

Embara: Saigon's youth arcadia

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Abstract

Gentrification and segregation are the two most polemic terms in urban discourse today. In a climate shaped by rapid globalisation and multinational corporations, widespread sameness is evident in any cosmopolitan hub. Conversely, each city has its own local, vernacular traditions. Considered to be the heart of Ho Chi Minh City, District 1 is the centre for all financial, commercial and administrative activity. Although it is still Vietnamese in character, this district has felt the effects of secularisation and modernisation most heavily. In order to confront the challenge of wider cultural amalgamation, the need to reform urban typologies for living, knowledge sharing, and profit making is paramount. By October 2016, a “New Urban Agenda” will be tabled at “Habitat III” placing culture at the centre of the debates on sustainable urbanism. Drawing ideas from hypothetical theories and cultural imperative of the scene, new strategies will be introduced to embrace the relationship of the human subject and urban environment. *Embara* is an attempt to articulate a sound and measure response through urban acupuncture. As a concept, wayfaring is used as a strategy to enhance the user experience in both solids and voids, public and private spaces. The mechanism which centres at building connection includes sequence of events that will become a catalyst to a chain of reaction in rejuvenating Ho Chi Minh City through new contextualisation of programs, targeted at the most critical group of citizens in the country, the youth.

Keywords: boulevard, centripetal space, chance encounters, connectivity, gentrification, gossip stations, haptic city, wayfaring.

1 Introduction

Ho Chi Minh City commonly known as Saigon or by the abbreviations HCMC or HCM is the former capital of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). Once



dearly called Diamond of the Far-east, Ho Chi Minh City is now the most populated city in Vietnam. The city boasts a population of almost nine million [1]. Modern office skyscrapers, amidst Oriental style pagodas and food stalls along the street, create a dynamic urban sphere in very special sense. It is not oddly tidy like in Singapore nor in urban slumps omnipresent like in India. The downtown area as illustrated in Figure 1 below, is growing at a rate that will equal Tokyo by 2020. If Hanoi is the political capital of Vietnam, Saigon is the commercial heart and a magnet for foreign investors. New business ventures and ambitious development projects are popping up each year [2]. Saigon has a tropical climate with an average humidity of 75%. There are two seasons: wet and dry. The city life reflects the weather- a blend of harmony and chaos mixed into one. Traffic is heavy, dense and never-ending, but you can always find locals lounging at street-side coffee vendors, content to admire the passing free-for-all. Progress aside, Saigon is steeped in tradition, a living monument to the past that wears its culture proudly on its sleeve. Decorated with colonial and French style architecture throughout the city, Saigon houses a unique mixture of past and present.

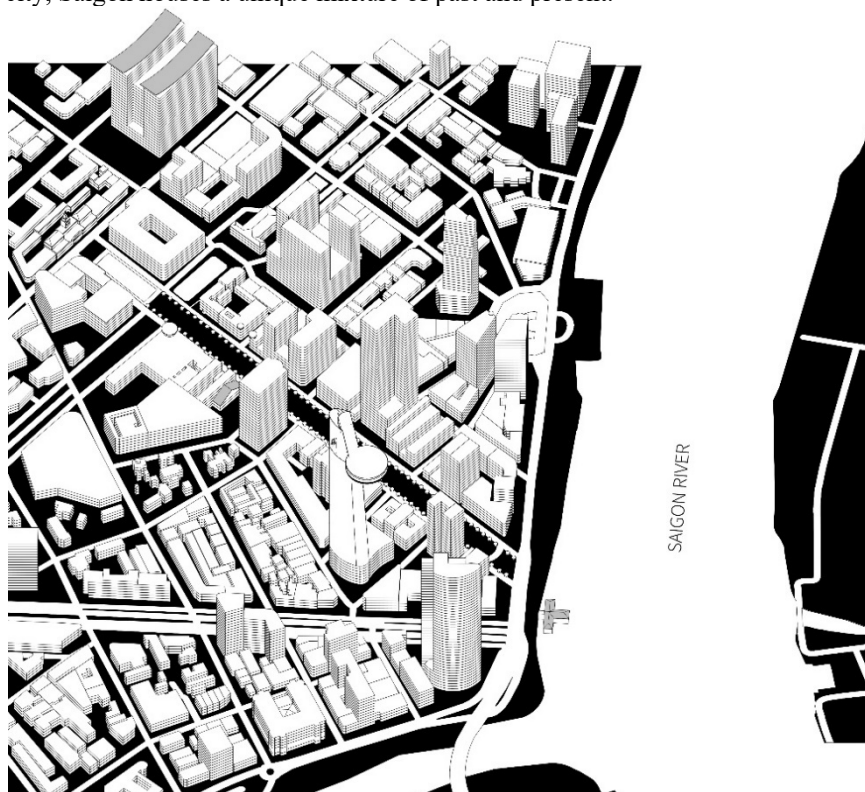


Figure 1: Existing urban blocks of Downtown Saigon.

2 Site setting

Lies in the centre of Ho Chi Minh City, the proposed urban footprint perimeter (as shown in Figure 2) belongs to District 1 which is regarded as an animated central urban district with highest living standards of the city in every aspect. This belief is expressed clearly in the saying: *Ăn Quận 5, nằm Quận 3, mua ca Quận 1* which means “Eat in District 1, stay in District 3, entertain in District 1”. Covering up to 24 acres, the site house two streets with the highest prices of land using right in this biggest city of Vietnam namely Nguyen Hue Boulevard and Dong Khoi Street. Being the primary commercial centre in Saigon, one can easily find multi-storey buildings, luxuriant trade centres, coffee stores and international retail outlets within the site periphery [3].

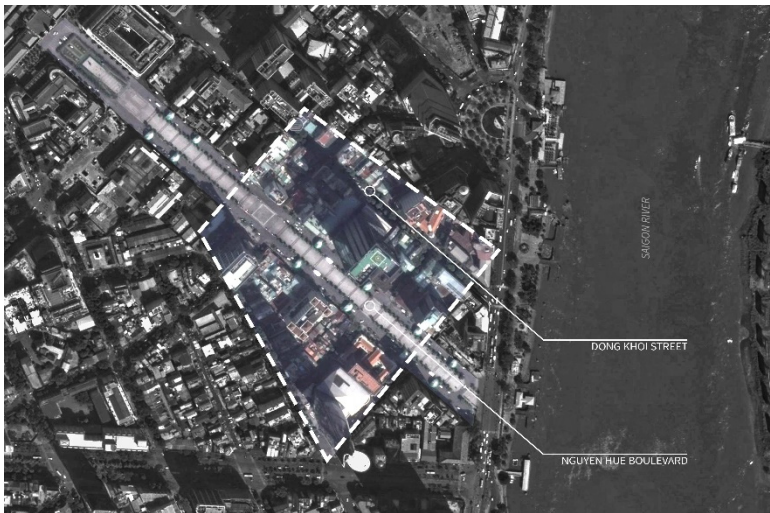


Figure 2: The site.

Known as *Charner* during the French colonial days, Nguyen Hue Boulevard as demarcated in Figure 3(a), one of Saigon’s oldest thoroughfares, has undergone numerous transformations over the course of history. In the 1870s, this thoroughfare was converted from a canal into a street. Then from the 1950s to 1999, this street was regarded as the flower street of Vietnam as it hosted the annual flower festival [4]. Fifteen years ahead, the street was further developed into a proper road for automobiles and only quite recently in April 2015 it was converted into a pedestrian street. On week days, vehicles are still allowed to run along the boulevard, but from 6pm to 1am on weekends, all kinds of vehicles are banned from entering this place.

Known as *Rue Catinat* during the French colonial days and *Tu Do* in the 1960s, Dong Khoi Street as demarcated in Figure 3(b) was reborn during *Doi Moi* (a radical economic reform policy between 1986 and 2000 by Nguyen Van Linh where more than 30,000 private businesses were created and the economy grew at

an annual rate of 7%) as the heart of Saigon's commercial and shopping district. During French colonial times, Dong Khoi Street was the country's fashion centre [4]. Runs from the Notre Dame Cathedral to the Saigon River, this street is home to historical establishments such as the Grand Hotel and Hotel Majestic. This street has local boutiques, international brands and restaurants in beautifully restored French colonial buildings.

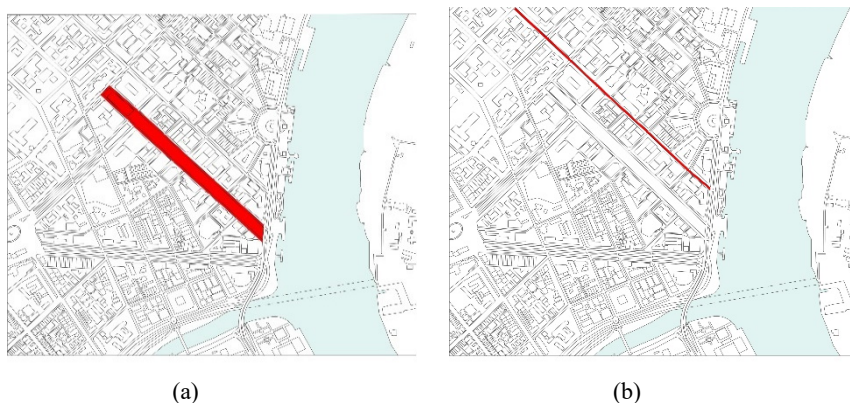


Figure 3: (a) Nguyen Hue; (b) Dong Khoi Street.

3 Dilemmas and potentialities

Figure 4 demonstrates the urban issues in Downtown Saigon. The existing land use distribution as illustrated above is obtained by placing a 5x5 meter grid on the urban fabric. These series of squares are then calculated to give an impression of the existing land use budget of the area.

Gentrification is a global urban phenomenon whereby underdeveloped areas are transformed. The process is often coupled with rising rents, a shift in the social fabric of neighbourhoods, and in many cases, the influx of multinational corporations. To some it implies the beautification and positive development of previously underdeveloped areas. However, it goes hand in hand with the negative effects of lower-income residents being priced out in favour of those who can afford increased rent prices caused by the process of rapid transformation.

“Segrification” is a combination of “gentrification” and “segregation”. The term describes the phenomena that occurs when rising rents cause families to move away or prevent individuals of diverse socioeconomic brackets to have access to affordable housing. “Segrification” describes the process, not only in Downtown Saigon but very much common in big cities throughout the world, by which gentrification increases the cost of living, resulting in a diminishment of racial and income diversity. There is a pressing need to reform the urban typologies for living, knowledge sharing, and profit making of the place that which embrace the existing local culture in order to de-gentrify Downtown Saigon as it is today.

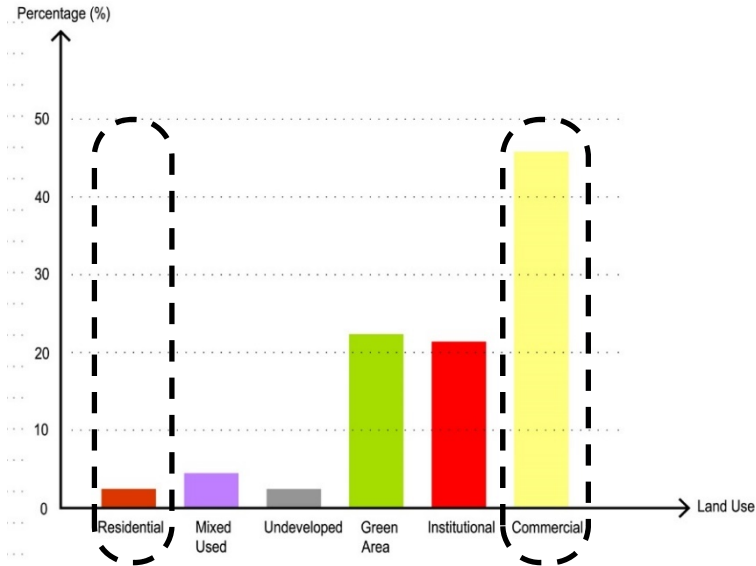


Figure 4: Existing land use distribution in Dnnton Saigon.

The newly opened pedestrian boulevard however, apart from being a public realm also serve as urban stage to house major festivities such as Tet Festival and the annual flower festival. As shown in Figure 5, the verticality of urban blocks and sense of grandeur are strong forces at the site. As the city becomes denser, buildings tend to grow taller for it is the best mechanism to increase the strata of the land in accommodating the ever-expanding businesses. This phenomenon contributes to the amalgamation of urban skyscrapers and colonial or French style architecture in the heart of Saigon.



Figure 5: Nguyen Hue Boulevard.

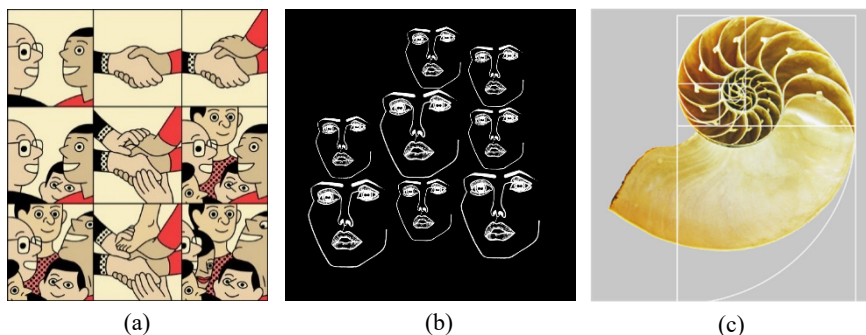


Figure 6: (a) “Connectography”; (b) Neologism: “Sonder”; (c) The City of God.

4 Background theories

4.1 “Connectography”

One of the famous adages about the world, is becoming obsolete. Centuries-old arguments about how climate and culture condemn some societies to fail, or how small countries are forever trapped and subject to the whims of larger ones, are being overturned. Thanks to global transportation, communications, and energy infrastructure (highways, railways, airports, pipelines, electricity grids, internet cables, etc.) the future has a new maxim: Connectivity is destiny [5]. As our expanding cities grow ever more connected through transportation, energy and communications networks, we evolve from geography to what can be describe as “connectography”. It is a combination of the word connectivity and geography. The global connectivity revolution, in all of its forms has enabled such a quantum leap in the mobility of people, resources and ideas. An evolution of the world from political geography, which is how we legally divide the world, to functional geography, which is how we actually use the world: from nations and borders, to infrastructure and supply chains. We don't just build connectivity, we embody it. We are the global network civilisation. A civilisation in which geography is no longer destiny. Connectivity has become the most important asset class of the 21st century. Figure 7(a) and (b) illustrates some initial ideas on how to apply the theory of “connectography” as part of the urban intervention.

4.2 Neologism: “Sonder”

A neologism (from Greek *néo-*, “new” and *lógos*, “speech, utterance”) is the name for a relatively new term, word, or phrase that may be in the process of entering common use, but that has not yet been fully accepted into mainstream language. Each original definition aims to fill a hole in the language itself, to give a name to emotions we all might experience but don't yet have a word for. *Sonder* can be understood as the realisation that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own. Populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries and inherited craziness. An epic story that continues invisibly around you

like an anthill sprawling deep underground, with elaborate passageways to thousands of other lives that you'll never know existed, in which you might appear only once, as an extra sipping coffee in the background, as a blur of traffic passing on the highway, as a lighted window at dusk [6]. Figure 8 illustrates how the theory of *sonder* could inspire some authentic urban solutions on site.

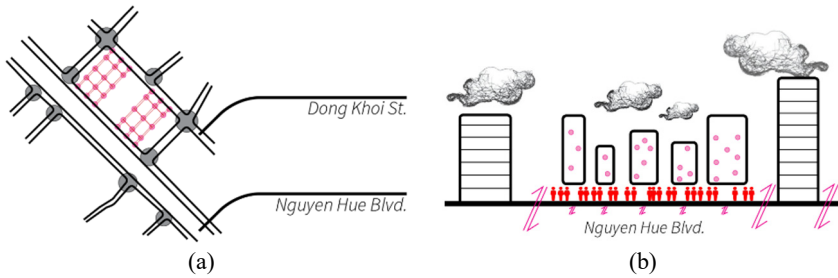


Figure 7: (a) Adding corners; (b) Vertical connectivity.

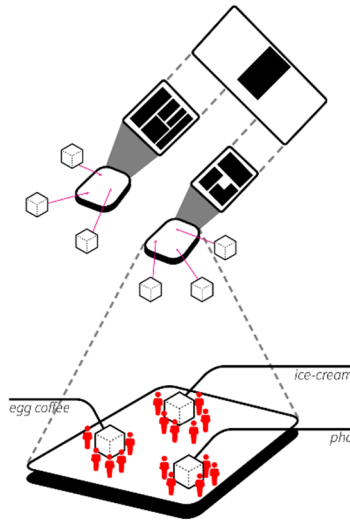


Figure 8: Increasing social interaction through 'gossip stations'.

4.3 The City of God

The modern man believe that he is in command of his own destiny. He departmentalises his life in order to survive at work, at play and at home. The anonymity of urban living has helped preserve the privacy essential to human life, namely the urban man who wants to maintain a clear distinction between private and public [7]. What then are the sources of meaning and value by which the urban man lives his life? Behind the wall of the city life rested on a common foundation, set as deep as the universe itself: the city was nothing less than the home of a powerful God. The architectural and sculptural symbols that made this fact visible

lifted the city far above the village or country town. To be a resident of the city was to have a place in man's true home, the great cosmos itself. Figure 9(a) and (b) below serves as pilot ideas on the adaptation of this particular theory as part of the urban acupuncture.

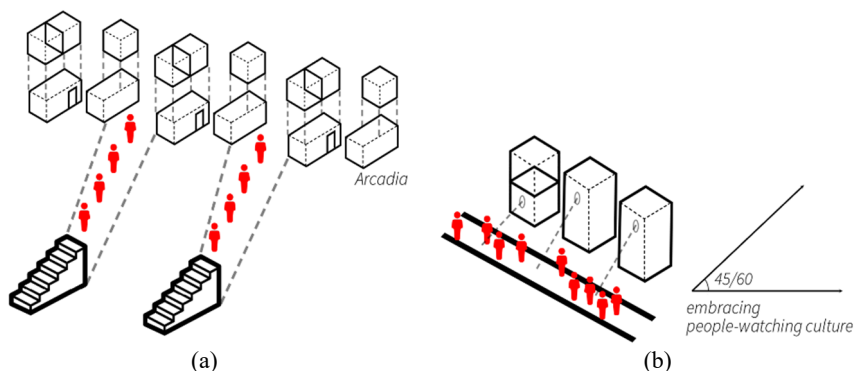


Figure 9: (a) Variations of housing units; (b) Embracing people-watching culture.

5 Hypothesis

Embara is an approach to reconstruct the relationship of the city and the human subject. As a concept, wayfaring is used as a strategy to enhance the user experience in both solids and voids, public and private spaces. The two main streets that run parallel in the site will act as 'eureka' on the ground level, sprawling out its energy horizontally and vertically throughout the urban blocks.

Embara is a classical Malay word for wayfaring. The act of a wayfaring stranger or a wayfarer traveling on foot. A wayfaring man; travelling, journeying, walking, hiking, rambling, touring; wandering, roaming, roving, drifting, nomadic, itinerant, peripatetic. Wayfarer are practitioners of the city, for the city is made to be walked. A city is a language, a repository of possibilities, and walking is the act of speaking that language. Just as language limits what can be said, architecture limits where one can walk, but the wayfarer invents other ways to go.

6 Key design concept

The contemporary city is the city of the eye, one of distance and exteriority. The haptic city is the city of interiority and nearness [8]. The eye itself has not remained in the monocular, fixed construction defined by Renaissance theories of perspectives. The hegemonic eye has conquered new ground for visual perception and expression. Although new technologies have strengthened the hegemony of vision, they also help to re-balance the realms of the senses. The haptic experience seems to be penetrating the ocular regime again through the tactile presence of modern visual imagery. In a music video for instance, we cannot halt the flow

of images for analytic observation; instead we have to appreciate it as an enhanced haptic sensation.

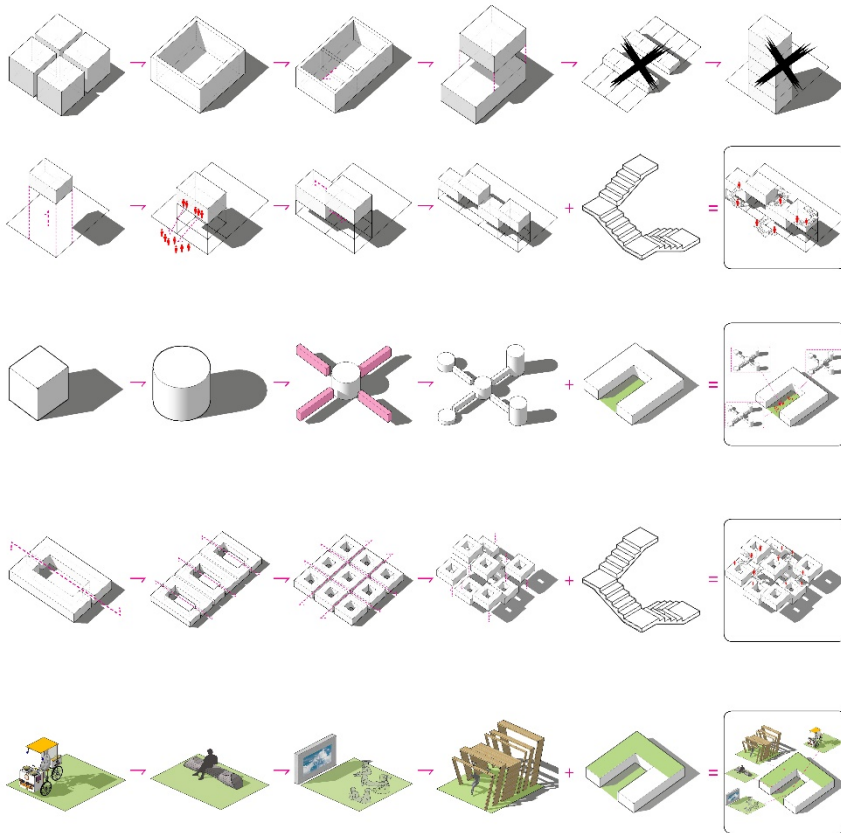


Figure 10: Floating typologies.

7 Events and sequence

7.1 Core program: Arcadia (housing units)

In poetic fantasy it represents a pastoral paradise. Takes its name from the mythological character Arcas, son of Zeus and Callisto. In Greek mythology, it was the home of the god Pan. The four fundamental areas of the house include living, kitchen, bedroom and bathroom. The typology of a housing unit can be extended by adding more bedrooms or other reasonable spaces such as balcony. The built form is kept simple to provide most efficiency in every space [9].

7.2 Secondary program 01: Hackerspace

Hackerspaces offer a place for strangers to gather and share ideas and resources. Emerging out of the Maker Movement over the past few years, hackerspaces have



proliferated globally. It is a participatory, social culture that invites and inspires all kinds of people and communities to invent, build, and hack [10]. Making and doing with your hands encourages creativity, innovation, and ultimately, design thinking.

7.3 Secondary program 02: ViewCube

The system create an interactive and tangible experience between digital and physical models whereby the user can alter the 3-dimensional perspective on a digital screen by moving an object over a replica physical model or plan. Orientation and positioning is calculated and performed in real-time, allowing for seamless hand-eye coordination between the users hand gestures and the display screen [11].

7.4 Secondary program 03: micro-installations

Micro-installations are the practice of using design solutions to adapt small urban spaces, thereby changing the behaviour of city dwellers and activating under-utilised areas [12]. Between performance and installation, food and beverage, urban furniture and many others, the idea is to trigger the public's mobility in a spirit of proximity and intimacy.

8 City manifesto

This theoretical city seeks to promote interaction amongst stranger. Stranger interaction is the wilful engagement between people who have had no previous relationship. This act of spontaneity can have significant effects by interrupting the expected narratives of daily life, shifting perspective, and forming unexpected connections [13].

These unexpected connections or “urban spontaneity” refers to the importance of occasionally engaging in unpredictable events in our cities, as opposed to moving through them with expected, predictable patterns of behaviour. The element of surprise is an important one in discovering new ways of seeing our streets. Actions like flash mobs, street dancing, impromptu conversations with strangers, and unplanned behaviours in our everyday lives play an important role in our sense of ownership of our own streets and help promote a healthy connection to our sense of freedom and expression in public space. Figure 11 signifies a sketch proposal of *Embara* as urban acupuncture mechanism.

9 Morphology of concept

“Cityness” is a term coined by sociologist Saskia Sassen in her 2005 essay, “Cityness in the Urban Age” referring to urban agglomerations that do not necessarily have all the attributes associated with traditional Western notions of the city but still produce meaningful public spaces. The term “cityness” here refers to those interstitial spaces, areas of differences and moments of intersection that constitute contemporary urban life.



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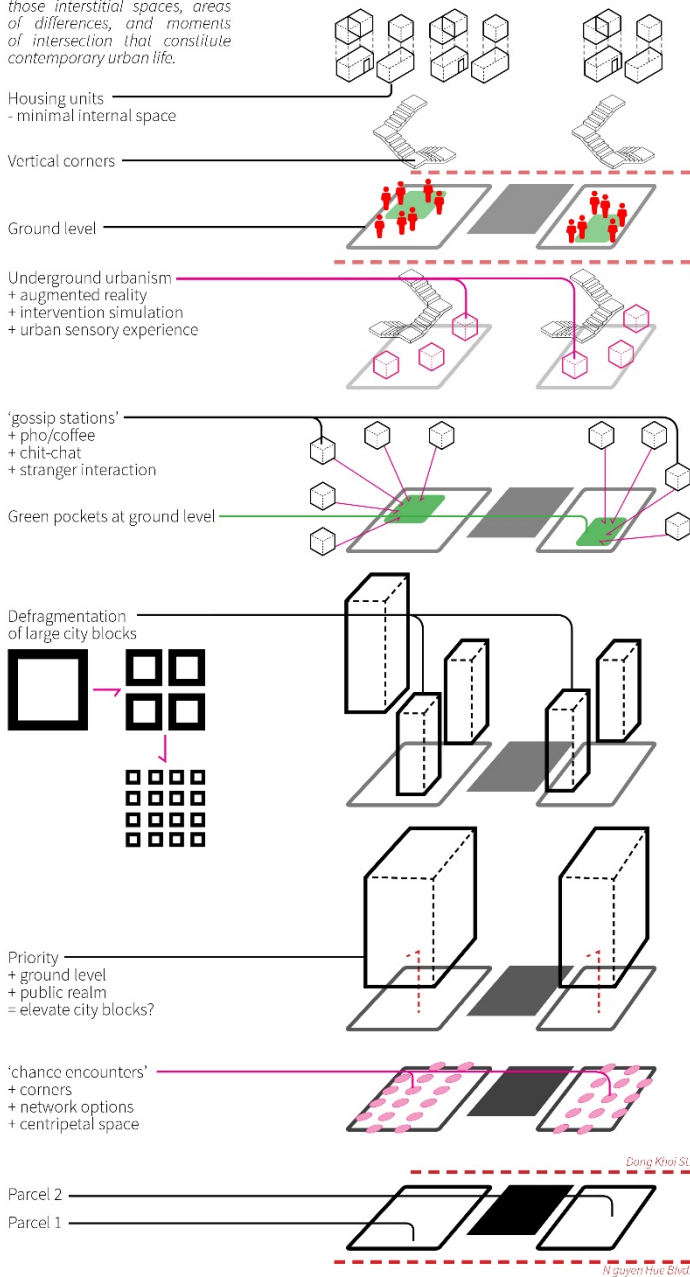


Figure 11: *Embara* blocks: Cityness, a sketch proposal.



10 Conclusion

In an age of accelerating change, cities are the new nations. The way cities around the world are expanding today somehow has become the accepted worldview of how 21st Century future living should be. Yet our definition of urbanity is steeped in certain tropes that do not support the full range of informal urban activity [14]. This study is nothing more than a humble attempt to draw on theory but focused on real-world problem in search of authentic future living.

Acknowledgement

We would also like to extend our utmost appreciation to the Faculty of Architecture, Planning and Surveying, UiTM in providing a grant for the realisation of this paper.

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