figure. 6: outdoor areas on the south edge of Halle 2

*2.4 Uses* - The majority of the interior surface is occupied by retail space (73%), while distributive spaces amount to just 9% of the whole. Service spaces such as bathrooms and technical rooms are stripped to a bare minimum and amount to 1% of the total. The administrative building on the Southeast amounts to about 10% of the net floor area and it's the only pre-existing building currently in use.

The large majority of retail spaces inside the warehouses are dedicated to the sale of non-edible products (clothing, electronics, ..) and services such as nail-polishing and hairdressing. Interior streets are often used as extra space to display merchandising.

Restaurants are located almost exclusively at the South and North end of Halle 1, 2 and 3, and in correspondence with the elliptical square in Halle 3. Grocery stores are prevalent at the South end of the complex to profit from the large parking area nearby. There are currently no restaurants or grocery stores in Halle 6 and 8.



*2.5 Technological remarks* - The warehouses are industrial steel truss structures. The internal height varies from 3m on the sides to about 6m at the centre. The retail units are separated by partition walls that are only 3 meters high and don't have false ceilings, with the sole exception of restaurants and bathroom areas where they are required by law. The roof is thus almost completely visible from the inside. Natural light penetrates in the buildings through linear skylights at the summit that can also be used for extra natural ventilation, if needed. Four of the five retail buildings are covered by about 7 000 m<sup>2</sup> of solar panels, generating an estimate average of 1,39 MW of energy.

Water, electricity and artificial ventilation run in channels on the side of the truss structure. There is an extensive sprinkler fire-prevention system.

### 3. Quantitative analysis for spatial understanding

The following observations stem from the previous survey and constitute the fulcrum of our considerations.

*3.1 - Social effects of spatial and technological efficiency of the built environment* - The actual spatial efficiency of the Dong Xuan Center is the result of an industrial-like spatial design strategy. Although we have no informations about the designers, we can deduce that the design approach is similar to the one of the industrial context. The industrial district surrounding Dong Xuan is composed of fairly regular blocks in which the land use is always linked to a policy of maximum usability of space. Looking at the Lichtenberg industrial area as a whole it is evident that the infrastructure follows a logic of extreme rationality: an alternation of driveways (access for users and workers), and railways (access for goods).

The construction standard of the Dong Xuan is not different, in the end. The internal corridors are the pedestrian access to the functional boxes. The external driveways are primarily necessary for procurement and vehicular access. When the two flows intersect, both are carefully safeguarded by the presence of walkways and raised platforms, which are often protected by shelters, to facilitate the loading and unloading operations.

Given this logical layout, the organization of the interior space is also the result of simple choices as solution of practical problems.

The choice of the steel portal structure is necessarily linked to the desire to cover the widest possible distance leaving the inner space free of pillars. The structure generates an internal volume greater than that required, reaching a ridge height that is almost the double of the minimum (internal height could have been slightly more than 3 m). This extra space is only marginally occupied by technical equipment (mechanical, electrical and fire), leaving it mostly empty. All technical rooms are placed in the head with one exception, linked to the central location of some restaurants.

The only thing that seems to escape this logic is the positioning of the toilets, probably related to the tracking of underground water infrastructure.

While the nature of the choices appears to be strictly economic and technological, the results often create effects that are not considered from the starting decisional field.

In fact, in the case of Dong Xuan Center, it is possible to question the traditional parameters of quality of space. Somehow in this case, as the limit condition, quality and efficiency seem to coincide. This is related to the functional program, but also to the anthropological nature of the site. The population of Lichtenberg and, more generally, of Berlin, has built a way of living profoundly linked to spatial efficiency issues. The distribution of residential slabs is extremely rational and presents abundant open space, which has been long managed independently by the inhabitants themselves in a form of *understatement*<sup>4</sup> in the definition of urban space. Hence the inhabitants of Berlin have constructed an anthropological form of spatial life which provides temporary employment, trading, sharing, and it's interesting how this behavioral element is absorbed by the local Vietnamese community in the context of retail space At the same time this form of

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<sup>4</sup> Team X: overdesign Vs understatement: Team10online.org. (2016). *TEAM 10 Meetings*. [online] Available at: <http://www.team10online.org/team10/meetings/1965-berlin.htm> [Accessed 3 May 2016].

appropriation is also far from a material consolidation of private presence on public land<sup>5</sup>.

Being able to attract people from different communities and heritages, the Dong Xuan appears as a waiver of certain mix of traditional anthropological traits, the porous and incomplete nature of the space providing opportunities for democratic engagement<sup>6</sup>. Simplifying the problem of settlement only to logical, spatial and technological efficiency, Berlin's Vietnamese community gave shape to an extraordinary integration experiment.

As European culture imported to Vietnam its model of covered market, Vietnamese inhabitants of east Berlin reintroduced it back in Europe after its metabolization. The result is a sort of resiliency negotiation, with implicit and explicit effects on the metabolism of this spatial model.

*3.2 - Interior Corridors as quasi-streets* - The perception of the interior corridors as *quasi-streets* is defined by the intersection between their use and their dimensions and spatial peculiarities.

The corridors are filled with displayed merchandising and constitute an informal extension of the shops, resulting in a negotiated street-like space. This character is underlined by the narrowness of the corridors, where the concentration of people and objects reminds of an alley in a Mediterranean town.

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<sup>5</sup> Also the design of public space is historically more relevant, see for example the investigations by Camillo Sitte (Sitte, C. (1901). *Der Städte-Bau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen*. Wien: Verlag von Carl Graeser.) or, more recently Jan Gehl (Gehl, J. (2006). *Life between buildings*. Kbh.: Danish Architectural Press.). In general that is expressed also in the tradition of the grand-tour.

<sup>6</sup> This interpretation reflects the view on democratic space expressed by Richard Sennet in his essay *The open city* (Burdett, R., Sudjic, D. (2007). *The endless city*. London: Phaidon Press.)



Figure. 9: interior street

While the the surface for circulation is stripped to the bare minimum, the narrow corridors profit from a large overhead airspace that creates the impression of a *city under a roof*, the specific spatial quality that characterizes the traditional European covered market.

This low m2/m3 ratio, as well as the intrinsic negotiable character of the corridors, allow us to read these interior pathways as *quasi-streets*, places where the urban phenomenon is replicated in an unlikely setting.

*3.3 - Degrees of controlled openness - The Dong Xuan Center*, remarkably, is almost completely accessible to visitors. All shops face the interior pedestrian quasi-street on one side and the exterior vehicular street on the other, being accessible on both sides by everyone. Except for the restaurants' kitchens and few other technical spaces there is no inaccessible backdoor. The whole issue of public vs private is thus generally managed not by erecting clear barriers, but rather by a subtle distinction between different degrees of public. One key point of this relationship is the fact that shops don't present extensive windows, but rather relatively small doors that, though always open, clearly define private space. In

the same way, the main entrance to the warehouses is not a large glazed facade, but rather an opaque and quite modest door that clearly states the passage from one degree of public to the other.

In addition to all this, spaces dedicated to delivery and other technical necessities are never concealed from the view of the visitor, who is on the contrary often forced to cross path with delivery trucks or people carrying large trolleys full of goods.

This lightening of spatial segregation results in a blending between the role of visitor and that of the resident: visiting Dong Xuan Center doesn't feel like watching something from the outside, rather taking part in it.

This is specifically underlined by the fact that the visitors of the Center come from different communities and backgrounds: far from being simply a Vietnamese enclave, the Dong Xuan Center has become a landmark for the neighborhood and it attracts people from all over the city regardless of their cultural roots.

*3.4 - Mixed program as urban value* - Observing the functional program as a whole it is possible to deduce that it is also characterized by efficiency criteria, as there is a clear separation of functional blocks.

In particular, the fact that the whole complex doesn't include housing is of specific interest, because it allows for a higher degree of transparency. The presence of residential space contiguous to retail, perhaps on an hypothetical upper floor, would dramatically change the public/private gradient and alter the perception of full accessibility to the complex.

Looking around the Dong Xuan Center, in its aggregate characteristics, it is possible to see that it contains an extremely varied functional program. This supports the urban value of the complex. This is not a building, but a piece of the city, which fits with the other pieces and consists of a succession of public and private spaces.

#### 4. Three short lessons for the contemporary city (by Dong Xuan Center)

The observation and study of the Dong Xuan center as an urban container of social integration allows us to produce some simple final consideration. These are

not generated in deductive form, but are the narrative product of remarks and critical analysis.

In spite of its quantitative basis, the investigation is finally substantialized in a discourse.

Starting from the most practical considerations and moving to the more theoretical, we try to raise three small questions that we learned from Dong Xuan Center and that could be verified on similar case studies.

1 - The presence of an abundant internal volume is a relevant factor that allows us to perceive Dong Xuan Center's interior as public instead of private space. This is not a sufficient condition for publicity, but certainly a necessary one. If the internal spaces of Dong Xuan Center were claustrophobic, the corridors would cease to be streets. The street is not simply a distribution mechanism, but a place in which there is space for everyone. Space that, in this case, can be quantified as the available airspace. This airspace is a tridimensional surface on which to project *heterotopias*<sup>7</sup>, and thus can be defined as an integration parameter, a common good.

2 - As cities become more and more privatized, architects tend to respond by augmenting visual transparency. But simply allowing to look inside a space doesn't mean guaranteeing its accessibility. Rather, transparency means being able to walk and inhabit different spaces, as represented in the Nolli plan of Rome<sup>8</sup>. The internal quasi-streets have the capacity to contract and dilate in accordance to the surrounding retail spaces: that happens in Dong Xuan Center as well as in traditional cities<sup>9</sup>, and it constitutes a high level of transparency.

3 - Without the constraints of strictly domestic space the Dong Xuan Center is allowed to be completely transparent, constituting a community space that doesn't qualify itself as an enclave. In enclaves the access to "external subjects" is often characterized by filters of different entity. Some parts are completely accessible, some only visible, a portion partially visible and finally

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<sup>7</sup> Foucault, M. and Vaccaro, S. (2001). *Spazi altri*. Milano: Mimesis.

<sup>8</sup> Nolli.uoregon.edu. (2016). *Interactive Nolli Map Website*. [online] Available at: <http://nolli.uoregon.edu> [Accessed 5 May 2016].

<sup>9</sup> Gehl, J. (2006). *Life between buildings*. Kbh.: Danish Architectural Press.

most areas are totally concealed to visitors. In most traditional cultures, only a very small part of the total urban area is accessible if you are not part of the resident community<sup>10</sup>. Even in the most historic and traditional urban fabric (related to traditional cultures), there are vertical public / private gradients even among members of the same community. Dong Xuan works as a set of streets because the whole area is accessible: the same experience is available to any user. Dong Xuan is the product of a process of cultural and social integration, the result of a cultural negotiation process that started violently in Hanoi, but that generated, as the culmination of a heterogenesis process, a little lesson on the topic of the right to space<sup>11</sup>, for the design of contemporary cities.

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<sup>10</sup> SQM. *The Quantified Home*. (2014). Ennetbaden: Lars Müller Verlag.

<sup>11</sup> Lefebvre, H. (1968). *Le Droit à la ville*. Paris: Anthropos.