Introduction

Detlef Briesen[*]

We are proud to present the first issue of the comprehensively redesigned journal of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH), part of Vietnam National University, Hanoi. Our journals are set to be indexed by SCOPUS in the near future; therefore, we adhere to the strict rules of peer reviewing, which have become standard practice in the international academic community. In future, we will publish two issues per year, in autumn and spring. Starting with this issue, the journals consist of two parts: firstly, a focus topic comprising three to five specialist articles on an important set of issues in the context of our publishing country, Vietnam, or at the regional level in South, Southeast and East Asia, and sometimes even on a global scale. This topic is supervised by a guest editor, who also organises the necessary peer review. The second part of each issue contains contributions submitted to us; we review these, organise a critical evaluation and, after any necessary revisions by the respective authors, we include the articles in our respective issues. So much for the technical questions.

The focus topic of our first revamped issue is urban and spatial planning. Thus, we commence our journey with a problematic that is highly relevant to Vietnam and its neighbouring countries: the state and future of the built environment. Our starting point is that the rapid development of recent years has led to profound changes in the socio-spatial structures across the region – from India to Indonesia to China. Very dynamic economic, social and demographic changes have taken place. This can be demonstrated by the impressive growth rates (GDP, PPP) across the entire region – for example, for the period between 1990 and 2020. Here are just a few examples:

Country	Growth rate (GDP, PPP) in percent 1990 to 2020
People's Republic of China	2,076.4
Vietnam	1,249.6
India	748.8
Malaysia	634.2
Indonesia	490.6
Philippines	457.4

Source: World Bank. (n.d.). GDP, PPP (current international $) - China, Vietnam, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines. World Development Indicators. Retrieved November 10th, 2025. (https://data.worldbank.org/)

---

[*] Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen, Germany; email: detlef.briesen@gmail.com

The data from the table can be summarised in two ways. Firstly, when comparing country by country, it is evident that, generally speaking, the lower the starting level in 1990, the higher the respective growth rates up to 2020. Secondly, when looking at the global level and the size of economic growth as a share of global growth, China stands out above all, followed by India and Indonesia. In part, this can be explained by the population size of the three countries. But for all the countries mentioned here, economic growth had a particularly strong impact on the construction industry: the building stock was fundamentally renewed, 100,000s of new units were built for commercial, public service or residential use, and the infrastructure was comprehensively renewed in transport, community services, energy and communications. All this has led to profound changes in the built environment – the cities and urban landscapes of Vietnam, India, Indonesia and, above all, China are barely recognisable compared to 30 years ago. The driving force and beneficiary of these enormous changes was primarily the construction industry.

However, the enormous leap in development in Vietnam and other parts of Asia also has its downsides. Manifold problems have often not been sufficiently mitigated by policies and mechanisms for organising and shaping societal space. Therefore, throughout the region, as well as in the global context, there is discussion about how to create a spatial order of society that better meets human needs and the role to be played by urban and spatial planning.

The special topic of the first issue is therefore spatial and urban planning and the associated attempts to analyse problems and develop concepts for solutions. The problematic is whether spatial policies can be designed to steer social development, or

at least mitigate the effects of existing problems. The keyword "spatial policies" also highlights the diversity of topics and fields of action in spatial and urban planning:

i. Urban and spatial planning concepts such as smart cities, green transformation, urban renewal, traffic control and management, urban densification and de-densification, urban greening, and planning that considers regional contexts and therefore does not end at the administrative boundaries of a city.

ii. Critical review of interventions, i.e. examining the topics and concepts outlined above with a view to assessing how successful or less successful planners have been, and identifying factors that promote or hinder planning interventions in the respective contexts.

iii. Transport and environmental issues, industrialisation and urbanisation, spatial justice, i.e. equal access to resources and services, socio-spatial segregation, population growth, heat management and climate adaptation, and more.

We are delighted to have found four highly distinguished scientists who will set the standards for further focus topics. They have provided us with excellent essays.

The first contribution comes from Klaus R. Kunzmann (Learning about Urban Development in China: A Collage of Personal Narratives), perhaps Europe's most influential planner with outstanding achievements in his field, in theory and in the practice of urban and spatial planning in Europe and East Asia. He reflects on his experiences with various development paradigms. Using a broad selection of ideal-typical model cities in China, he shows how diverse, creative and sometimes ambivalent spatial development in China can be assessed, but also which models for the

future are being developed there that will have an impact far beyond the country itself.

Our second contribution (Completing the Long Term 'Planning Revolution' in Vietnam: Implementing and Amending the Planning Law (2017)) was written by two equally distinguished experts: Nguyen Quang, former head of UN-Habitat Vietnam, and H. Detlef Kammeier, Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), Bangkok. The two authors undertake a long-term evaluation of Vietnam's planning legislation, highlight successes and failures, and emphasise above all that work on the relevant legislation is not yet complete.

The third contribution, by Sarada Prasanna Das, comes from India (Cities at the Forefront: Shaping Low-Carbon Futures in India). It deals with the energy transformation in India, the world's most populous country, which has also attained impressive growth rates over the last three decades. As India attempts to achieve zero-emission targets, the question of how these ambitious reduction targets can be achieved at the local level is of central importance. The author outlines the various options for reaching these goals but also points to the significant role of the urban population in implementing the challenging agendas.

The fourth essay (Believing the Future: Credulity, Rhetoric and the Fetish of Success in Vietnamese Urban Planning) by Olivier Jacques takes a critical look at the modernisation paradigm in Vietnamese planning. The author points out how the belief in modernisation continues to shape urban development in contemporary Vietnam. A revitalised rhetoric of modernisation through urban planning plays a prominent role in this. Together with political discourse and popular imaginations, it generates a collective optimism towards the future, even if the built reality often results in fragmented or unfinished urban landscapes. However, the author does not see these divergences as indicators of the failure of urban planning in Vietnam, but rather as an essential component of Vietnam's planning modernity. In it, belief in the future remains both the driving force and a symptom of a very rapid urban transformation.

Taken together, the four articles highlight significant developments taking place in Vietnam and in two of its important regional neighbours. What they have in common is an emphasis on a high degree of flexibility: in times of enormous change, attempts are being made to use urban and spatial planning to speed up development and sometimes even improve living conditions in the countries concerned – an important lesson.

The other five essays published here are selected, according to our strict criteria, from the open submissions we received for our newly designed journal. The essays were written by Vietnamese authors. In terms of content, in line with our goal, they do not focus on a specific topic: rather, they are intended to reflect the great diversity and, at the same time, the intensive international interconnectedness of the social and cultural sciences in Vietnam today with cutting-edge global research. The five essays are based on empirical research on various topics and can be classified as educational science, political sociology, media studies, international relations and gender studies.

Le Thi Yen Nhi and Tran Quoc Thao (Ho Chi Minh City Open University) deal with Project-Based Language Teaching (PBLT) in their essay (Affordances and Constraints in the Implementation of Project-Based Language Teaching: The Experiences of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language). This is an effective method of foreign language learning that utilises the commitment and cooperation of

pupils to promote language acquisition in school. PBLT not only improves language acquisition, but when implemented correctly in the classroom, it also promotes general learning objectives such as critical thinking, creativity and communication skills. These are key competencies for learners in Vietnam and elsewhere.

The essay by Nguyen Vu Hoang (USSH-VNU) falls within the field of political sociology (Struggling against the Black Tide: Vietnamese Fishermen and the Politics of the BP Oil Spill). It deals with a specific group of Vietnamese Americans who work in the fishing industry on the US Gulf Coast. The essay shows, on the one hand, how this group has been harmed in its economic advancement by environmental pollution caused by the BP Group's oil production. On the other hand, it demonstrates that the fight for compensation not only contributes to regulating the material losses suffered, but that the organised representation of interests can change political and societal structures in the southern United States to a large degree.

Tran Thi Thanh Thao and Luu Phuong Linh (Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam) reflect on the use of language in Vietnam's mass media (The Portrayal of the LGBTQ+ Community in Vietnamese Online Newspapers: A Content Analysis of Heteronormative Language). The essay can be classified as falling within the intersection of media and gender studies. The two authors show the extent to which language in the country's mass media is heteronormative – hardly surprising, given that Vietnamese is a language with very pronounced syntactical and semantic gender differentiation. It therefore remains to be seen whether and to what extent language in the country's mass media can change in the future.

Lena Le (USSH Hanoi) addresses a topic from the field of international relations (The Re-emergence of Non-material Factors in International Relations). Her starting point is an observation that analyses in the field of international relations research have changed in recent years: from an emphasis on hard material interests to more value-based approaches. She illustrates this with empirical data analyses and by developing explanations for, among other things, the dominance of constructivist over realist paradigms in research.

The fifth essay is by Luong Bich Thuy (Factors Influencing Maternal Stress: Self-Assessment by Mothers of Young Children) and falls under the category of gender or classical family research. She selects a topic familiar to many: young mothers are subject to heavy workloads, to a wide variety of tasks, such as professional work, housework, other family obligations and, in particular, caring for and raising children. In Vietnam, too, it can be observed how the traditional family context of child-rearing is increasingly being shifted from the responsibility of the entire multi-generational family to the shoulders of mothers. To remedy this, the study proposes various countermeasures, ranging from better time management skills and improved working conditions to the creation of new social institutions.

In summary, we hope that our first issue represents a step in the right direction, even though we had to overcome several hurdles along the way.

The next issue, which will be published in April 2026, focuses on media studies in its first part and is edited by Arvind Kumar Das (Pune, India). Open submissions for the second part of this issue are welcome.