



The Rebirth of Thuan Kieu Plaza into the Garden Mall

The traffic—motorbikes crowded with too many occupants, blue buses teetering like ancient mammoths, the odd cyclo rolling by in hopes of finding a client—swarms and ceases at the intersection of Hong Bang and Do Ngoc Thanh streets in District 5, HCMC’s Chinatown. Up until recently commuters who passed through this intersection in the evening were met with the sight of three russet-coloured towers rising into the sky.

These towers were the home of Thuan Kieu Plaza a residential development project dating from the late 1990s. The project failed but this land was too valuable for developers to ignore forever. Situated in a prime location in District 5, Tuan Kieu Plaza was initially valued at more than US\$55 million, according to the real estate news website, realestatevietnam.com.vn.

In 2013, the development team An Dong Investment JSC won the right to renovate the buildings for the price of VND600 billion, according to reporting by *Thanh Nien News*.

In November 2017, after four years of stops and starts the towers were officially transformed into The Garden Mall, a flashy new commercial and residential centre with shops and events to draw in a younger crowd. The complex features a tropical garden with

200 bird sculptures which, according to reporting by *Vietnam Breaking News*, reflects the hopeful Vietnamese idiom, *Dat lanh chim dau*, or in English “Where there is good land, the birds will come and settle.”

The End of Thuan Kieu Plaza

Completed in 1998, Thuan Kieu Plaza became the first high rise apartment complex in HCMC, yet the development failed to live up to its promise of becoming an emblem of new wealth in Vietnam. According to reporting by *Kenh14* in June 2017, the towers contained a commercial centre, 648 apartments and various other facilities for the residents. Initially, the project drew a fair number of occupants, but one by one the people and businesses left.

Thuan Kieu Plaza was built for an expected influx of Hong Kongese after Britain transferred sovereignty to China in 1997, but the immigrants never came and the apartments were purchased by Vietnamese buyers instead. However, the building’s low ceilings and insufficient airflow, made the Vietnamese quite literally sick. Occupants eventually moved out, citing illness and respiratory issues amongst their complaints.

In contrast, the Garden Mall designers have attempted to create light where once there was dark. True to its name, gardens and greenery are the theme throughout the building. The cheerful new colour of the buildings has given them a fresh start.

A New Centre for Saigon’s Youth

Standing outside The Garden Mall, five months after its grand opening, it is easy to see the pains that An Dong Corp took to erase the stories from the past. Now, rather than the abandoned pink buildings, the towers resemble shoots of bamboo reaching towards the sky.