

# Living in “New Urban Areas”: towards sustainable urban communities in Hanoi, Vietnam

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## Abstract

Under the impacts of the socio-economic transition in Vietnam in the last decades, residential patterns in Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam, have substantially changed from the ‘Collective Living Quarter’ (KTT) which embodied the old socialist period to the “New Urban Area” (NUA); a new type of large scale urban development promoted since the late 1990s. Hundreds of such NUAs have spread over Hanoi, mostly in the outskirts. Lacking social infrastructure, having a bad connection to the city centre and lacking public services, many NUAs run the risk of becoming merely ‘sleeping’ townships without the vibrant urban life which is characteristic for the older parts of Hanoi. Housing costs in these areas are also too high for the average Vietnamese. Based on a recent survey, the paper presents an analysis that there is an imbalance between the built environment and social organization in the NUAs in Hanoi at the present time. On the one hand, the residents are not happy with inadequate public services, housing quality, as well as unprofessional management manner; on the other hand, the residents are happy with the improved living environment compared to what they had before in the old KTTs and intend to live permanently in the chosen NUAs. Most interestingly, the traditional community spirit observed in the old KTTs can actually be found in the NUAs. The paper concludes that despite the shortcomings in the built environment and management, there is a high potential for social and community cohesion in the NUAs. The community spirit among the residents is likely to have the power to transform these areas into vibrant urban spaces.

*Keywords: residential pattern, collective living quarter, new urban area, Hanoi, sustainable community.*



## 1 Residential patterns in Hanoi: the embodiment of historical periods

There have been many changes in housing and residential patterns in urban areas in Vietnam over the last half a century. In Hanoi – the capital of Vietnam – housing issues have become more and more urgent due to the population pressure, the rapidly increasing housing demands, the limited land resource, and problems of planning, constructing and managing urban residential areas.

Succeeding architectural heritage and residential patterns over the course of history seem to become historical “statues” – embodiments of different stages of development, and social and political ideals of the nation in the last half a century [4].

Up to the end of the Indochina War in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, houses in Hanoi were characterized by “tube-houses” or “shop-houses” in ancient – commercial quarter of the city, adjacent to a French quarter with beautiful villas of French architecture, which still remain until now [1].

Then came the period of old-fashion socialist centralized planning development (1960–1985). In this period, a popular and quite typical residential pattern for Hanoi was ‘*khu tap the*’ (KTT) - collective living quarters [2].

In the early 1960s, in response to the rapidly increasing housing demands after the war, Hanoi government had built dozens of KTTs with the government budget to “give” houses to tens of thousands of staffs working in government and city offices. Big KTTs of the city often occupied some hectares of land area, with dozens of 2- to 5-floor apartment buildings, accommodating thousands of households in poorly furnished rooms of 18–24 square meters, and the building architecture was monotonous.

Those living in the KTTs were typically “subsidized” with permanent rent at a negligible rate (1% of the salary). With the average area of 24 square meters for each apartment, a “lifestyle” in the KTTs has been shaped since 1960s [3].

In the 1990s, after the onset of the Reform in Vietnam, life and income of people started to be improved. Housing demand of most urban inhabitants became more and more urgent, while the housing subsidized by the government was ceased. In addition to the policy liberalizing production and business, government also allowed and enabled people to build their houses by themselves. As the result, in the 1990s, there was a booming of houses built by people, or so-called “irregular” houses, or “popular” houses [2]. This fact partly created diversified image of many streets, living quarters with chaotic and spontaneous architecture and planning. Psychologically, the profound reason for the booming of self-built houses in the 1990s was the preference of Hanoi inhabitants at that time: people wish to own a private house with both “ground and roof” rather than renting an apartment in KTTs [6].

At the end of 1999 and early 2000, the city started to encourage investors to build new urban areas (NUAs) including high-rise apartment buildings and houses for sales. At the beginning, Hanoi people, who did not like the old and worn-out KTTs, were sceptic with high-rise apartment buildings. In 1997, according to a survey conducted by the Hanoi Department of Housing and Land,



proportion of people with demand for those apartments accounted for only 1% of the total estimated demand for houses. In the same year, the first NUA in Hanoi named Linh Dam was opened, and some inhabitants were still hesitant to move in because of “afraid of using the lift” (as they had never used the lift before) [2].

## 2 From KTTs to NUAs

### 2.1 Inevitable trend

In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, annual economic growth of Vietnam was stable at 7–8%; foreign investment increased rapidly leading to the increase of demands for houses and offices. As the result, newly emerged real estate market boomed with many construction projects for new urban areas. In 2008, when the boundary of Hanoi was extended by more than 3 times (from 924 to 3,300 square km), there were over 700 real estate projects licensed, mainly at the edge of the city, many of them were NUAs of different size.

In fact, the development of NUAs is inevitable to implement the urban planning to meet housing demands in big cities and at the same time to make urban land use more effective with modern comfortable urban residential areas in the industrializing and modernizing Vietnam.

In 2012, the Hanoi Department of Construction reported that, there were 152 NUAs, covering the area of 44,406 hectares, with projected inhabitants of about 2 million.

According to the standards set by Ministry of Construction, NUAs are of the size from 50 to 200 hectares each, mainly located in suburban area, with population from 4,000 to 20,000, 60% of the construction land are for high-rise apartment buildings and 40% for low houses (villas and semi-detached houses), and with integrated infrastructure.

For inhabitants, NUAs are facilities to develop a new “residential culture” and a modern urban lifestyle for family and the community. Obviously, it is a long process for inhabitants and households in the city to adapt to the new residential pattern and to build sustainable urban communities.

### 2.2 Contemporary problems of NUAs

In the context of growing market economy in Vietnam, urban land and housing has become extremely lucrative for the booming real estate market. Meanwhile, with huge monetary value of land property, sky-rocketing increase in price of land and houses (one time it nearly reached the land price observed in Hong Kong or Tokyo), and ineffective management, real estate market in Hanoi contains many risks of speculation, corruption, fraud and other illegal affairs. Real estate and urban housing market in Hanoi have been always a hot area during the 2000s.

NUAs that violate the technical and management regulations are not an exception. To maximize profits, NUAs investors often ignore many technical and management regulations and requirements. Just the comparison between the



planned and the actual implementation of the NUAs shows many problems that affect everyday life of people living in the NUAs.

*The gaps between planned and construction* are widespread in NUAs in Hanoi at present time. For various reasons, including market imperfections and shortcomings or manipulation in management, investors only focus on building houses for sale, regardless of comprehensive planning approved. By doing so they could use money of customers and get big profits quickly. Public service facilities which are essential part of infrastructure for a NUA such as school, kindergarten, clinic, supermarket, traditional market, playground, recreation, gym... are often ignored with uncertain promises to “do it later”. The main reason is that to build these facilities the investors would have had to use their own money, while it is much less profitable and very slow in bringing returns. In some NUAs, there were even “secret” adjustments of the approved plan which brings more benefits for the investors at the expense of the inhabitants’ interests (for example, land for public service facilities is reallocated to land for houses).

No agency is responsible for organizing and operating daily services; inhabitants and private family-based small businesses are left free to handle the local public services, often spontaneously and unprofessionally, with low quality of services, deteriorating the landscape of the new urban areas.

NUAs are often badly connected with the city centre although the distance is not too far. Main connecting roads are not completed, and existing roads are overloaded and not convenient for both public and private transport. This fact makes NUAs somehow isolated from the city centre.

As a result, in many NUAs, the occupancy rate is low or “sprinkling” as people put it, making it difficult to develop infrastructure and social services. Many NUAs have become “sleeping” towns, even without any inhabitants, or “dead” NUAs.

*Quality* of planning, design, construction as well as maintenance service is poor while customers have to pay right at the start and during the process of construction in the form of capital sharing contracts. Many disputes occurred after apartments were handed over to the customers because quality of construction was not as good as it was committed in the contract, or the handover of the apartment was delayed, or the service of maintenance and repair is bad after the inhabitants moved in.

Lack of rules for operating and managing buildings in NUAs or unprofessional management have led to disputes and conflicts between the investors, the managing units, and inhabitants regarding price and quality of services. Voice of inhabitants and role of groups representing their interests are not respected in communication and negotiation with the management and operation committees of the buildings.

### **2.3 Relations between spatial and social orders in new urban areas**

Each NUA in Hanoi can be regarded as an entity consisting two groups of components: built environment and social environment, corresponding to spatial order and social order, which need to be in harmony as an essential condition for



sustainability. In reality, there are “gaps” or problems in both these “orders” in each NUA.

### **2.3.1 Gaps between planned space and built environment**

Planned space is often quite good on the document of planning of land-use. However, there are many gaps in the built environment as mentioned above: many technical and social infrastructures and essential public services for the community are not built yet. In addition, there are weaknesses in quality of design and construction, maintenance services for the buildings and apartments, as well as functional connections and transport to the other parts of the city.

### **2.3.2 Inhabitants’ positive assessments and satisfaction on the living environment in NUAs**

This is a surprise but explainable. Social space implies community of inhabitants and their daily life, attached to public services organized properly. Majority of inhabitants enjoy general planning as NUAs often located in suburban areas with natural environment which is quiet, spacious, airy, green and clean.

Moreover, most inhabitants feel relaxed when they move to the NUAs because they move there from crowded living corners in the city centre, from worn-out apartments in the old KTTs, or from the cramped tube houses with complicated social environment. Anyway their living standards are improved in term of housing condition as well as living environment.

Therefore, despite the lack of social infrastructures (which is common in NUAs of the city), or not-well organized daily services, NUAs have met most of urgent and diversified housing and social mobility demands of inhabitants in Hanoi.

Communities of inhabitants in NUAs are being established, changing and adapting quickly, with many positive assessments and satisfaction about the life in NUAs. These are important potential factors contributing to the establishment of “social order”, ensuring social sustainability of NUA community in Vietnam today.

### **2.3.3 Traditional community spirit is still maintained.**

It is also surprising that in many surveyed NUAs, from “popular” to wealthy gated communities, community spirit, especially neighbour relationship, is still maintained quite strongly. In fact, NUAs’ inhabitants, even in gated communities, are new urban communities of those who have escaped from poverty for not too long time. More than three decades ago, in subsidized KTTs for example, due to economic difficulty and shortages, people had to rely on each other and traditional community network, as an informal social welfare in their daily life. This tradition still remains today in NUAs and becomes a cultural factor with potential to reinforce social cohesion and vitalize the social life of the NUAs in the new urban living spaces.



### 3 Case studies

The following are two cases demonstrating the reality of life in NUAs in Hanoi, through perceptions and assessments of their inhabitants: one NUA is a “popular” and the other – a “gated community” of Hanoi city.

All data, figures and cited interviews in this part are taken from *Survey Report on 4 NUAs in Hanoi* made in framework of the SIDA – sponsored Research Project “Urbanization and Sustainability: Shared the Experience in New Urban Area in Hanoi” (2011–2013). The author expresses great thanks to Elisabeth Dahlholm and Hoai Anh Tran (Department of Design Science, Lund University, Sweden), Nguyen Thuy Dung (Vietnam Institute of Architecture, Urban and Rural Planning), and Trinh Thai Quang (Vietnam Institute of Sociology) for their contributions and supports to completion of the survey and report.

#### 3.1 Viet Hung: a popular NUA

Situated in the Northeast of Hanoi, 7 km away from the city centre, Viet Hung NUA is 210 hectare large, with the planned population scale of 26,000 and about 1.2 million square meters of housing floor. Construction started in 2004 and first inhabitants came to live there in 2009; so far, it is considered as “nearly completed” [12].

According to an assessment of a NUA managing officer, however, this new urban area is not fully occupied, or “sprinkling” as it is said. About 80% of new apartments and about 60% of semi-detached houses are occupied. Another managing officer said that about 50% of apartments and 50% of villas are sold but *unoccupied*. The reason is a part of those apartments and villas were bought for speculation purpose, and now they cannot be sold due to decreased price and frozen real estate market).

The other reason for the low occupancy rate is that although infrastructure facilities and public services were included in the plan but they have not been built so far (since 2009 when the first inhabitants moved in).

Below is the story of an inhabitant living here:

“We often buy food from the market of the *village nearby* (many, 7 markets in total), about 1–2 km away. This NUA does not have a market. There is no school, and the site for building school is full of grass, after the ground breaking ceremony 3 years ago. There is only 1 big kindergarten for the whole new urban area, we thought it was public nursery but it turned out to be private one, *with foreign label (named Paradise Kindergarten)* with high fee, therefore many private and family kindergartens were set up in the area.

*Public bus stations* are very far away; there is a bus line with the closest station located 3 km of walk, or it costs *VND 20,000 to travel by taxi motorbike to get there.*

Areas planned for park, planting trees and playground for children were *put out for tender*. According to the plan, when houses are built, those public service facilities are also had to be built. However, investors *just built houses to sell and nothing else.*”(Woman, 58, tee-shop owner)

A managing officer said that waste water treatment station of the NUA is under construction, and it *will be completed in 2 years more!*



Assessments by inhabitants in Viet Hung NUA of the place where they are living are presented in Figure 1. Among 9 criteria, on 5-points scale, inhabitants gave rather higher value for living environment here (such as quietness, peacefulness, security, safety or management of the area...) than the factors of built environment and management (such as convenience of public service, maintenance of the area, designing quality of houses and area).

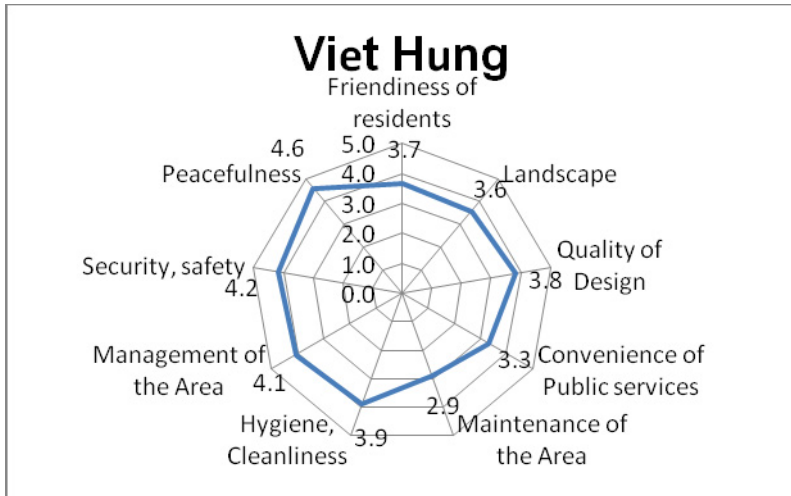


Figure 1: Assessments of living environment by inhabitants in Viet Hung NUA.

### 3.1.1 Positive perception of the inhabitants about the living environment

It is also surprising that the inhabitants here have rather good perception about their lives here regardless of incompleteness of this new urban area. Most of 30 owners of apartments here like the *planning* of this urban area when they were interviewed. About 91% were satisfied with the *size* of their houses here (from 80 to 120 square meters)

They also shared other positive comments such as: “They feel relaxed and secured living in this new urban area”, “will feel regret to leave this place”; and 83.3% “plan to live permanently in this new urban area”.

### 3.1.2 Friendly social environment/community

A remarkable feature is that the inhabitants in Viet Hung NUA affirmed that they have a very friendly social environment. Most of the respondents (of different genders, age groups and occupations) thought that neighbour relations here are very good. More specifically, 92% of the respondents sometimes talk to their neighbours, a quarter know their neighbours’ names, and sometimes talk when they meet out.

This feature firstly is inherited from the traditional community spirit of the inhabitants here who mainly come from rural areas, who are only the first or second urban generation living in Hanoi. For the first generation that used to live

in old living quarters in the 70s and 80s of the last century, this tradition is even stronger because it has existed since the difficult period before the Reform.

This is an important social factor that contributes to the development of sustainable urban communities in Hanoi, which is different from what is described about extreme urban lifestyle without community spirit in western mega-cities.

### 3.2 Ciputra NUA: a “gated community” in Hanoi

Ciputra is the biggest NUA among quite few “gated communities” NUAs in Hanoi. The area is surrounded by wall and gates, isolated from the rest city, guarded to ensure security, safety and comfort for its inhabitants who mainly are wealthy with high incomes and foreigners living and working long term in Hanoi.

This NUA is called South Thang Long in Vietnamese, and Ciputra (more popular) in English, which is the name of the investor: Real Estate Investment and Development Ciputra (Indonesia), in joint venture with Hanoi Urban Development and Investment Company (UDIC).

It is situated in the North of Hanoi; about 7 km from the city centre, next to the road from Hanoi centre to the international airport, near the Red River, and what makes it special is that it is located by the West Lake, famous natural scenery of Hanoi with fresh environment.

Ciputra has the scale of over 300 hectares, started in 1994, but construction was not started until 2002 because of Asian financial crisis (1997–1998). Total investment capital is USD 2.1 billion; the project is divided into 3 phases; only the first phase has been completed so far with the area of 94 hectares. According to the plan, Ciputra will consist of 50 high rise apartment buildings, 2,500 villas and complex of offices, shopping centre, hospital, school and recreational services with the population of 50,000 inhabitants.

That will be a *complete, self-contained new urban area with all the modern services, technical urban infrastructure facilities* [13].

#### 3.2.1 Assessments and feelings of inhabitants

As a gated community, surely its potential wealthy inhabitants would have a high level of satisfaction with the life here.

This is confirmed by the assessments by the inhabitants on 9 criteria about living environment using 5-points scale (see Figure 2). Although the result is not perfect, it is much higher than the case of Viet Hung NUA presented above. Two thirds (6 out of 9 criteria) were given 4.3–4.6 points out of 5 (see the two thirds of the polygon on the left). The rest 3 criteria (a third on the right bottom of the polygon) were given only 3.7–3.9 points. These low scores were mainly given to the factors such as designing quality, quality of maintaining the buildings. It seems that inhabitants here assess the natural and social living environment to be better than the technical factors of construction or convenience of public services.

Anyway, this polygon with assessing criteria is quite “full”, while only a third of the whole planned area of Ciputra project was constructed.





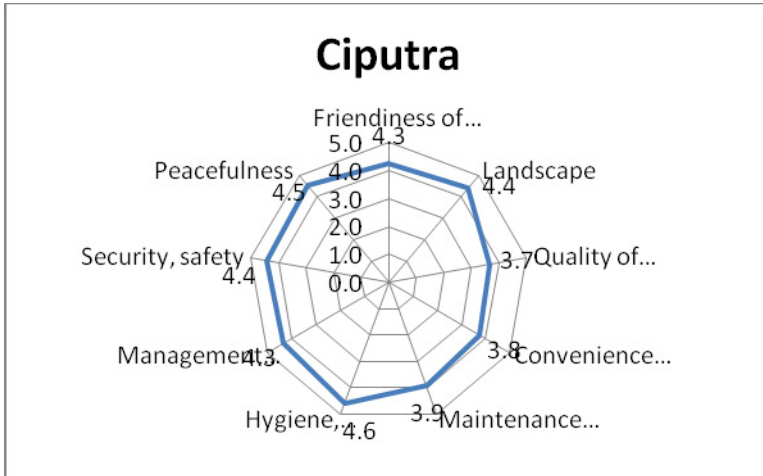


Figure 2: Assessments of living environment by inhabitants in Ciputra NUA.

Normally, “security, safety” is the first criterion of a gated community. Many Vietnamese as well as foreigners mentioned this advantage first when they decided to live here, especially for children and the elderly as there is no busy traffic in the area. In addition, there are international schools with high quality here.

(by *Ainhanoi*). We live here, purely because the International School (UNIS) moved here and now the kids can walk to school within 2 minutes. That is a big plus for families with kids in that school [10].

(by *Blackwidow*) True, it is a bit quieter than a typical downtown or even Tay Ho (To Ngoc Van, Xuan Dieu) neighbourhood, because the traffic is lighter and there is less honking and beeping [10].

### 3.2.2 Fresh natural environment and friendly social environment

Clean natural environment, quietness and peacefulness, beautiful view of West Lake are big advantage, ensuring that these criteria reach perfect quality of Ciputra.

Friendly community is also a good perception of inhabitants. All respondents said that they “feel relaxed and secured when living in this NUA”. Neighbour relations here are also very good, most of respondents (91.7%) know names of their neighbours and sometimes talk to them. 83.3% of them greet each other when meeting out of their houses; 16.7% even regard their neighbours as close friends. Therefore, it is understandable that inhabitants here feel that they are attached to their present living place. Most of them “plan to live here permanently” or “will feel regret to leave this place”.

Especially, 91.7% of respondents “feel proud to live here”, that seems a place that “demonstrate their rank”, as an inhabitant here told us that “others know *who I am* when I live here!” Newly wealthy people often like that.

### 3.2.3 Disadvantages

Inhabitants are not totally satisfied with *designing quality and planning* of the whole NUA as well as each building house of a modern NUA like Ciputra. Only 75% of the inhabitants interviewed “like planning and design of this urban area”. Only 50% are satisfied with “standards of the house” (while this proportion for Viet Hung, a more popular NUA, is 91.7%).

Convenience of public services here is also an issue. Vietnamese inhabitants living here still do not feel happy with the modern, luxury and expensive restaurants. They are still attached to more popular services (traditional markets, small shops, or big whole-sale supper-markets like Metro) which are available only outside the NUA gates.

There’s one overly priced tiny western supermarket there, and one restaurant, with a fancy westernised menu and inflated prices for their average tasting fare.

The streets are empty, except for those giant horses towering down over you. It’s a kind of feels like a giant rain cloud is about to open over the place. Really, it’s a huge ghetto for rich people [10].

### 3.2.4 Influencing factors

For Vietnamese inhabitants living here (most of them are wealthy ones), Ciputra seems to be one of the best NUAs to live in Hanoi. Their good assessments and preference of Ciputra is understandable due to both properly planned space and secured, friendly and civilized social environment.

As all inhabitants in Hanoi, however, they are still in *transition of housing demand and residential pattern*. At present, high-class living areas like Ciputra gated community are still rare in Hanoi. Therefore, wealthy people have not many choices for their *corresponding “living culture”*. Lifestyle and residential taste of this new middle class (many of them are newly rich) are not very *selective and sustainable*. In addition, the psychology of upstarts and willing to be looked up by others make their view on Ciputra somehow subjective. Opinions of foreigners who had ever been living in Ciputra on an online discussion about “How is living in Ciputra Hanoi?” may give us other a view.

### 3.2.5 Without a local identity?

Some Vietnamese experts, planning architects and designers realize that gated communities like Ciputra are not very attractive, lacking special features of Vietnam and Hanoi. Some foreigners have the same feels.

(by *Suddenpaws*) Ciputra is a strange beast. I think you either like it or hate it. It’s almost surreal, with its houses all “little boxes made of ticky tacky” if you remember the old song, all looking very cold and very sterile, like an overpriced monosyllabic housing estate.

It’s a soul draining, lifeless mass of bricks and mortar. And those horses, whilst being anatomically correct (I have this on good authority), are really freaky, especially at night [10].



(by *Backagaintohn*) If you want to taste Hanoi, feel Hanoi, don't live in this dead quarter: no Hanoi's ambiance there, it is safe but... It is a boring area, and it could be anywhere, nothing Vietnamese about it [10].

Therefore, gated communities like Ciputra may be a dream for someone, but are not so close-friendly and sustainable for the majority of Vietnamese urban inhabitants in both architectural and lifestyle aspects.

### 3.2.6 A Human urban community?

Finally, it is difficult to expect that isolative material, social and cultural space of gated communities like Ciputra to become a desired pattern (even for wealthy inhabitants), nor to represent urbanizing Hanoi in regard to culture and social aspects.

There have been a lot of debates on “gated community” everywhere in the world, and in Vietnam too. Different views on “gated communities” like Phu My Hung (in Ho Chi Minh City) and Ciputra in Hanoi are controversial with both the pros and cons. Some concepts like *liveable city* [7] or *open city*, and *city for all* are cited as opponents against gated communities like Ciputra – a city for people but *not for all* because it is just a “wealthy oasis”, isolated from outside poor and popular communities, in the context of transitional Vietnam, where social polarization is increasing.

(by *Suddenpaws*) Its appeal I think is those wonderful gates on the roads, complete with security guards, to keep the “riff raff” out... mind you [10].

(by *Blackwidow*) Still, it's full of happy white (and now not so white, but very wealthy) faces, and that's what makes it so appealing to some. Ciputra is great if you have money and really don't like all those dirty poor people ruining your view [10].

Therefore, it is hard to see a “perfect” NUA like Ciputra as a pattern of sustainable city. To reach a full sustainability for that city, something needs to be integrated like human values or a cultural identity which seem to be missing.

## 4 Conclusion: toward sustainable urban communities

A sustainable city likely requires a harmony of many factors: economic, social and environmental; between built and social environments; planning, architecture and indigenous human values, etc.

Today the NUAs bring Hanoian a new residential pattern, at the same time improves their living conditions. While the social cohesion within NUA community remains strong, however, imperfection of built environment and lack of effective management likely do not ensure sustainability of NUAs communities. Even NUAs – “gated communities” while appear as perfect living place for wealthy people, are still lacking local identity in architecture and lifestyle. Moreover, being isolated spatially from outside urban communities, they are also sharpening social contrast in transitional Vietnam today.



By such a view, living in NUAs likely is the starting for Hanoian become inhabitants of sustainable urban communities where people find their home not only 'a place to accommodate' but also 'a place to live' in meaningful harmony.

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