
Sujee Jung November 13th, 2019

# In search of meaningful data

*"My fieldwork experience was a sweaty, muddy, risky, and frustratingly lonely process," writes **Sujee Jung**, PhD Candidate at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, Rutgers University, on her research in Hanoi.*

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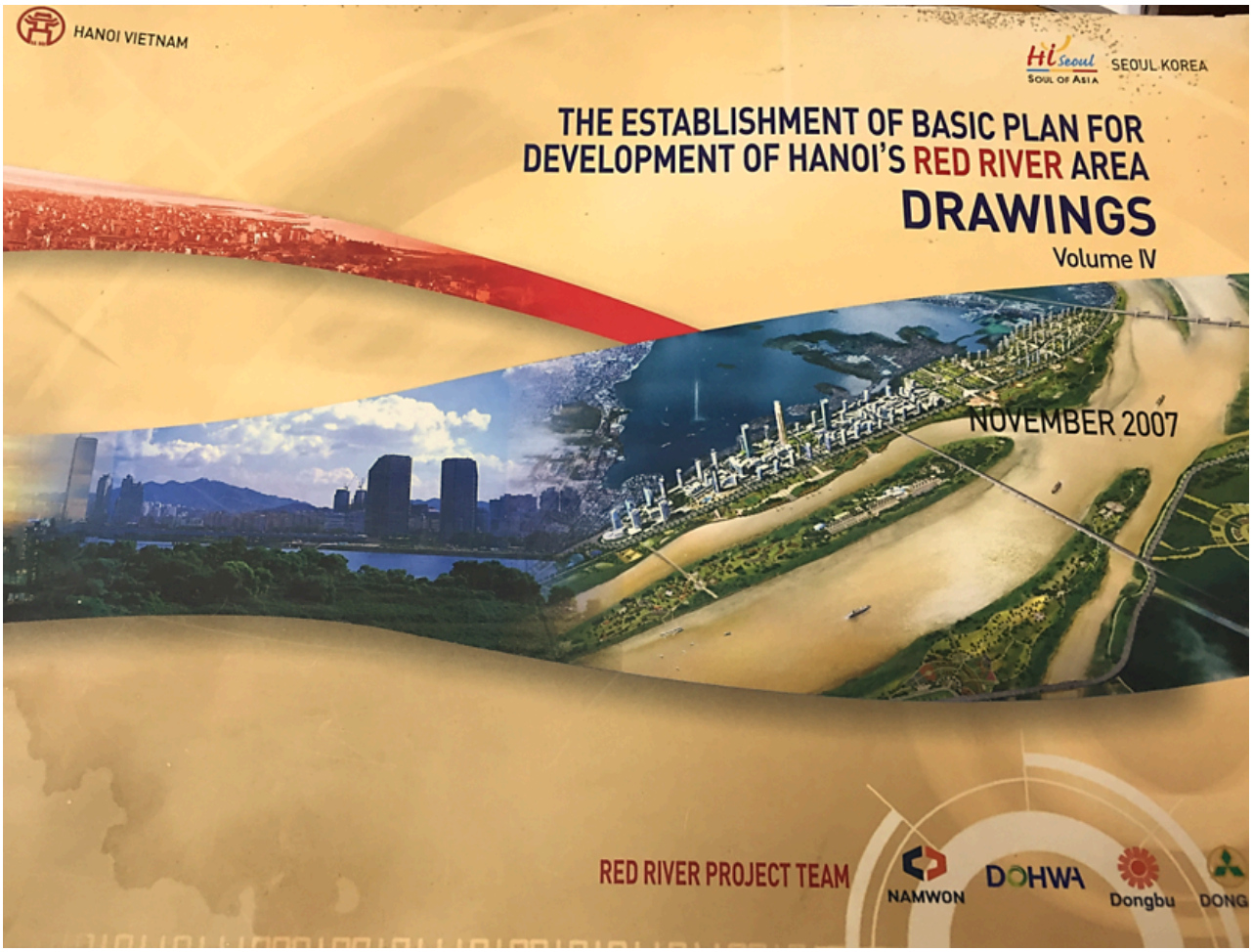
Hanoi is a fascinating yet challenging city for research on urban planning. As the political center of the Communist Party, the city represents national power and visions (Logan, 2009). Conducting fieldwork in such a politically sensitive environment demands discretion, tacit, and careful scrutiny on the part of the researcher (Scott et al, 2006). Data acquired may not necessarily be meaningful or trustworthy, especially if informants feel pressured to align their observations and interview responses with the centrally-established political standpoint, professional behavioral codes of conduct.

An example was the onsite interview I conducted with Vietnamese urban planner in 2016 as part of my research on Vietnamese planners' assessment of the Basic Plan for the Red River Development in Hanoi. In the period 2005-2012, South Korean donors and planning consortiums developed the Basic Plan for Hanoi's urban waterfront development and submitted the plan to the Vietnamese National Congress. However, this plan was not approved, and could not be implemented on the ground.




*South Korean Planning Consortium's Technical Drawings for the Red River Development Project (2007)*

When I asked for the respondent's professional opinion about the pros and cons of the Basic Plan, I received mixed signals. On the one hand, the respondent shared appreciative and complimentary remarks towards the Korean donors and planners responsible for the Basic Plan (the Seoul Metropolitan Government, Korean International Cooperation Agency and other private planning consortiums). On the other hand, the respondent was reluctant to provide any critical comments, avoided eye contact, employed uneasy intervals of speech, and engaged in apologetically cautious gestures. I quickly became aware that my positionality as a Korean stranger may have been an obstacle to acquiring reliable and genuine responses to my questions.

The respondent's cautious behaviour made me aware of the importance of building rapport, at least to the extent that he could feel assured that I was not a 'Korean spy'. After a few weeks' working with the respondent in the planning office, I conducted a second interview in which I first shared my own critical review of the Basic Plan and then repeated the questions from the first interview. This time, I received an entirely different reaction. The respondent began to engage in unconstrained speech, whispering "to be honest with you" into my ear. This experience forced me to question the validity of the official, diplomatic, politically appropriate and professional accounts I had previously collected, which motivated me to conduct additional fieldwork in the hope that I could obtain meaningful first-sourced data on the ground.

### Illusionary ambition

In March 2017, newspaper articles reported that the Red River Development Project was being re-initiated with brand new design proposals. I contacted a planning director in Hanoi to ask if I could participate in the design review process for the revived Project. The director responded with a welcoming invitation and I began my on-site fieldwork at the state-owned enterprise (SOE) under the leadership of the Hanoi People's Committee.

In June 2017, I flew to Hanoi to review two planning proposals for the Red River Development Plan. I planned to focus my research on Vietnam's institutional working environment, local planning process, and elites' everyday life in the urban planning office. As a naïve graduate student, I was eager to enter the real planning world, live up to a dictionary definition of social justice and take bold actions to intervene in the technical and bureaucratic planning process.

### Fieldwork nightmare

These ambitions turned out to be an unrealistic fantasy. I could not foresee what awaited me upon arrival to Hanoi: suffocating traffic jams; a bruised body as a result of two hour-long daily commutes on a motorcycle; unpredictable seasonal monsoon showers and muddy flood waves swiping my heels; surviving 9-hour indoor office routines while indulging daydreams about outdoor site visits to the field; drinking vodka and eating dog meat to be friends with male colleagues; being kidnapped by a taxi driver who demanded internal development information for his investment properties; conducting detective work on colleagues' polite smiles and diplomatic silences; writing a planning report that would never be read; and accepting that I am no one but a foreign passer-by even after a six-week-long, full-time stay in the planning office.

*Commuting Scene in Hanoi, Photographed by Sujee (Suzy) Jung*

In the end, there was no elegant way to bridge theory and practice once I decided to go to the field. My fieldwork experience was a sweaty, muddy, risky, and frustratingly lonely process. It required making imperfect decisions about what was appropriate to question and what was not; what I would like to suggest and what I ought to compromise; what I could write about and what I should be secretive about; and, who I am and who I had to pretend to be. None of the literature on research methods had offered useful guidelines about how to cope with the specific environment within which I was situated. There was no pre-existing knowledge to refer to. I had to improvise strategies to survive every single moment. I did not have the luxury of spare time for detailed note-taking on my observation in the midst of the rapidly shifting working environment.

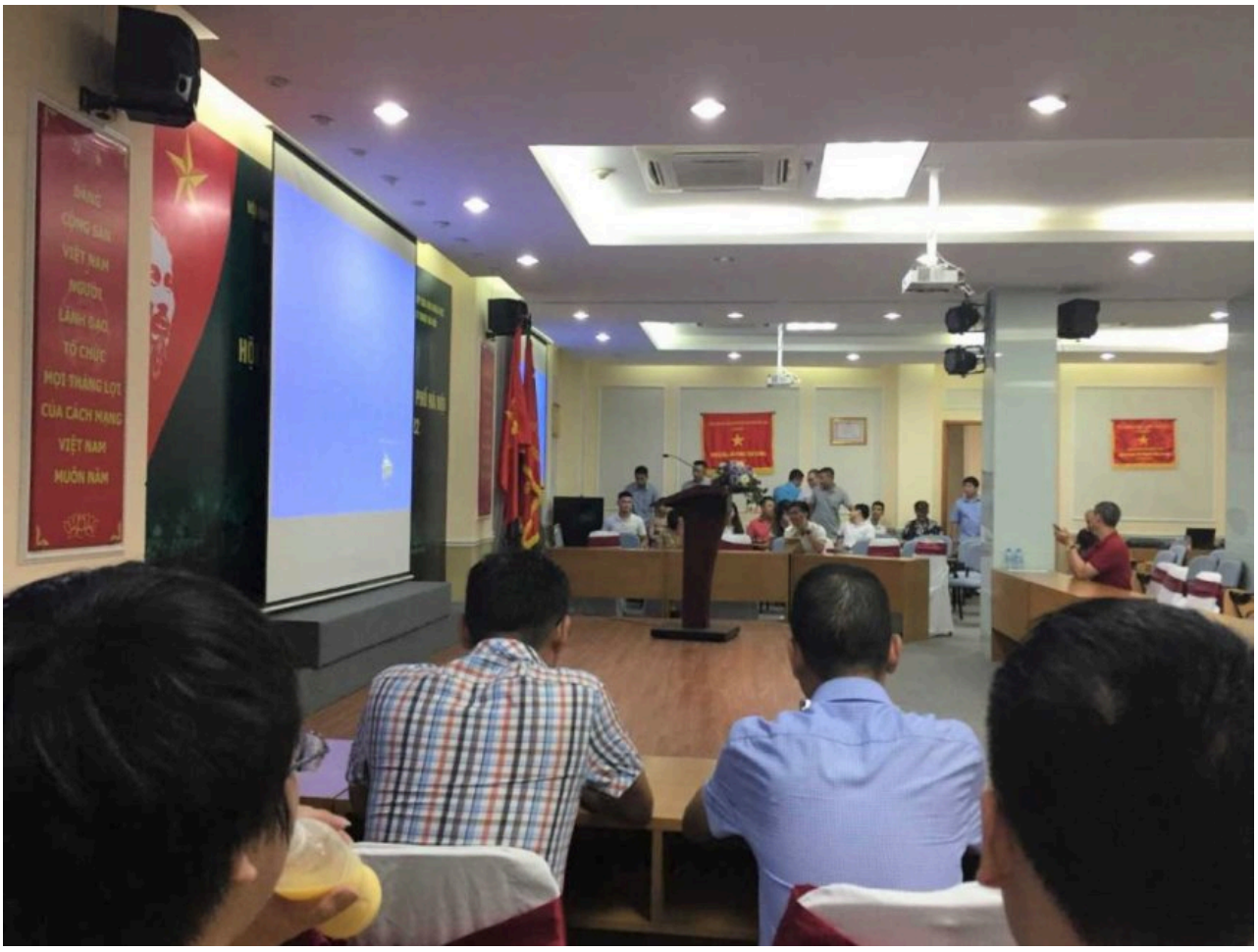
After many sleepless nights, I began to understand why my fieldwork seemed to be a chaotic nightmare. As a researcher, I felt frustrated because I did not have control over the object of the research. The director of the planning office assigned my tasks, which were not the primary objective of my research. The research agenda in the planning office was established by powerful actors including Hanoi city's mayor, the communist party, developers, investors, vice president of the office, and the planning director. Top-down planning decisions were made in the Hanoi Committee's meetings, no matter how much time I spent on policy recommendations. Dictated by external priorities, the collected data deviated far from the expected answers to my research

questions. It was a wild, frustratingly crude reality, mocking a researcher's attempt to fixate a dynamic and slippery environment within a static research plan.

### Going with the flow and unbridled learning experiences

I had no choice but to continue with the imperfect research process. I accepted my imposed positionality at the bottom of the institutional hierarchy. I gave up my control as a researcher. I stopped avoiding and began confronting unanticipated findings. I became less anxious and more accepting of the fact that I did not know where my experiences would take me. Even though my research ended up with no firm conclusions, that outcome did not scare me any longer. I opened myself to all possibilities, for findings beyond my initial expectations.

Once I accepted my limited positionality, partial perspectives, bounded understanding, and peripheral knowledge (Haraway, 1988), I was finally able to learn as an apprentice. My fieldwork transformed into a continual lesson-learning exercise as I started to take baby steps to see, read, listen, and accept things for comprehending, not for probing. I was physically present in the planning office. I occupied one seat in the weekly meeting, learning how to make a speech like a professional Vietnamese planner. I attached a human face to every single interaction and grasped who was in charge of what in the workplace. Focused on these situated learning experiences, I could avoid the urge to aggregate or generalise the details into a 'Vietnamese' way of doing things. I could also refrain from ascribing Vietnamese planning issues to so-called 'third world' problems such as non-transparency, unaccountability, corruption and censorship.




*Weekly Meeting at the Hanoi Urban Planning Institute, Photographed by Sujee (Suzy) Jung*

My fieldwork provided the opportunity to move beyond the original objects of the research such as expert knowledge, power-laden decision making, and a generalised Vietnamese culture of professional planning practices. It revealed, instead, the very personal process of relating to the subject and the practice of planning in the daily interactions of incarnated human bodies. While immersing myself as a planning researcher in everyday life of Vietnamese planning office, I could navigate an extraordinary way of unveiling Vietnam's mysterious planning world with the very ordinary stories of professional planning practitioner.

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### About the Research

This blog is an excerpt from the author's international fieldwork research for the doctoral dissertation, 'Global flood-resilient knowledge and local planning practices for the Red River Development Project, Hanoi, Vietnam (2005-2017).' The doctoral research examines global north-south policy transfer of the waterfront expertise from Seoul, South Korea to Hanoi, Vietnam, and its problematic local application for the Red River in the past (2005-2012). Drawing lessons from the previous failure, the research, then, searches for an alternative form of cross-border planning communication for the revived Red River Development Project (2017). Through participant observation, the researcher had undertaken the proposal review at the local planning office in Hanoi in 2017. Her learning experiences elucidate Hanoi City's decision making over 'sustainable' flood mitigation strategies, and the City's effort to mediate conflicting interests between green riverbank corridor and maximum waterfront real-estate properties development.

## About the author

**Sujee Jung**

Sujee Jung is a doctoral candidate at the Edward.J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, United States. Her research focuses on flood-resilient river planning, cross-border policy learning, and urban governance in East Asian and Southeast Asian cities.

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