

Walking as Cartography: Collecting Colours in Saigon

Patrick Shaun Ford

www.patricksford.com

When moving to a new country I have found that there is always a period of orientation, of getting to know the area. I need to learn where to buy things such as food, where to pay bills, where the nearest ATM or bank is located and so on, how to take care of the many daily activities and necessities that are quite mundane and normally go unnoticed, but which suddenly become more difficult in a new country. In order to carry out these chores I may ask my new work colleagues or neighbours, or I may consult maps or websites dealing with local issues; but, if I have sufficient free time, the surest and most enjoyable way is to walk the streets. Physically walking the streets allows me to gain an overview of the area: how various points of reference relate to each other geographically, how far apart they are and how different roads interconnect. Of course, consulting maps can be a starting point, a safeguard, but maps may also present misleading concepts of distance and sometimes they do not adequately indicate potential barriers or obstacles.

Places indicated on a map may seem relatively close, but it is only once you arrive there on foot that you discover the highway with no discernible means of crossing, or the wall or fence which blocks the way forward. Once discovered, these obstacles are stored away in my memory, marked with indelible ink on a map I create and carry in my head, and which I continually annotate as I become more familiar with the area, and as the area itself is modified and amended over time. The map I create in my head is not as ordered and uniform as the printed maps with which we are familiar. Often, the former comprises experiences, snippets of sound, colours and textures, smells, awareness of open areas or narrow spaces, which are all located and inter-connected in relationships that are developed as I make my way around the neighbourhood.

This is the exactly the process I went through when I arrived in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.¹

I reviewed different districts of the city and found an area to the south of the city centre – District 7 – where there is a tremendous amount of construction work going on, much of it in preparation for luxury residential developments. A large part of this district is comprised of either completed or in-process construction projects that will no doubt entirely transform the local environment in the future. There was one specific area that intrigued me: I found a large block of streets laid out in a grid format, littered with shops and businesses that rendered it almost self-contained.

The vibrant environment featured a plethora of cars, taxis, motorbikes and scooters that seemed to drive up and down the streets in a never-ending procession. Crossing the roads as a pedestrian was particularly fraught. Drivers of vehicles never seemed to pause at junctions, they simply merged with ongoing traffic, similar to how a small stream flows uninterrupted into a river. I discovered that pedestrians need to adopt the same strategy if any forward progress is to be achieved. This kept me alive and alert as I walked around the grid of streets and roads.

Defining the Scope

The largest road, which ran through the centre of the block I was studying, was quite deceiving. It appeared busy, as though it was a main artery running towards the city centre,

but, upon further investigation, it turned out that the road actually ended a mere few hundred meters further on. All the traffic on the road dispersed abruptly and filtered into the many side streets within a short distance. After first briefly exploring the area on foot, I returned home and inspected a Google map of the area to overlay this map with the first-hand experience I had gained.

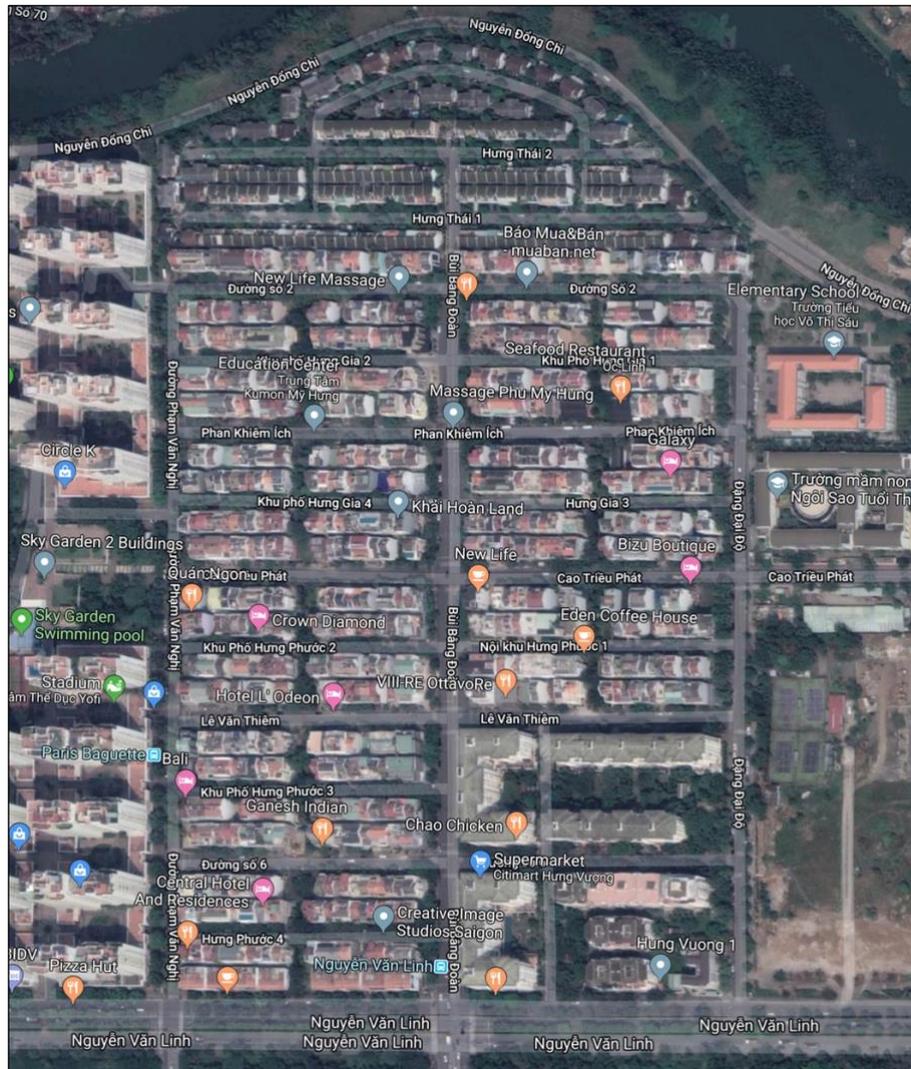


Figure 1: The area in District 7 to be studied. (Source: Google Maps)

The Google map allowed me to define the scope of the area to be studied. Then, I needed to consider how I would convert the layout of the streets into the image I would use in my work. I often allow the work itself to determine the direction it will take, and, in this instance, I was interested in creating a digital print. This would link the latter with two previous digital prints I had created that were more abstract in nature.

The digital prints I previously made featured multiple layers, and the works' titles suggested connections between the layers of marks in the print image and the layers that make up the natural landscape. The language I had begun to develop while working on the previous prints would now be adapted to work with a real location.

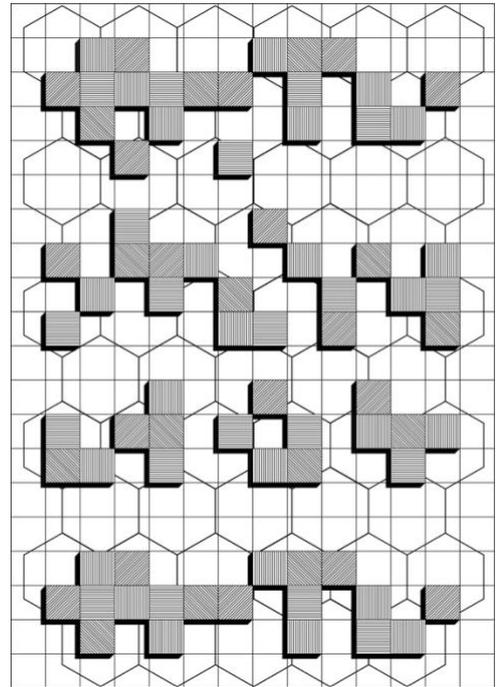
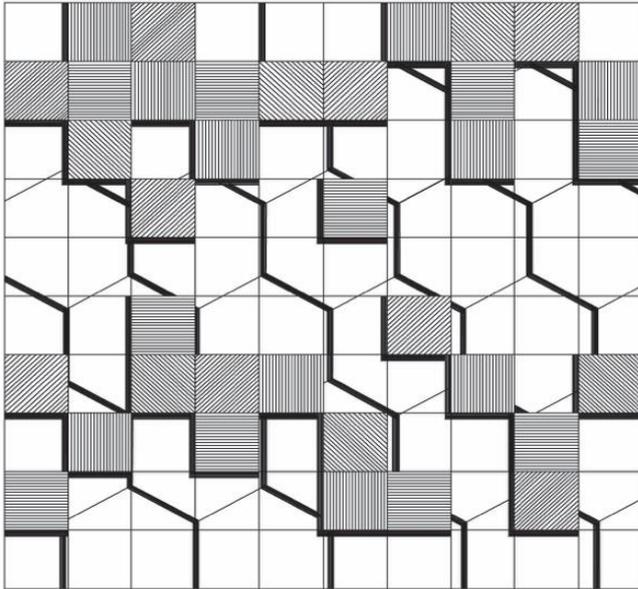


Figure 2: Previous digital prints, Strata (i), 2017 and Strata (ii), 2018 (Image credit: Patrick S. Ford)

From the map of District 7 I made a simplified version and numbered the road junctions. These intersections would be the focal points of the image in the print. The numbering of the junctions allowed me to keep a record of particular details collected. In all, there were thirty-four intersections.

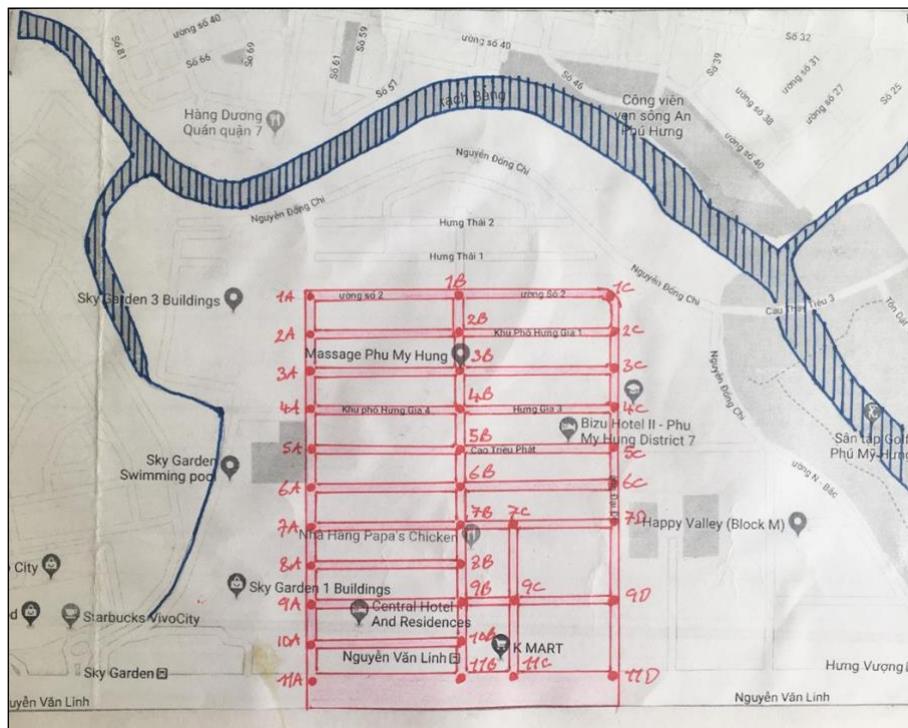


Figure 3: Defining the scope and numbering the intersections. (Source: Google Maps with additions by Patrick S. Ford)

Now was the time to revisit the location. This time I used my map and numbering system as a reference, so I would be able to pinpoint the exact location of any source information gathered, in this case: colours.

Colours

During recent collaborative experiences, I had been introduced to an app for mobile phone called City Palette², which enables the user to collect incidental, environmental colours using the phone's camera. The work conducted by the app's developers in New Orleans, USA, has contributed a significant amount to the work I have been doing recently in Asia, in both Hong Kong and here in Vietnam. It has demonstrated adaptability.

As I had already become familiar with the app, I had confidence that it could contribute to my working method. Using this app, I could collect a colour sample for each of the thirty-four road intersections and use them as place-markers in my digital print. Of course, the app was only a data gathering tool, whereas I would retain the final say in how that data would be used.

The process for choosing colours played out as follows: I walked to each of the thirty-four intersections one by one and took a photograph, facing in towards the centre of the area I was studying. Interestingly, the City Palette app presented a choice of six colours that represent the dominant colours within the image recorded. I then had to manually accept one of these colours based upon a comparison with the area as I see it in front of me. I found that among the many sets of colours taken at the various locations, there were some colours which would frequently be displayed due to consistent elements such as the colours of the road or the trees. For each location, I chose the colour that seemed to represent the individuality of that spot and which I judged to be the most suitable representative colour. As the number of colours in my palette grew, the app arranged them into a grid, which gave me a feel for how the palette was growing and developing. It seemed as if the app was trying to construct its own map of the area with a representation of the building blocks and road intersections.

Back in my studio, I isolated each colour that would be dropped into the appropriate place in my print and created a square-format swatch for each of them. This made it easier for me to review and drop them into place in my print. In my notebook, I worked on the grid of streets, simplifying the structure and integrating the visual language I had been working with in order to create a further development of the print 'Strata (ii)' seen earlier. The colours would be placed into this structure in such a way as to retain their original geographical relationship, i.e. close to the locations where I actually found them.

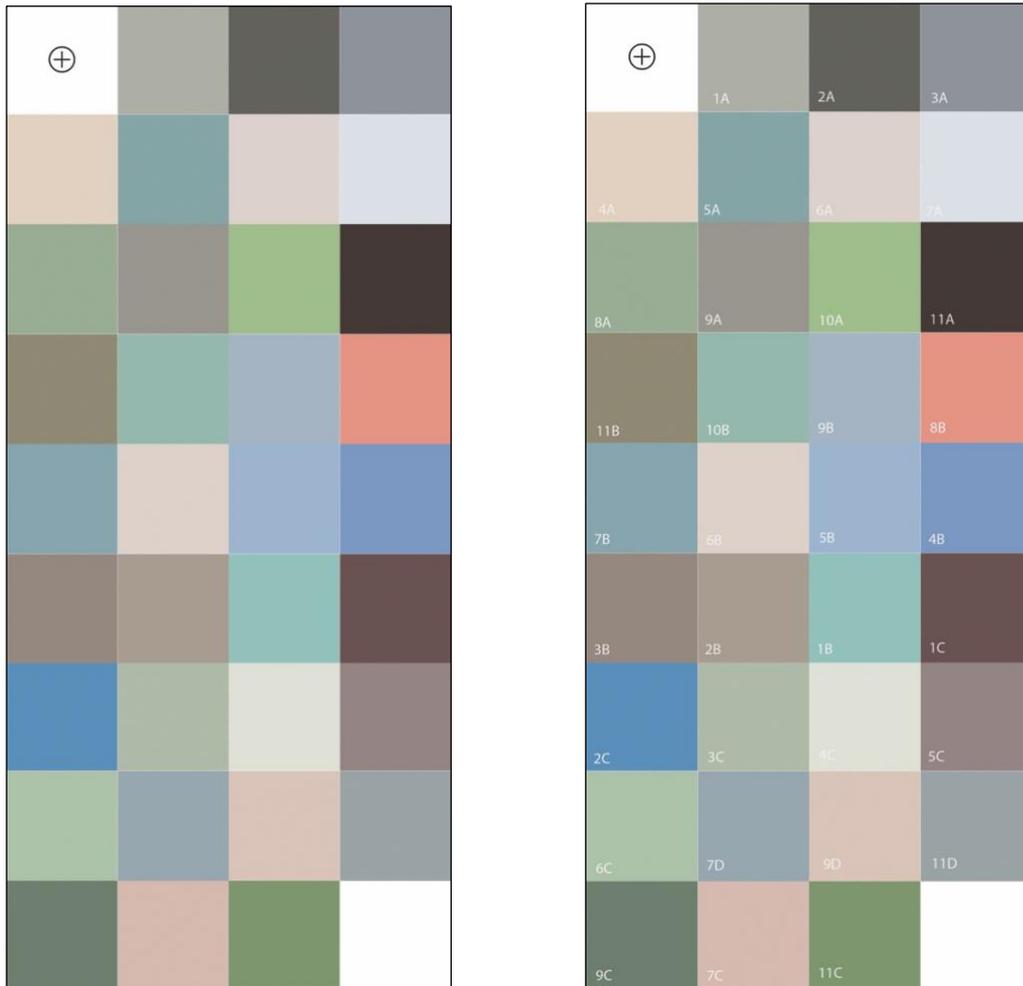


Figure 4: Screen capture of the app colour palette (left) and also with road intersection reference numbers added (right)

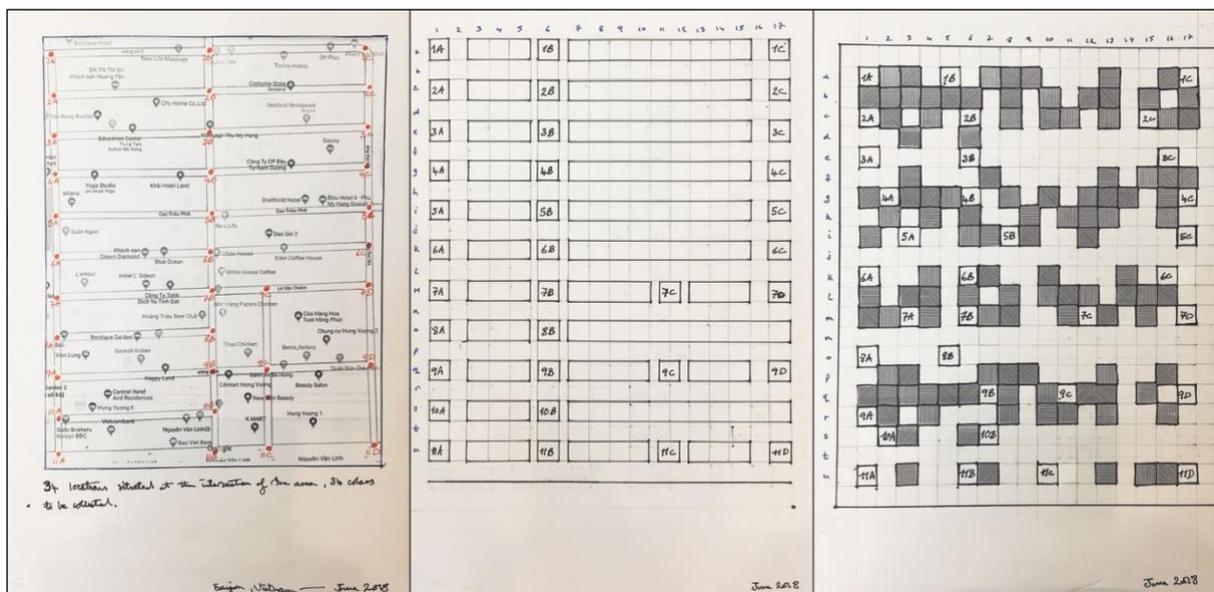


Figure 5: Notebook pages showing development of the print image (L-R) (Image credit: Patrick S. Ford)

Consolidating the Image

Using Adobe Illustrator, I laid out the print image in line with the third page of my notebook (Figure 5). The cross-hatched blocks and their configurations were crucial for me, and I tried to fit the coloured blocks as close to the intersection where they were recorded as possible. If a cross-hatched block happened to occupy the intended intersection space, I allowed myself to make a value judgement on where the coloured block could be 'nudged', up a little, down a little, across a little...

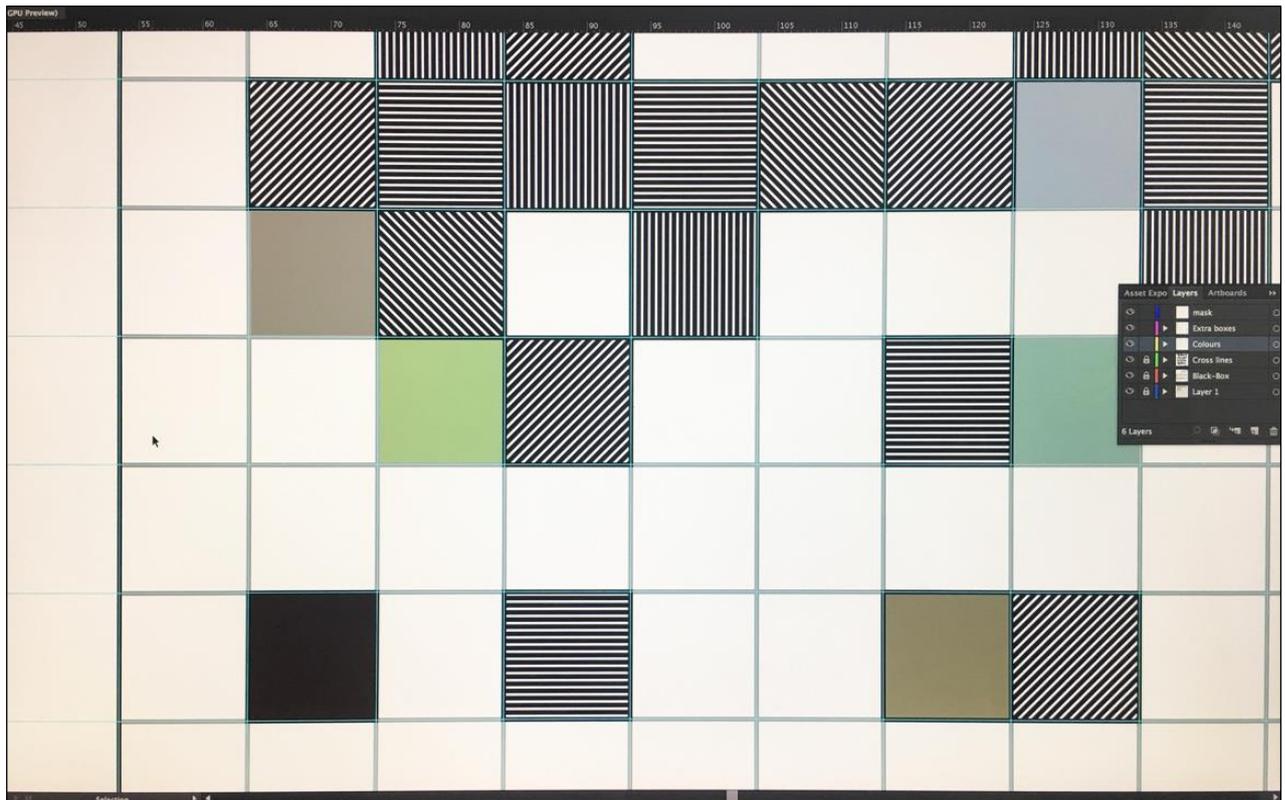


Figure 6: Work in Progress (Image credit: Patrick S. Ford)

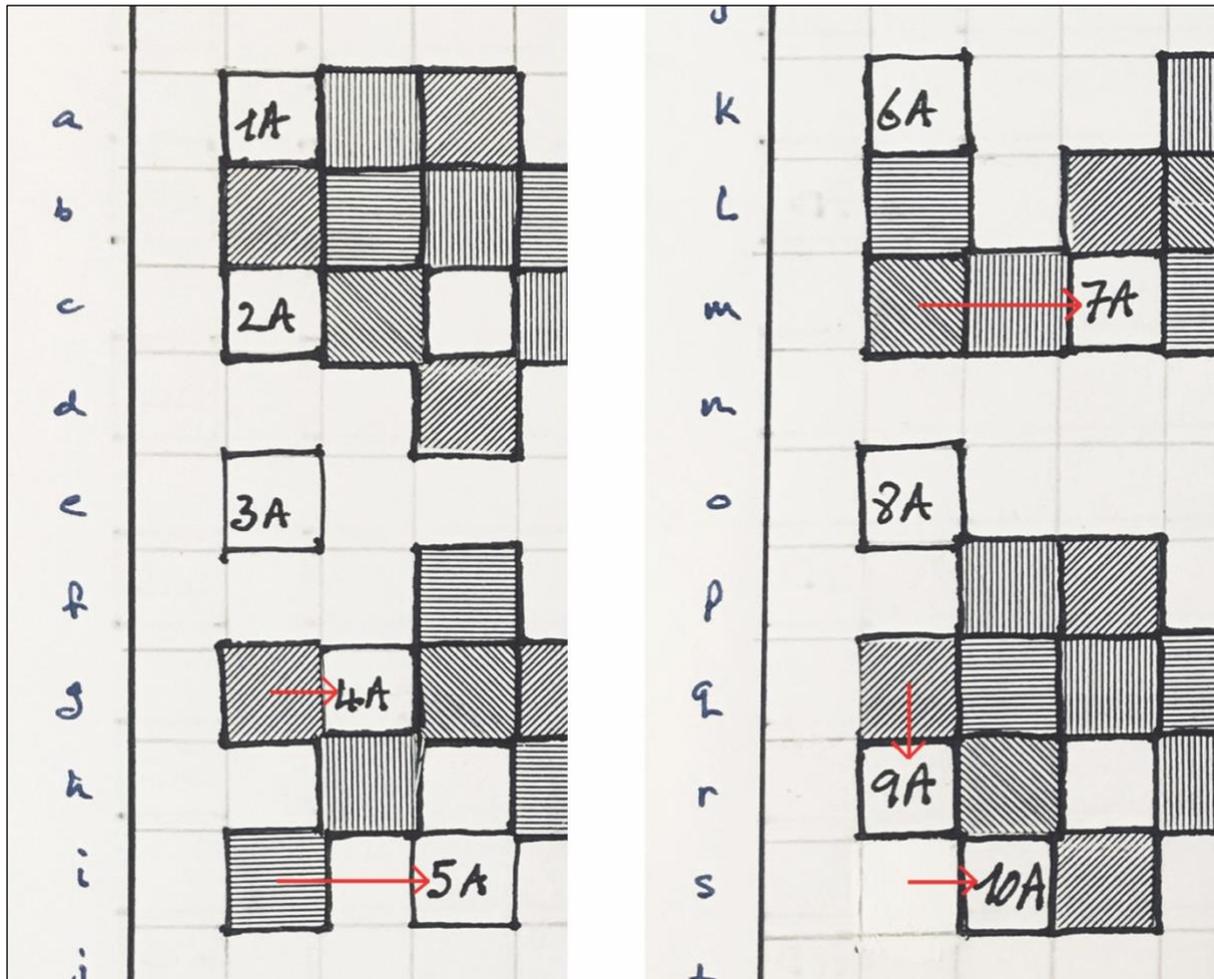


Figure 7: Notebook drawing showing colour repositioning (Image credit: Patrick S. Ford)

In Figure 7, Colour 4A had to move one block to the right as its intended place was already occupied. Colour 5A moved two blocks to the right, one block due to its intended place being occupied, a second block to avoid being too regularly associated with Colour 4A above. Likewise, Colour 7A needed to move to the right to an unoccupied place, while Colour 9A had no available spaces in close proximity, so it was moved one block down. Consequently, Colour 10A moved one block to the right to avoid being too close to Colour 9A. I made these judgments on-the-fly with an eye on the overall composition. The final configuration of the digital print is a result of a combination between a system-directed process and a certain degree of artistic license.

Although systems-based strategies intrigue me, I always prefer to retain the final say based upon considerations of composition. My work is often described as being conceptual in nature; nevertheless, I work with a mindset in which I grant the final say to the work itself, which is necessarily interpreted by me. I keep an eye out for unexpected serendipity, chance encounters or unpredictable outcomes if they appear to resolve the logic of the work.

The final appearance of the digital print included overall grid lines to tie all the blocks together, but these are rendered in grey to push them back in space a little, which creates a layering effect. Despite the respect paid to the cross-hatched blocks, the overall configuration of the print and placement of the coloured blocks constitute a map of the area studied.

As mentioned earlier, I had previously been compiling a visual language that I could use to describe the physical layout of a landscape, as geographers or geologists use symbols and

legends to denote different types of information onto maps and charts. The previous digital prints explored this visual language but did not represent actual locations, so when I began the print for District 7, I decided to employ the same language, but to overlay information captured in a real location. The grey grid was retained in order to make cross-referencing easier and also as a reminder of the rectilinear nature of the walks I conducted around the area. Because I recorded the colours at the numbered road intersections, I could not control the way colours interacted with one another beyond the minor adjustments necessary if they happened to fall on a square that was already occupied by squares with cross-hatching (I decided at the outset that I would not change the configuration of the cross-hatched blocks).

The work was printed out in edition of 30 along with several artist proofs and with an overall paper size of A3. I envisioned the work as a personal psychogeographic exploration of the area. For this project, the aim was twofold: to become more familiar with the area and to take particular notice of the colours found at certain locations within that area. During the process of creating the work, I realised that there are almost limitless ways of approaching the study. For example, I could have reacted to the many cafes and eateries I encountered, recording the types of food served, subsequently zoning the area into smaller sub-zones that targeted their menus towards patrons that favoured breakfast, lunch or dinner. I may have focused on the flow of traffic: pedestrian – moto-scooter – car – delivery vehicle; or I may have picked up on the type of animals encountered during the walk: dogs, cats, lizards... even chickens that roamed in wire enclosures. In the future I may dig deeper into some of these topics, creating new layers that could be stacked on top of the initial one I have just created. However, my immediate aim was achieved, and my increased familiarity with the neighbourhood is what would help to make these future projects possible.

The process of creating this print work helped me to become more integrated with the city. Wandering the streets in a structured way, even more than I would normally do when becoming accustomed to a new place, has expedited the familiarity I feel for the neighbourhood. The discipline involved in organizing the lists of road intersections, colours and different walking routes has meant that besides creating the print work, I have also successfully constructed a mental map of the area that links the various experiences I had during the study period. It would be interesting to learn if my map would be useable for someone new to the area. Anyone using my map would need to bring curiosity and a sense of adventure in order to get the most out of it. The key indicators are the colours, but as some of these have been recorded from advertising, particular flowers or trees in blossom, the sources may not be permanent or visible during the whole year. It would be necessary to add a set of dates or seasons for the map to indicate when it could be useable.³

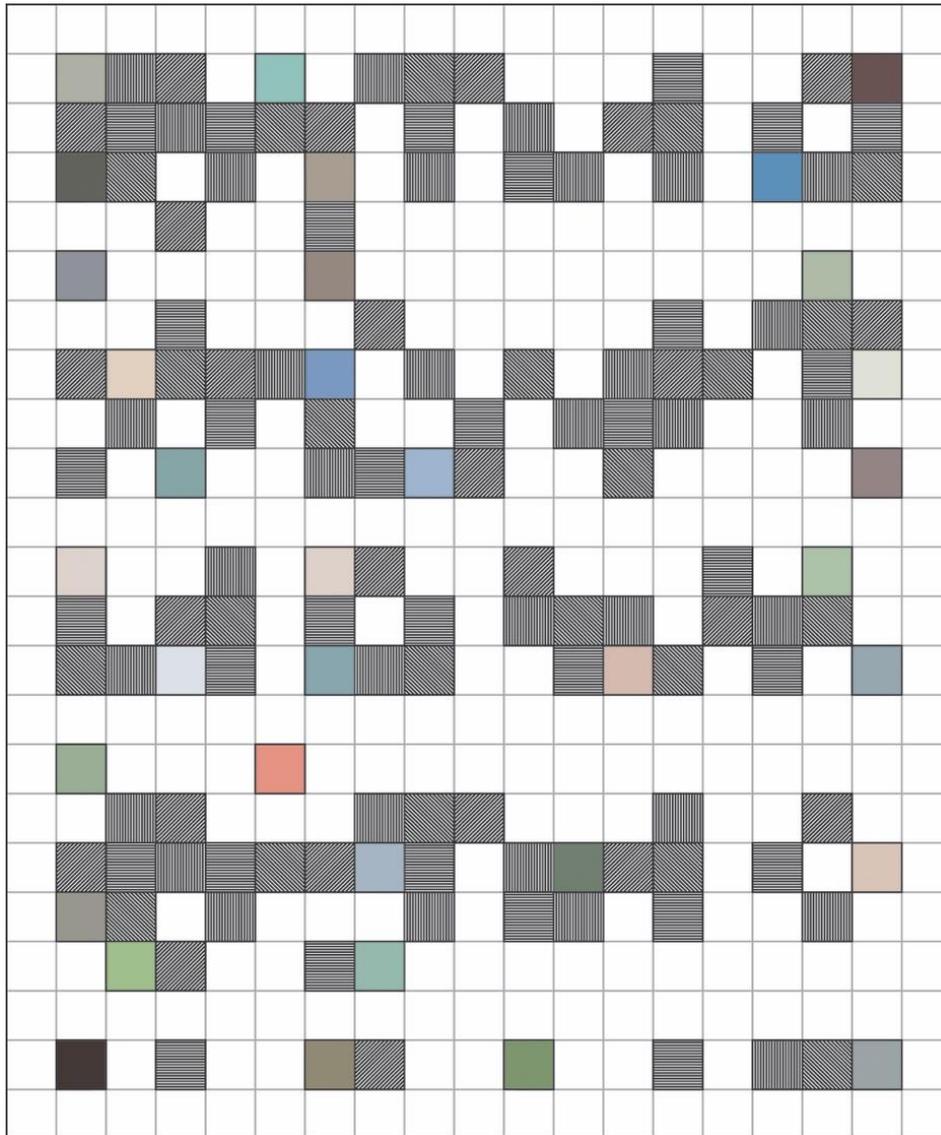


Figure 8: District 7, 2018 – Digital Print (Image credit: Patrick S. Ford)

ENDNOTES

¹ The city was known as Saigon and served as the capital of Cochinchina (the southernmost region of French Indochina that encompassed all of what is now Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos), and later the republic of South Vietnam. After 1975 the city and the rest of South Vietnam became part of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the city was renamed Ho Chi Minh City after the victorious revolutionary leader. However, the name Saigon is still widely used in unofficial circles and is the name of the river that flows through the city.

² The City Palette App began as a concept by Chloe Bass and Bob Snead and was designed by Taylor Snead. For more information please follow this link: <https://www.paletteapp.city/about/>.

³ As regards the accuracy of the map, I would like to refer to the map of the London Underground (devised by Harry Beck in 1931 and which first saw service in 1933) that emphasises the various line and station names at the expense of geographical accuracy. Passengers use the map to find desired destination and interchange stations and so these are prioritised in its layout.