

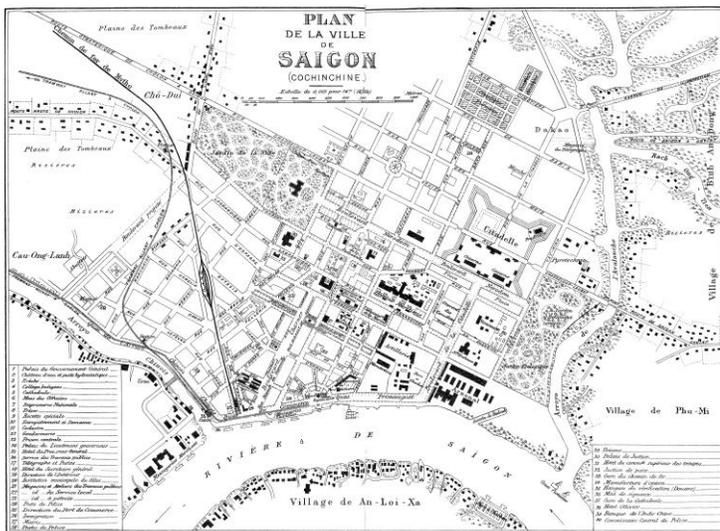
Reminiscence of a Simpler Time

by Dao Doan

Often we don't fully appreciate things until we no longer have them. That is certainly very true in my case. Allow me to explain.

In the early 60s, I grew up in a city that only much later did I realize was one of my all-time favorites of all the ones I've lived in or visited over a lifetime of some 60 years. This was not because it was a spectacularly beautiful city, or happened to be near a world-renowned natural landmark, but because it held many of my best childhood memories. The city was Saigon, now officially renamed Ho Chi Minh City after the North Vietnamese leader who headed a regime which adopted a brutal Communist dictatorial political system, and completed their military conquest in a 30 year civil war against South Vietnam.

The city was loosely labeled as the "Pearl of South East Asia" in many pre-war travel books and flyers about Saigon, perhaps more of a marketing ploy by travel agencies to attract tourists to this capital of the former French colony than a true reflection of realities on the grounds.



Indeed Saigon was planned and built by the French during their almost century-long occupation according to planning principles at the time: large boulevards for important thoroughfares with signature focal points at one end or the other, usually a monumental civic building in nature or sometimes a large park full of trees. In the case of Saigon, these monuments included the all white French Governor's Palace, which later was converted into the South Vietnamese Presidential Palace, and the city's Notre Dame Cathedral. The rest of the city was laid out as a grid occasionally cut by a diagonal boulevard. The city blocks were very small, fronted by very narrow streets. All streets

and boulevards were lined with tamarind trees, which, in a tropical climate, eventually grew up to 80-100 feet. Even though some of their roots eventually also grew very big, the 20-25 foot wide sidewalks allowed them plenty of room to grow without creating too much disruption.



I didn't realize it at the time, but the French had planned a highly pedestrian-friendly city. Private individual cars hardly existed, and didn't start to make their appearances until the late 60s-early 70s.

During that period, transportation in Saigon came in a wide variety of modes:

1. Walking—the most common and flexible mode, especially used by street vendors who sold their products all over the city, going from neighborhood to neighborhood, and walking back to their homes to replenish their supply. The blocks being small helped. The vendors sold everything from knickknacks to fruit snacks (that required cutting, peeling and presentation) to hot and cold sweets of all sorts (including ice cream that needed to be kept in frozen containers) to noodle soups that needed to be kept hot over open but contained charcoals. It took tremendous effort and skill to balance all that over their shoulders or keep stabilized in their push-carts.
2. Taxis—very compact versions of the old French Citroen autos, painted yellow and blue.

3. Pedicabs (better known as “Cyclos”)—a sort of large tricycle with the driver steering from the rear. I remember seeing an entire family of 4-5 on it (2 adults and small kids) piled into one. Flexibility was their key benefit. My mom befriended a few who became almost her private chauffeurs. They waited outside our front door to take her wherever she needed to go, where they would wait again or return at an agreed time to drive her back home for a fixed fare. While waiting they might take other customers to whatever destinations, then come back for my mom.



4. Motorized pedicabs (with very polluting diesel engines)—convenient and fast for some street vendors to assist with their getting around neighborhoods.

5. Bicycles—the most common for mostly young, non-vendor people, students, regular workers and some vendors who managed to fabricate (in very creative ways) diverse appendages attached to the back to carry their wares. These even included portable metal boxes of mini movie theaters in which they projected hand-cranked old black & white films of Charlie Chaplin for neighborhood kids paying maybe the equivalent of pennies to watch the movies through tiny portholes.

6. Buses—very common for across town trips. City buses were smaller than regional ones and could navigate the narrow streets easily.
7. 3-wheel motorized people carriers, primarily from an Italian maker called Lambretta, that could carry 6-8 passengers and their belongings, be it vendor baskets, bicycles, etc. Safety was never a concern; getting around was. These were also highly flexible: you just hailed them down, they stopped, you hopped in and off you went. Usually very affordable fares were figured out on the go, but were totally unregulated.



Personally, the best part was that it was so easy for a youngster like me, barely 8-10 years old, to go anywhere. I used to walk across town all the way to downtown for ice cream alone at 10 pm. I walked to school every day, to the sport club, and to friends' houses, most of which were within 15 minute walk. The city seemed large, but actually was very compact.

Supplementing the streets was a network of alleys that allowed those living off of them in more affordable housing connectivity to the streets.

Fast forward sixty plus years. I was diagnosed with brain cancer last year. With three additional surgeries this year, my doctors recommended that I refrain from driving. So here I am, going from a place with 7-8 modes of transportation with high flexibility and high mobility for young and old, rich and poor alike, to a car-centric society where your mobility around town depends heavily on your ability to own a car and drive. If one of those two is not in sync with the other, you may find yourself stranded, like me now, depending heavily on family or friends to chauffeur you around. Uber and Lyft services help some, but only for shorter distances. For longer ones, many may not be able to afford it. We have built a society that puts a lot of conditions on the access to mobility, such as proximity of services to homes and proximity of public transportation to riders. The city blocks are way too big and too long, making walking a dreaded chore. Too many developments turn their backs to the streets so even if you can walk, you see mostly uninteresting yardwalls. The streets are too wide, encouraging traffic to go faster than the posted speed limit. The fast traffic in turn discourages bicycle use, even with marked bike lanes. Buses are too infrequent; stations are too far apart. Most bus systems do not penetrate far enough into the heart of neighborhoods to encourage high ridership.

Of course, I can't wait for the day when I'm allowed to drive again. Or I can dream of the old days in Saigon, which I no longer have.