

Hanoi's 'tube' dwellers vow to stay in their ancient home

Preservationists fear that efforts to relocate residents of Hanoi's Old Quarter could threaten the area's unique character

BY IAN TIMBERLAKE
AFP, HANOI



Above: Nguyen Thai Hau, 63, washes rice at her small home on Hang Ca street in Hanoi's Old Quarter.

PHOTOS: AFP

She stands in the narrow doorway, a dark tunnel stretching behind her until it ends at a patch of light half a block away. Inside the tunnel are tiny rooms the old woman and her family call home.

"I enjoy living here and I will die here," says the 83-year-old, her mouth stained the color of red wine from chewing betel nut. She declined to be named.

The stream of tourists passing her tunnel in Hanoi's Old Quarter could easily miss it, along with the many similar dark spaces throughout this neighborhood whose roots go back almost 1,000 years.

As much as life in the Old Quarter is lived on the noisy, crowded streets, it also takes place — unseen by casual visitors — inside these long, narrow homes known as "tube houses."

Civic authorities have deemed many of these homes unsuitable. They are seeking approval to move about one-third of Old Quarter residents to high rises to improve their living conditions, state media reported.

"We share the same toilet with dozens of others," says Tran Dinh Nam, who has spent all of his 45 years in one Old Quarter house and is proud of his neighborhood.

He and other tube dwellers vow to stay put. "I don't want to move anywhere else, even to the next street," says the old woman who has lived in her house for 60 years.

Her quarters were not always as cramped as they are now. She said the tunnel is a relatively recent addition, dividing her family's space from that of others whose entry doors open onto the dark corridor.

Such renovations are typical, says a booklet based on research by Hanoi's Ancient Quarter Management Board and Japanese universities.

"If there is an empty space, a dwelling will be built on it," the booklet says. "Almost every available space between existing buildings has been developed or infilled."

The Vietnamese capital in 2010 will celebrate its 1,000th anniversary, and the Old Quarter has been its heart throughout. The district developed around 36 streets named for the goods once made and sold there.

Hang Bac, where the old woman lives, became known for its silversmiths. Jewelers still ply their trade on Hang Bac but are now side-by-side with all manner of other businesses: a bakeshop, a small hotel, travel agencies and a cafe offering Western food for passing backpackers.

It is a scene repeated throughout the Old Quarter, where pedestrians weave past sidewalk vendors selling drinks and snacks. The narrow streets are filled with motorcycles and the ear-splitting sound of their horns.

"The density in here is too high," says one Old Quarter resident familiar with the redevelopment plan. "They want to move people out, make a better life," he said, adding that the plan has been proposed but not yet approved by civic officials.

There are 21,900 households in an area of less than 100 hectares, the Ancient Quarter research booklet says, citing a 2006 census.



"In many houses, an entire family may occupy no more than a single room," it says.

Nguyen Thai Hau, 63, has lived almost 50 years at a house on Hang Ca street, named for the fish once sold there.

She says her house, built in the 1940s, originally belonged to one wealthy man and his wives.

"Now there are six households here with about 30 people," she says.

Reached through a short tunnel, the two-story structure rises from a courtyard where Hau washes rice for cooking in a small kitchen.

"Of course, the living conditions are not good ... but we are used to it," says Hau, whose family sells clothes from the sidewalk in front.

Her 30m² of space is small but, like others in the Old Quarter, is extremely valuable.

"It may reach nearly 20 billion dong (US\$1 million) this year, I guess. I did not sell it as my elder son refused to go anywhere else. He said it's easier living here, at the center of Hanoi."

Others agree the convenience of Old Quarter living compensates for the lack of amenities.

Tradition is also a factor, says the old woman on Hang Bac. She says some residents have bigger houses elsewhere "but still no one wants to sell because these are the houses of the ancestors."

The state's Vietnam News said the plan calls for moving 25,000 of the area's 84,000 residents, beginning late next year when 1,900 households will go to a new development called Viet Hung, across the Red River.

With its wide streets and broad sidewalks devoid of almost all people and vehicles, the mix of high- and low-rise apartments certainly has something the Old Quarter lacks: a feeling of space.

That is not enough to entice Nam, the lifelong Old Quarter inhabitant with a shared toilet.

"We don't want to live in a high-rise block," Nam says. "We are not used to it."

Nobody will be forced to go, said the other local resident, who is familiar with the plan. Authorities will take time to find out what people will need to make them feel comfortable in their new neighborhood, he said.

"This is a very difficult project. We have to spend lots of time to study," he said.

As a first step, after two years of negotiation, several families who squatted inside a Hang Bac temple have been moved to new accommodation and given compensation, he said.

The overall relocation plan should not affect the Old Quarter's character, he added, countering the fears of some foreign tourists.

"It would destroy it," said Jean Kennedy, 65, an Australian archeologist. "This is a living city." Cha So-Yeon, 29, of South Korea, said the area's street activity appealed to her.

"We want to see the lives of the people," she said.

But Polish visitor Paul Paanakker, 54, making his second trip to the Old Quarter, said he is unlikely to return.

"It's too crowded compared to Saigon," he said.



[LIFESTYLE]

Polluting pets: the devastating impact of man's best friend

Pet owners are angered by a new book from New Zealand that says raising a dog is worse for the environment than driving an SUV

BY ISABELLE TOUSSAINT AND JURGEN HECKER
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Man's best friend could be one of the environment's worst enemies, according to a new study that says the carbon pawprint of a pet dog is more than double that of a gas-guzzling sports utility vehicle.

But the revelation in the book *Time to Eat the Dog: The Real Guide to Sustainable Living* by New Zealanders Robert and Brenda Vale has angered pet owners who feel they are being singled out as troublemakers.

The Vales, specialists in sustainable living at Victoria University of Wellington, analyzed popular brands of pet food and calculated that a medium-sized dog eats around 164kg of meat and 95kg of cereal a year.

Combine the land required to generate its food and a "medium" sized dog has an annual footprint of 0.84 hectares — around twice the 0.41 hectares required by a 4x4 driving 10,000km a year, including energy to build the car.

To confirm the results, the *New Scientist* magazine asked John Barrett at the Stockholm Environment Institute in York, England, to calculate eco-pawprints based on his own data. The results were essentially the same.

"Owning a dog really is quite an extravagance, mainly because of the carbon footprint of meat," Barrett said.

Other animals aren't much better for the environment, the Vales say.

Cats have an eco-footprint of about 0.15 hectares, slightly less than driving a Volkswagen Golf for a year, while two hamsters equates to a plasma television and even the humble goldfish burns energy equivalent to two mobile telephones.

But Reha Huttin, president of France's 30 Million Friends animal rights foundation says the human impact of eliminating pets would be equally devastating.

"Pets are anti-depressants, they help us cope with stress, they are good for the elderly," Huttin said.

"Everyone should work out their



A medium-sized dog's carbon footprint is more than double that of an SUV, while a cat's eco-footprint is slightly less than that of a Volkswagen Golf, say the authors of *Time to Eat the Dog*.

PHOTOS: AFP

own environmental impact. I should be allowed to say that I walk instead of using my car and that I don't eat meat, so why shouldn't I be allowed to have a little cat to alleviate my loneliness?"

Sylvie Comont, proud owner of seven cats and two dogs — the environmental equivalent of a small fleet of cars — says

defiantly, "Our animals give us so much that I don't feel like a polluter at all."

"I think the love we have for our animals and what they contribute to our lives outweighs the environmental considerations."

"I don't want a life without animals," she said.

And pets' environmental impact is not limited to their carbon footprint, as cats and dogs devastate wildlife, spread disease and pollute waterways, the Vales say.

With a total 7.7 million cats in the UK, more than 188 million wild animals are hunted, killed and eaten by feline predators per year, or an average 25 birds, mammals and frogs per cat, according to figures in the *New Scientist*.

Likewise, dogs decrease biodiversity in areas they are walked, while their feces cause high bacterial levels in rivers and streams, making the water unsafe to drink, starving waterways of oxygen and killing aquatic life.

And cat poo can be even more toxic than doggy doo — owners who flush their litter down the toilet ultimately infect sea otters and other animals with toxoplasma gondii, which causes a killer brain disease.

But despite the apocalyptic visions of domesticated animals' environmental impact, solutions exist, including reducing pets' protein-rich meat intake.

"If pussy is scoffing 'Fancy Feast' — or some other food made from choice cuts of meat — then the relative impact is likely to be high," said Robert Vale.

"If, on the other hand, the cat is fed on fish heads and other leftovers from the fishmonger, the impact will be lower."

Other potential positive steps include avoiding walking your dog in wildlife-rich areas and keeping your cat indoors at night when it has a particular thirst for other, smaller animals' blood.

As with buying a car, humans are also encouraged to take the environmental impact of their future possession/companion into account.

But the best way of compensating for that paw or clawprint is to make sure your animal is dual purpose, the Vales urge. Get a hen, which offsets its impact by laying edible eggs, or a rabbit, prepared to make the ultimate environmental sacrifice by ending up on the dinner table.

"Rabbits are good, provided you eat them," said Robert Vale.