Insights:

RESEARCH-DRIVEN MASTERPLANNING IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

CHAPMAN TAYLOR
MASTERPLANNING

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Chapman Taylor LLP is a Limited Liability Partnership
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CHAPMAN TAYLOR HAS BUILT A STRONG REPUTATION AS MASTERPLANNERS ON PROJECTS ACROSS THE WORLD, ABLE TO PRODUCE DESIGNS ON A LARGE FROM EARLY CONCEPT STAGE RIGHT THROUGH TO FULL COMPLETION. OUR PORTFOLIO OF MASTERPLANS ACROSS SOUTH EAST ASIA INCLUDES A WIDE RANGE OF DEVELOPMENT TYPES, FROM SMART CITIES TO RURAL ECO-RESORTS AND URBAN EXPANSION ZONES. IN THIS INSIGHT PAPER, **DAVIDE DE VISDOMINI, CHANIPA PROMMUANGDEE** AND **THANAWAT SRIMUANG** FROM OUR BANGKOK STUDIO LOOK AT THE INGREDIENTS REQUIRED TO CREATE A SUCCESSFUL MASTERPLAN AND THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWING THE PLACE AND ITS PEOPLE BEFORE PUTTING PEN TO PAPER.

The vital role of research and analysis

A crucial prerequisite to any masterplan is detailed research and analysis of the site and its context to determine how we approach the client's brief. Before we draw anything, we make significant efforts to understand the location, the culture, the economy, the climate and several other factors.

Our research looks at the main economic and social drivers in the region and country. We look, for example, at whether the economy is services-orientated or manufacturing-based, how people generally earn a living, what the surrounding commercial landscape is (such as what, and how much, retail, office and hospitality provision exists already) and proximity to the coast or other natural areas for activity-based provisions. We analyse the climate and weather patterns, the humidity, rainfall, hours of sunshine and how people interact with them.

Our masterplans for cities are usually quite different in nature from our masterplans for more remote areas. For the latter, we have created several masterplans across South-East Asia which provide resorts which are integrated with the surrounding natural environment while enhancing that environment and boosting the local economy.

How in-depth research has informed our projects

At Hon Thi Eco Islands in Vietnam, we are creating an eco-resort spread across Hon Thi and three smaller islands in the picturesque Nha Phu Bay. The scheme will sensitively integrate with the landscape, which includes pristine beaches, clear blue waters and tropical hillside vegetation.

Before designing the project, we researched the marine ecology, the tidal movements, currents, the quality of the water, the various types of marine life (both sea and land-based) and the island geology and geography. We wanted the natural environment to remain unspoiled and to ensure the minimum necessary intervention.

At Sa Pa Wellness Resort, also in Vietnam, our preliminary studies placed a strong focus on the cultural context; the area is inhabited by local tribes with their own specific customs and cultures, and we learned about their way of life, their rituals and their needs.

The planned development will provide a market outlet for the H'Mong hill tribe to display and sell products and food, helping to boost the local economy and showcase local history, traditions and culture.

We learned about their natural remedies and the way they used plants – for example, they create baths with the leaves of the dao tree to rejuvenate their skin, inspiring one of the many spa services which will be on offer at the new resort. We wanted the resort to be steeped in the culture and traditions of the place and its people so that visitors receive an experience unique to Sa Pa.

The resort will help tourists to engage with, and experience, the rich culture and way of life of the H'Mong tribe, while creating new opportunities for the people who live in the area. Also included in the environmentally responsible scheme are a community development centre, a bamboo preservation area, schools, a hospital, roads and public infrastructure. The result will be a thriving and vibrant resort which offers mutual benefits for both tourists and the local people.

The MIPIM Award-winning Mui Dinh Ecopark in Vietnam is a very large masterplan which is also inspired by the local landscape. We dedicated a lot of time to understanding the location, weather, local references and heritage, in order to be respectful and develop a design that is authentic, localised and unique to this place – something which could not be replicated or would not make sense in any other location. The area's weather patterns became the key to resolving the masterplan zoning, optimising uses and allocating services to each of the areas.

We carried out a thorough analysis straight away, to establish how many hours of sunshine the site receives throughout the year, what changes occur with each season and between day and night, how the humidity varies, what temperatures to expect, rain periods, etc. We established how the tides worked, how the dunes were formed and the ways in which the winds acted. That information and analysis helped us to deliver a design that is fully adapted to this ecosystem and performs better, at a lower cost.

Through research of the history and culture, we learned that this area of Vietnam was home to settlements built by the Cham people, the first nomads to arrive and establish this as their home. They lived in and shaped this habitat for hundreds of years, bringing specific traditions, materials, crafts, fabrics, and a rich array of colours. They also built temples in the area using local materials and certain intricate architectural details.

These elements shaped the design, creating a modern development rooted in the area's deep history. We felt that we had a responsibility, as international architects, to showcase the geographical and historical context, and enhance its value, rather than just "parachuting in" a neutral and non-contextual development.

Culture, landscape and ecology also informed our masterplan for our Xuan Khanh Lake ecological tourism and Buddhist spiritualism masterplan at Son Tay, on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City. Son Tay is known for its thousand-year-old heritage village and a laterite brick temple. Xuan Khanh Lake has recently also become well-known internationally for the discovery of an almost extinct animal – the Yangtze giant soft-shell turtle.

Planning and infrastructure
The fundamental infrastructure which will serve the development has to be planned first, including bridges, roads, transport nodes, energy, communications and water supplies. The existing infrastructure is researched in the preliminary stages, so that we know what is needed and how to integrate the existing and the new effectively. We work with engineers, local authorities, the government and other consultants to determine requirements, what challenges the site provides and how we can ensure that the development is functionally flexible, sustainable and future-proofed.

We are working on a major masterplan for an urban district in Bangkok for which our early studies looked at the surrounding urban fabric, the existing mix of provisions, the architectural forms, the population of the area and its behavioural patterns, how many worked during the day and how many during the evening and night, tourism patterns and the likely number of visitors we could anticipate.

We used this information to inform the infrastructure and mix of uses to include and their location, as well as the ideal plan for people flows and the forms of architecture used. Our research into the existing transportation infrastructure assisted in the planning of a transportation system for the new development which would serve its needs in an optimised way while being well integrated with the existing systems.

Sustainability in a broader sense
We always work to meet the environmental sustainability standards which apply in law locally and nationally, but we aspire to go further. We seek and use the best strategies for energy efficiency, including the use of natural energy sources, and are very careful about where and how we source materials.

Our conception of "sustainability" also covers broader aspects, including the socio-economic character of the area and its people, to address issues such as migration to big cities or other countries, and the need for investment and jobs.

As an example, the Coc San urban masterplan for the expanded city of Lao Cai in Vietnam will provide a modern and sustainable district in a luscious green mountain setting near the border with China, providing many jobs and economic stimulus for the city and the area beyond.

For masterplans in undeveloped locations, we seek to ensure that intervention in the natural environment is sympathetic, well-integrated and as limited as possible – not only is it the right thing to do, ecologically, but it would also make no commercial sense to needlessly damage the greatest asset that the development has.

At the Sa Pa development, we studied the tree species, how nature had evolved in that environment, flooding patterns and any imbalances in the ecosystem. We used less than 15% of the total available land for developing our masterplan, and much of that itself is green space. We also created an organic farm area for the local tribes within the development, including traditional local produce such as peaches and rice. The peach trees are also noted for their stunning blossom, which draws many visitors.

At Mui Dinh Ecopark, we left more than 40% of the natural environment within our site completely untouched – particularly the beautiful sand dunes, which inspired the architecture itself. This will be a highlight of the development, helping to attract visitors from across the region and beyond.

The provisions within the development will bring many jobs to the local area, whether hotel staff, people to service the villas, cleaners, caretakers or other opportunities. This can help sustain communities for decades and keep people from leaving their local areas. The developments also offer an outlet for local crafts and produce.

About the author

Davide has over 14 years of experience working in architecture and interior design in Italy, Finland, China and Thailand. He has led many key projects in Europe and Asia, including large-scale residential, hospitality, mixed-use and luxury resorts for international clients. His strength lies in a deep understanding of local cultures and user experiences, using these to integrate the needs of clients with each local context.

Davide oversees the design of our projects in South East Asia, including both architectural and interior design, and he manages delivery for our clients alongside our different specialist teams.

About the author

Chanipa studied Urban Planning at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok and has many years of experience in analysis and surveying in France, Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia, Vietnam, China and Sri Lanka. She has worked for major international property development companies such as China Resources Corporation and CR Land.

Chanipa is trained in forecasting city growth, competitor studies, market potential analysis, city or site expansion flows and development. She has an impressive track record of successful design, thorough analysis with well-planned strategy in projects across Asia.

About the author

Thanawat has over a decade of experience in international projects, having worked in Australia and Asia. He has developed strong leadership skills and project management techniques to organise teams and handle complex projects. He has a keen eye for detail and a natural flair for creativity, combined with analytical and problem-solving skills, making him a highly valued project leader.

Thanawat has worked on a broad range of projects, including masterplanning, residential high-rise, hospitality and resorts, commercial, retail, education, and healthcare in Australia and Asia. His experience includes the planning, concept design and construction detailing and supervision phases. He has advanced skills in 3D visualising and hand sketching.

Urban Smart Cities

In South East Asia, there is now a strong push by governments to develop smart cities – urban developments which use mass data collection and analysis technology to optimise the experience of the people using them – with the use of tax incentives and other measures to encourage the creation of many new smart districts in the coming decade. Chapman Taylor is already at the forefront of this expansion.

We are currently designing a 500,000m2 GFA mixed-use smart city district in a Vietnamese city; we began by examining what problems were being faced by people in the area on a daily basis and figuring out how we could help. Noise pollution was a major problem, due to traffic, construction and other activities, and there was also a lot of air pollution caused by fumes from car exhausts and nearby industrial buildings. In addition, we found that power was unreliable there, with the electricity supply often failing or being switched off, while flash flooding was common during monsoons because the nearby river often burst its banks.

These are fundamental issues for local people, and these had to be addressed before thinking about other matters. We followed the same process with a 1,800,000m2 GFA mixed-use smart city design we are currently creating for Thailand, and we are also designing another smart city development in the same city for which we are now in the research stages – a 2,000,000m2 GFA mixed-use urban district with major civic and cultural components.

Masterplanning trends in the coming years

We will see an increasing emphasis on people-centred masterplan design in the coming years, where in the past the focus for many developers was on, for example, car use, road placement and the functions of the buildings that lined those roads. We need to look first at the ways in which people will want to inhabit and use the space, what they need and how they will experience what we design. Wellness is an increasingly common buzzword, but it is a key element of a successful masterplan; the places we design should be good for people's mental and physical health.

Within a matter of years, it will also be the norm for buildings and districts to be 'smart', using technology and very detailed planning to create built environments which are self-monitoring, self-configuring, self-diagnosing and self-correcting. Smart systems allow us to predict future needs, save energy, anticipate, identify and prevent problems, improve operational efficiency, create new means of interaction between the built environment and its users and optimise how users experience that environment.

In the period after the COVID-19 epidemic, we will see more people looking to spend time in remote and nature-enveloped resorts, which could create a very large market for the kind of developments we are already creating in South East Asia – particularly for ecological and wellness resorts. Chapman Taylor is well-placed to help this process, given our strong experience of creating wellness resorts in India, Thailand and Vietnam.

The post-pandemic era might also see increased demand for space, particularly green space, rather than high-density construction. Many people spent their national lockdowns in confined spaces such as apartment blocks, often without a garden or yard to spend time in. A large-scale transition to remote working has also opened up the possibility of people living far away from the towns and cities where they have worked, so we may see more demand for masterplans which are much more open and green.

Chapman Taylor's approach to masterplan combines creativity, context sensitivity, sustainability and commercial astuteness to deliver successful places and spaces for people to enjoy. Our masterplans in South East Asia and globally are tailored to the needs of clients and communities so that our developments create maximum social and economic value.