

# STREET IN HANOI ANCIENT QUARTER AS CULTURAL PLACE: A CASE STUDY OF HANG BUOM STREET

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## **Abstract**

A differentiation in history and culture in Southeast Asian cities has crafted a unique scene of traditional commercial streets which is distinguished from Western norm. Whereas the later is mostly recognized based on physical form and behavior of users only, the former is not limited itself in those focuses, but also people (users) and their activities - which are supposed to create the spirit and the soul of the places have been included. The distinctive features of Southeast Asian streets in the historic commercial district are also differentiated from Western ones by the pluralism and integration of those components than mono and segregation manifestations. In Vietnam, the adoption of Western regulations without sufficient consideration on local context resulted in ineffective spaces and the lost of this historical district's spirit. The paper's objective is to clarify the physical and functional aspects of Hanoi Ancient Quarter which play key role in forming the distinct soul of historical district. It is assumed that those attributes are to make urban space to urban place, toward cultural sustainability. The theory of "place" and "cultural capital" will guide through the whole paper. The methodology is the combination of theoretical and empirical implementation by region history, local politics and economic-social development reviews and onsite investigation in a representative street, Hang Buom Street (Sail Street) in Hanoi Ancient Quarter. The site investigation and social survey have been conducted from 2010 to 2015, covering the physical aspect, functional aspect, and social aspect. The findings of this paper would aim to contribute to philosophy of urban conservation in Southeast Asian as well as being suggestion for urban management and development in such local unique contexts.

**Keywords:** urban conservation; traditional commercial street; cultural capital.

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## **1. Introduction: Background and research interest**

The street is considered as a collective place for community nutrition, where people talk, discuss, share, buy, sell and exchange. These aspects have been enhanced in the Asian context as the traditions of the informal market, market or trading activities have never been confined to internal space and generally spread out into streets [1]. The street characteristics and street activities reflect customs, habits, beliefs, ideas; the cultural identities have been nurtured through many generations. Nowadays, the street activities in historic commercial district has become the vivid lesson so that we can the

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understand traditional life and the culture of country. In Hanoi, those values of Hanoi Ancient Quarter street were stressed by Prof. Yuichi Fukukawa - Chiba University, in the interview by BBC in 2010 “The streets (in Hanoi Ancient Quarter, author) have been used as living room for resident; this experiment has been lost in Japan. Here (in Hanoi, author), there exist streets, alleys owning the true sense of urban, only people - no car”.

Asian cities are undergoing transformation from a traditional city, built to carry foot traffic and provide function as meeting space and marketplace, to an invaded city, characterized by an upset balance brought about by car dominance, and is in perilous danger of becoming an abandoned city, described as a place where public life ceases to exist [2]. In Hanoi, the dominance of mobile transportation has resulted in an extremely chaotic scene in Ancient Quarter. The question is to filter the aspects which are vital to remain the distinct characteristic as well as the soul for Hanoi Ancient Quarter, the oldest commercial district in Asian countries.

Street culture is agglomeration of local experiments through times, represented in different forms and spaces, an intermixture of internal and external influences. The paper will study both traditional aspects and contemporary aspects ; components of street culture, including the physical character, function and activities; and local people’s perception of the street, which are represented the entity of a place.

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1. Place*

Place does not lend itself to a definite interpretation. Different disciplines routinely address certain components of place. Whereas economic geographers largely deal with place as location, architects, urban designers, physical planners, anthropologists or human geographers, among others, focus typically on the issue related sense of place or people’s attachment to and conception of their environment [3]. The Norwegian architect and phenomenologist Christian Norberg-Schulz explores genius loci in his work “Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture” [4], described genius loci as representing the sense people of a place, understood as the sum of all physical as well as symbolic values in nature and the human environment. In addition, in the book “The Sense of Place”, Fritz Steele discusses about the spirit of place: There are certain physical and social settings that are so potent that they evoke similar responses, regardless of the diversity of internal states of the responders. These settings have, what we call, a strong spirit of place that acts in a powerful, predictable manner on everybody who encounters them [5]. Physical environment setting (location, boundary, size) combined with social features (behaviors, the willingness to share the setting with the outsiders etc) of the people living and working in these setting forming the spirit of some particular places. Based on aforementioned theories, the paper will study street’s physical setting, social setting, and how people perceive the environment.

### *2.2. Cultural capital*

“Cultural capital” was first used by Bourdieu and Jean Claude in 1973, and it traditional targets as individualized, personal possession of cultural wealth, particularly the “embodied” type [6]. Similar to the social capital and unlike some other forms of the capital such as economic, human, and physical capital, cultural capital is not depleted by use, but by non-use [7] Most previous studies have shown that cultural capital reproduces through inter-generational transmission, calling here “vertical” way. There is an additional means of transmission: the intra-generational or the “horizontal” way, such as

peer-to-peer cultural influences among friends, schoolmates, colleagues or neighbours of the same generation [8].

The question is how cultural capital play a key role in shaping Hanoi Ancient Quarter street characteristic and helping it sustain itself overtime. The key cultural capital as: ways of life and habits, customs and beliefs, social cohesion and cooperative work, and creativity and adaptability are clarified by observation and interview.

### 2.3. *Cultural sustainability*

Cultural sustainability can be defined as ‘the ability to retain cultural identity and to allow change to be guided in ways that are consistent with the cultural values of people’ [9]. The cultural sustainability discourse reveals an emerging opinion that culture is one of the four pillars of sustainability [10, 11] ‘Culture is gradually emerging out of the realm of social sustainability and being recognized as having a separate, distinct, and integral role in sustainable development’ [12]. Although this idea has been pervasive in the literature and increasingly recognized by governments, NGOs and local bodies, culture was not institutionalized as a self-standing dimension of sustainability, but was rather examined as part of the social aspect or simply ignored [13, 14]. In 2013, the first International Congress on the linkages between culture and sustainable development was held by UNESCO, producing a declaration titled ‘Placing Culture at the Heart of Sustainable Development Policies’. The authors believe that culture is not only a driver but also a catalyst and an enabler for Sustainable Development economically, socially and environmentally. It is hypothesized that culture reproduces the passing of cultural values and norms ‘horizontally’ from person to person through education, narratives, observation, exposure, interaction, group activities, etc.

## 3. **Historical background**

The Ancient quarter of Hanoi (designated by the state as a National Historical Heritage in 2004) covers an area of 82 hectare, located at the very heart of Hanoi - Capital city of Vietnam. Its origin can be traced back to about a thousand years ago (about year 1010) when the first feudal dynasty of Vietnam set up and Hanoi became the capital city. Like many traditional Asian cities, Hanoi included two functional parts, namely the citadel and the civil/commercial district. While the citadel was a sacred place for the rulers, royal and/or noble families and represented for the supreme kingdom and optimal power, the civil district which facilitated residential and commercial activities in a more spontaneous and unplanned form represented for the civil life spirit.

The history of changes of street form and uses is summarized as following:

+ In Feudal time (From 10th century to late 19th century): As aforementioned, Hanoi Ancient Quarter in early feudal time was a gathering point of traditional crafts guilds. Each of those was a private living-and-working domain for a craftsman or merchant community who altogether came from a countryside village/area or abroad. Thus, the local life inside each guild included origin-related lifestyle aspects and that manifested through their own (guild-streets) settlement [15]. Showing no difference with a rural village, a typical guild-street was built by and for a specific community, with completely enclosed setting and access(es) controlled. Common places for each guild normally were a local temple/ common house and the sidewalk-free street. While the first was for occasional ritual activities and/or important community discussions, the later was more like a closed spacious common ground facilitating slow-movement traffic, craft manufacturing and daily social activities. Guild street space became contextual substitute for conventional Western public open spaces like plazas or

civil squares as it also nurtured livelihood, social interaction and other activities of traditional urban life.



(a) HAQ street in French colonial time late 19th century [16]



(b) HAQ street in Central state subsidy period [17]



(c) HAQ street in 1990s Reform - Open and Integrate period [18]

Figure 1. Street landscape of Hanoi Ancient Quarter over time

+ In French Colonial time (late 19th century - 1954) (see Fig. 1(a)): By this time, HAQ had underwent significant changes because of the French Colonial rulers. To break down a traditional social structure, to promote a traffic and urban management, the Colonial French removed street gates as well as refined and/or widened guild streets by breaking down small roadside stalls, creating sidewalks and drainage network. This separated fast movement (of trams, rickshaws and cars lately) with the slower one (as pedestrians). Thus, the major spatial changes in this period can be identified as the street space segregation for different traffic modes as well as the public-private segregation converting most of multi-use space to single-use space resulting in space ineffectiveness (Edensor, 1999) and the limitation of social interaction.

+ Central state subsidy period (1955–1986) (see Fig. 1(b)): Under the Communism regime the Ancient Quarter was still a manufacturing and trading hub of Hanoi; nevertheless, the guild system with private business and ownerships was gradually replaced by state-own crafts cooperatives and small-scale factories. Many of the local population left, while new inhabitants filled in. The individual household crafts manufacture and businesses declined; traditional social composition was fragmented. Since shops, crafts manufacture and automobile traffic declined, the streets became more spacious and quiet. Due to the promotion of collectivity and social equality of the recent regime, street was recognized as a truly public place for everyone, for the pluralities. In other words, the street was developed as a more public-use centric place, in which Individual interests and privatizing activities were excluded. A typical street of Hanoi Ancient Quarter was a domain for collective activities such as listening to daily broadcasted news, stories ; queueing for water fetching, for food and daily necessities subsidy. etc.

+ The Reform - Open and Integrate period of Vietnam (1986 onwards) (see Fig. 1(c)): After a long sleep, the economy of Vietnam in general and Hanoi in particular woke up in late of 1980s and from 1990s onwards. Private economic activities such as household and/or small businesses returned to civil quarter. This allowed stores to dominate first floors of houses and stalls occupied correspondent sidewalk. Besides, by that time, since traffic modes and needs increased then motorbikes and cars also boomed and dominated Hanoi streets. Local population has also risen rapidly since then. With no sufficient physical intervention while having much more subjects, users and activities added, street space of Hanoi Ancient Quarter from now on seems to face a lot of pressure.

#### 4. Hang Buom Street as A case study

Hang Buom is a three-hundred-metre street in the eastern side of Hanoi Ancient Quarter (see Fig. 2). This street was chosen as a case study because there are many historical monuments, heritage buildings remained; Chinese spirit can still be sensed there through the street's physical settings, functions and activities; as well as the variety of community and active business. Being typical while showing variations, being a witness of history but also carrying on life and moving forwards future, Hang Buom represents for many of guild-streets in Hanoi historical district.

Historically, this street was just a small route of Ha Khau (River Gate) ward inside civic quarter. It stayed right at a river gate where To Lich river met the big Hong river (Red river) of Hanoi [19]. At the beginning stage, this area was dominated by Vietnamese residents who made and provide sails, trampolines, baskets, mats, blinds etc for the whole quarter. Based on such special location logic and historical water-related livelihood characteristics, it was named Hang Buom (Sail Guild).

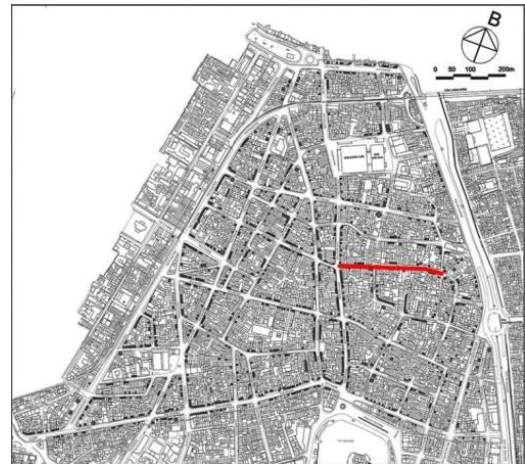


Figure 2. Location of Hang Buom street in Hanoi Ancient Quarter



(a) Hang Buom in 1900s [20]



(b) Hang Buom in 1930s [21]



(c) Hang Buom in 1950s [21]

Figure 3. Street space and street activities of Hang Buom overtime during the first half of 20th Century

Once Vietnamese neighborhood, this area, however, became a component of a Chinese district during the late 19th century to mid 20th century (see Fig. 3(a), (b)). Originally, Chinese businessmen and their families firstly resided in Viet Dong (Hang Ngang Str); then spread to neighboring areas eventually. Since the Chinese community was always been good at trading, Hang Buom with nearby boat deck and riverway was an ideal spot for their business. It then became a main trading and residential district of Guangdong/Cantonese-Chinese community. The original name “Hang Buom” remained; however, the traditional products were been replaced by other subjects and services served by Chinese people. The whole street turned into a busy Chinatown area with the dominant presence of Chinese restaurant (cao lu), food shops and food stalls. In terms of form, this street was a closed, isolate residence with a Guangdong Assembly Hall in the central area, several Vietnamese temples and shophouses. It two ends had gates which closed at night [22].

Despite Hanoi experienced ups and downs during the first half of last century, Hang Buom as part of Chinatown was not affected much. This street went through Vietnam Independent Revolution



(1945), the Vietnam-France War (1946–1954), yet still remained and developed because all governments (French and Northern Vietnamese) did not want to touch this merchant Chinese community.

Chinatown in Hanoi gradually has declined since mid 1950s when the Northern Vietnam started to pursue socialism under the lead of Vietnam Communist Party. Business privatization and the elimination of private ownership threatened interests of merchants. Many Chinese merchants and their families living in this area left and headed to South Vietnam. The most drastic change took place during the late 1970s when Sino-Vietnamese border war fought between Vietnam and China. Most of the remaining Chinese residents returned to their homeland. Their houses and businesses were taken over by the state then were allocated to government officials and their families who came from other provinces [22] (see Fig. 3(c)).

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Physical settings

Urban form actually is a result of a community's history of living; also it is a physical environment that has been preserved and nurtured community's precious cultures [23]. In addition, morphology has always been vital assets that have survived through ups and downs of history. Therefore, urban form is truly fundamental and sustainable factors of a urban culture.

Through photographs taken by the French at the beginning of the last century, we can identify morphology of Hang Buom street as the following features: narrow streets and sidewalks, almost no trees - except several old giant ones. Typical 1-2 storey shophouses were high with their narrow frontage and long length, divided into layers of spaces inwards. The traditional houses had sloping roof, uneven facade as the second floor was set back while shophouses built or renovated since the early 20th century were taller, with flat facades and Western decorations. In the 1950s-1980s, although the community and socio-cultural life had changed drastically as well as the liveliness of commercial activities were entirely absent, its physical environment remained unchanged.

The urban form and morphology are sustainable, but it would not last forever with an eternal form. Each urban form has its own historical rationale, so when the economic, social and cultural conditions change, the remained old form could become obsolete and unsuitable. Therefore, we should find out what the core values of an urban form and morphology that are still suitable and can help to preserve and promote urban culture in the future. From sufficient observation and experience of Hang Buom street, the following conditions should be recognized as crucial component needed to be retained:

First of all, because Hang Buom spatial volume and scale has changed as the average height shophouses has shifted from 2 storey in the past to 4-5-storey high today (70% of shophouses) [24]. In order to keep the street remained as a close, familiar place with humanscale, all shophouses should remain in 3–5 floors high and must not exceed 5 floors. In accordance to the restricted height, these buildings also should be remained as a small scale with narrow width as before and no future large lot merging. Such division would ensure land use efficiency, fair business opportunities for local people as well as bring chances for visitors to experience the variety of commodities, services in diverse spaces. In addition, the history of the region, the spirit of the place should also be sensed through objects with historical values such as heritage sites (old houses, communal houses, religious sites, community houses etc) and trees.

## 5.2. *Intangible elements*

### a. Lucrative space

A notable aspect of HAQ sidewalk is a making - profit place of local people. Difference from Western street which contains three types of space, space of necessary, optional and social activities (Jan Gehl), the most crucial role of street in HAQ is to provide lucrative space for residents. In fact, owners of front house can earn up to 50usd per one meter square just by leasing the first floor. Many local people believe that they would never be “hungry” if they retain the properties in HAQ. According to Mrs. Hoa (a 60 year old woman whose family with 2 generations have lived here), her family try their best not to sell the properties since they can earn living by running a small shop when they are retired. Moreover, the pavement also provides space for residents on the rear back earning money. An interview with Mr. Thuyet (a 80 year old man whose family with generations in Hang Buom street) shows up many cases that the living of his neighbourhood families are based on the pavement. For example, a stall where the breakfast is served for 3 hours in the morning can help the residents get more than 1000 usd per month, which is quite high in compared with the government officer’s average monthly salary around 500 usd. Therefore, despite a powerful legal tool (Law on transportation 2008) abandoning all activities except walking, and continuous efforts of government in spatial clearance for pedestrians, the “under-table” negotiation between local people and local authority has continuously happened to retain such informal commercial activities. The pavement also provides lucrative space for rural farmers living in urban fringe. Such kinds of activities moving back and forth daily between the city historical center and the rural area is a traditional connection link. The farmers bring fresh food from production place to the door of customers by their private motorbike or bicycle. Those vendors stop on the pavement conditionally for a very short time, they usually utilize available tiny and compact space to provide services mostly for HAQ residents, sometime visitors.

### b. Unity of commodity

It is not difficult to define a street in HAQ by its commercial commodity, which is created the shopping habit of Hanoians. Such kind of tradition has lasted for hundreds of years despite of the change of merchant community and commodity. Hang Buom street is not an exception. Originally, Hang Buom Street was a place of selling sails by Vietnamese merchants since it was located at the strategic river gate. In the late of 19th century and early 20th century, with the expanding of Chinese merchant community, the street changed into famous dining place running by reputation Chinese cooks, mostly served for theater nearby. Due to Sino-Vietnamese border war in the late of 1970s, the political conflict has led to the withdrawal of Chinese back to their home country, leaving big and vacant estates to Vietnamese. Since 1990s, the new customers’ need in modern life has resulted in flourishing of confectionary shop. According to a survey in 2015, around 50% of surveyed shops is confectionary shop, and another approximately 25% is related one. Thus, difference from other Asian historical commercial districts where resident community plays the key role, the HAQ experiences the change of community; the district has been a gathering place of people from various hometowns. However, the unity character of commercial commodity has always remained through history. It reflects the culture of doing business in Vietnamese culture as a popular proverb “commercial needs partner, doing business needs association”.

### c. Horizontal transformation, Spatio-temporal space

Another distinguished aspect is spatio-temporal perception of space; space is time dependent. While the business activity in shop can be identified as a fixed activity; an activity of rear-living residents constitutes of semi-fixed activity such as dessert stall, lottery stall which is happening for

rather short time; and a mobile activity of vendors who bring the fresh food from urban fringe (see Fig. 4).



Figure 4. Range of activity on Hang Buom street (Photo taken by authors)

Those activities don't happen as a Western notion of one space - one function. It interacts with 5 adjoining sub-spaces, including (1) Inside the shop (2) threshold space (3) in front of shop (4) pavement edge (5) road bed, as following (see Figs. 5 and 6).

- Fixed activity : organized in space 1, spatial extension from 1-2-3-4, mostly happen in daytime and evening time.

- Semi-fixed activity: organized in space 2 and 4, spatial extension from 2-3-4-5-, 4-3-2

- Mobile activity: organized in space 3 and 5, spatial extension 3 4 - 5; 3 2, 5 4 - 3 2 , become semi-fixed activity conditionally, happening in very short time.

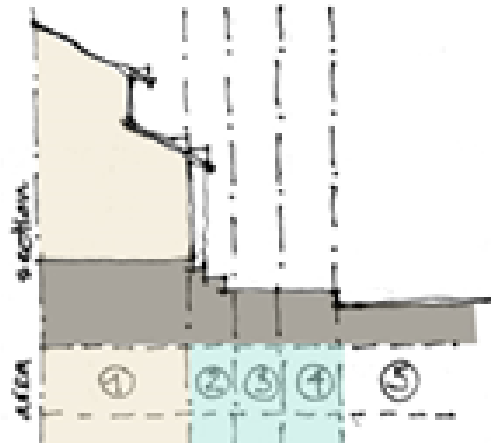


Figure 5. Layers of Hang Buom street space

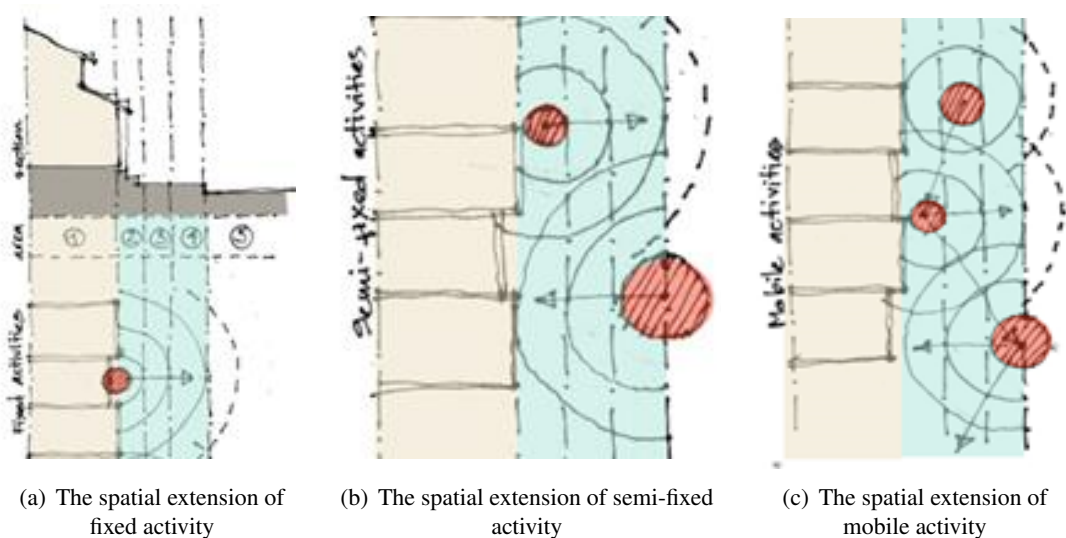


Figure 6. Range of Spatial extension of activity on Hang Buom street

Those characters indicate an intermixture between its nodes, between its node and a connector,



and no clear-cut differentiation between movement and non-movement space. It reflects adaptability and flexibility characteristics of Vietnamese society.

### 5.3. Cultural capital

In terms of ways of life and habits, HAQ sidewalk is a hub of outdoor social relations' activity. Asian are, in general, social individuals wherein they usually do not go out alone, prefer to do activities together and are always in groups [25]. In Vietnam, after Doi moi (reform) in 1986 which is transformed from central economy to socialism oriented market economy, there is a greater increase in participation in work, friendship, and social group network [26]. It has resulted in change the street to a vivid venue of shopping, meeting, and dining. The sidewalk in HAQ provides an ideal space for various commercial experiences with a reasonable price. It is measured that in Hang Buom street, every (about) two meters in average, one can find a stall serving street food. It is extremely crowded after working hours as there is no room for pedestrians walking on the pavement. HAQ pavement helps to connect individuals to society, forming their social and political identities.

With regard to customs and beliefs, Hang Buom features sacred places such as Bach Ma temple; eating well-known food and shopping confectionery which have become custom. With reference to social cohesion and cooperative work, local people has a very weak social network. Hang Buom street has no co-operative business. Most of residents have no idea about the leader of their To dan pho (a smallest community unit in Vietnam administration system) who is assumed to connect local people and government. Long history has witnessed the cultural phenomenon of “not exclusion of outsiders”, in that people from outside find it easy to start business here. It also reflects the origin of the place, a Great Market (Ke cho). Thus, despite of shrinkage phenomenon in many traditional commercial districts, the HAQ have continued to live and adapt with the modern life.

With regard to creativity and adaptability, in order to ‘survive’ and develop in a competitive environment with spatial and (sometimes) capital limitation, stakeholders of Hang Buom street have implemented various adaptation methods. First of all, there is a good and “symbiotic relationship” between the *three main stakeholders* as one supports the other for mutual benefit and co-existence overtime (see Fig. 7) in Hang Buom street). Except the municipal and local authority, stakeholders of Hanoi Ancient Quarter mostly present on street. In details: Livelihood of (1) *local inhabitants* depend much on urban service provision. To earn foreign cash, they deliver ‘premium’ pricy services



Figure 7. The symbiotic social relationship between three main stakeholders in Hang Buom street

to (2) *tourists* and their own neighbors. (3) *Street vendors* - laborers from provincial areas come to HAQ to provide 'lower grade' goods and services to local people and tourist sometimes. To ensure the living income, because of financial priority, every inconvenience and social inequity can always somehow be relieved.

Secondly, creativeness and adaptation of Hang Buom street users also manifest through spatial negotiation. A mutual agreement set up to ensure every individual would have a piece of livelihood space. The amount and duration of space use are determined based on financial capacity, occupational requirement and even social status. Most of private entrepreneurs (wholesale stores, restaurants and cafeterias) locating in 1st floor of Hang Buom street occupy front sidewalks for commercial purpose. Local inhabitants who are living in multi-owner houses use available front space for social interactions. Large upfront space of several public buildings are saved as a motorbike parking lots. All of those make pedestrians struggle to walk on the pavement. Street vendors, who are not 'allowed' to own specific space, move constantly on foot or by bike, on and off sidewalks.

Negotiation in Hang Buom and Hanoi Ancient Quarter streets actually are Oriental/Asian culture based and Asean tropical-based [25]. Formal and informal business activities, widely accepted and tacit agreements happening everywhere, results in a place with a very high level of space utilization, multi-layering and compression. This is like a compact tropical forest with 'diverse flora and fauna which translates into high tolerance to crowded space and increased variation in street users' [25].

## 6. Conclusion

The research question is about the sustainability and thriving of historical commercial street over time as well as the role of culture, supported by a historical study, a literature review, a physical survey and an interview. A study on a representative Hang Buom street clearly explains why the environment here attracts a the large number of visitors, nurture a traditional way of doing business, and help to sustain culture over time toward cultural sustainability. In Hanoi Ancient Quarter, human-scale cozy street with low-rise buildings and small shops, unity of products, great diversity of services with reasonable price, this "place for all" with its own brand boost its commercial as well as socio-cultural activities. The "lucrative space" model helps the vulnerable groups entering the workforce in local service sectors. As the drive towards globalization has caused the rising of unemployment rate locally, this model has relevant and resilient. Sacred places play important role as communication-inducing public spaces. The neighborhood is also very "open"community, welcoming external business, enhancing the community building diversity and strengthening capability, but concurrently cease the solidarity and cohesion among inter-generation and trans-generation. Thus, it is in danger of an inevitable fate of gentrification after gaining the heritage status.

In conclusion, the discourse here on cultural sustainability has indicated that culture is a key pillar of sustainability, and cultural sustainability is an essential prerequisites to be met on the path towards Sustainable Development. The sustainability and thriving of Hanoi Ancient Quarter over time has been addressed through two main angles: creative ground-up initiatives and cultural capital. In terms of former, the case study hav shown a number of creative place -making such as road-side vivid commercial spaces, utilization of small and compact spaces. With regard to the cultural capital, local pride and mutual support, they are vital elements to retain the area. As a result, despite the reported declined of many traditional commercial district, Hanoi Ancient Quarter has remained vibrant and has been flourishing for centuries.

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