

The evolution of Green Belt concepts in Hanoi's regional planning, 1960-2023

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Abstract

This article analyses the evolution of Green Belt concepts in Hanoi from a historical perspective to find out what problems the process of introducing international concepts and practicalizing theories locally encountered during 1960-2023. The article uses fieldwork methods and comprehensive analysis to divide the formation of Hanoi's Green Belt into three periods with different scales, characteristics, and functions. The planners have found many ways to enhance Green Belt's role, from changing perception to changing form toward flexibility, but Green Belt theory still can not be put into practical planning. By exploring the Green Belt in the city's Master Planning explains the necessity and perspective for a planning tool that adapts to the practical context across urban development stages. From that development progress, the article outlines challenges in the process of identifying theories and finding suitable solutions to practicalization the Green Belt paradigm.

Keywords

Green Belt, Hanoi, Planning history, Regional planning, Prevention urban sprawl policy

How to cite

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INTRODUCTION

Green belts have emerged as a prominent planning tool adopted by numerous cities worldwide. The most renowned Green belt theory was proposed in the Garden City movement by Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928). This is an agricultural land area and strategically oriented to preserve the status quo in the face of the exploding needs of urban land expansion in the outer area. Green Belts have been embraced by various cities to address the challenges posed by industrialization and urbanisation. However, the implementation of this theoretical model varies across different contexts. London, a shining example of success with the policy, spread the influence of the Green Belts to many cities of the world; has witnessed numerous transformations in its institutional, form, and functions to adapt to evolving circumstances and development stages. In contrast to London's case, cities like Tokyo, Seoul, and Beijing have encountered significant hurdles in establishing and maintaining Greenbelts. These challenges stem from the conditions and resource constraints of each locality, coupled with the contradictions within the Green belts theory itself – the conflict between short-term needs and long-term development goals¹. The functions of green belts in urban areas have differed to suit the local development stage. For instance, London's Greenbelt served the purpose of shaping urban form and maintaining ecological balance. In contrast, Tokyo's Greenbelt focused on agricultural land protection, Seoul's aimed to provide recreational spaces for residents, and the first Beijing's Greenbelt preserved the historic inner urban area.

Hanoi's application of the Green Belt theory has undergone significant transformations in perception, evolving from initial food security needs to addressing urban sprawl. At present, the Green Belt has emerged as a crucial planning tool for Hanoi's sustainable development. Hanoi's Green Belt has gone through more than 60 years of development but has still not been able to put this international theory into planning practice. Experts have and continue to conduct research on the Green belt theory from various angles but lack a strategic planning perspective. Studies on Hanoi's Greenbelt primarily focus on the perspectives of outer areas, agriculture outer areas, green infrastructure systems, green spaces or green corridors and articles directly analysing the subjects are mainly conservation and ecological perspectives.

This article adopts a comparative historical planning perspective to examine the Green Belt theory from the introduction of international theory and the practical situation of planning in Hanoi to answer big questions surrounding Green Belt in the Master Planning of Hanoi:

1. When was the Green Belt theory introduced to Vietnam?
2. What mistakes were there in the process of importing into the locality?
3. Why has the Green Belt theory not been successful in practical planning?

From 1960-2023, Hanoi has undergone 7 times of Hanoi Master planning² but the Green belt has only undergone 3 changes. Based on fieldwork method research policies, Master planning sessions and changes in planning thought, this article divides the formation and development of Hanoi's Green belt into three periods with clear differences in scale, form and function. The first period(1960-1998) laid the groundwork for Hanoi's green belt when it did not have an international name but was called "City Belt" with the function of ensuring food security during the recovery stage. The next period from 1998-2011 with the ideal of ecological balance

under the impact of globalisation. By the third period (2011-2023) - a period of uncontrolled urbanisation - the green belt was officially considered a planning tool to control urban sprawl. Each period of the Hanoi Green Belt has been influenced by various plans from international experts participating in consulting and supporting planning.

This article examines the formation of Green Belt development perspectives within the unique context of a socialist country. The case of Hanoi is particularly intriguing, as the adoption of planning theories from countries with vastly different political and economic systems has resulted in challenges in establishing appropriate regulatory methods and tools. Hanoi's Green Belt emerged from a subsidised economy and has undergone a struggle for recognition amidst economic recovery and the capital city's special development. Planners face various challenges, including the ambiguity in defining the Green Belt, developing locally-appropriate frameworks for managing the Green Belt as a unified entity, and considering the overall urban development layout with a long-term vision. This article uses a comparative perspective of planning history to explore how planning applications adapt to different contexts, ranging from changes in scale to the flexible integration of structures and functions to balance development needs with long-term vision.

GREEN BELT AS CITY BELT TO ENSURE SECURITY AND FOOD (1960 -1998)

The green belt emerged during the early stages of modernization following the war (1950-1998)³. However, the role of the city belt was not fully emphasised until the 1960s when transportation challenges arose, Vietnamese Communist Party encouraged localities to achieve “a high degree of self-sufficiency in line with current production and combat conditions” and “conduct thorough research to achieve local food self-sufficiency”⁴. During this period, the development of the City belt took place under two stages of Hanoi's history: the centrally planned economy era (1960-1986) and the market economy era (1986-1998). This period did not witness significant changes in the form or function of the City belt, but Hanoi's context has influenced the importance of the Green Belt to the inner city.

THE GREEN BELT PLAYED AN IMPORTANT ROLE DURING THE CENTRAL PLANNING PERIOD(1960-1986)

During this period, Vietnam's economy, particularly in the capital city of Hanoi, faced the challenge of economic restructuring and development within the framework of the centralised planned mechanism. This context leads the residents of Hanoi, where there is a large concentration of labourers, to face a severe issue of food demand. The urban management system intervened directly to address food and supply issues for the city's residents by expanding the outer areas, establish a Green belt to serve the inner city. Following the 1961 decisions, the Politburo oriented the city's green belt as a vast outer area (approximately 15 times the size of the inner city⁵ - Figure 1) encircling the urban centre to enhance defence capabilities and provide food for the populace⁶. This represented a progressive planning concept, a stark departure from the previous era marked by the adoption of international concepts.

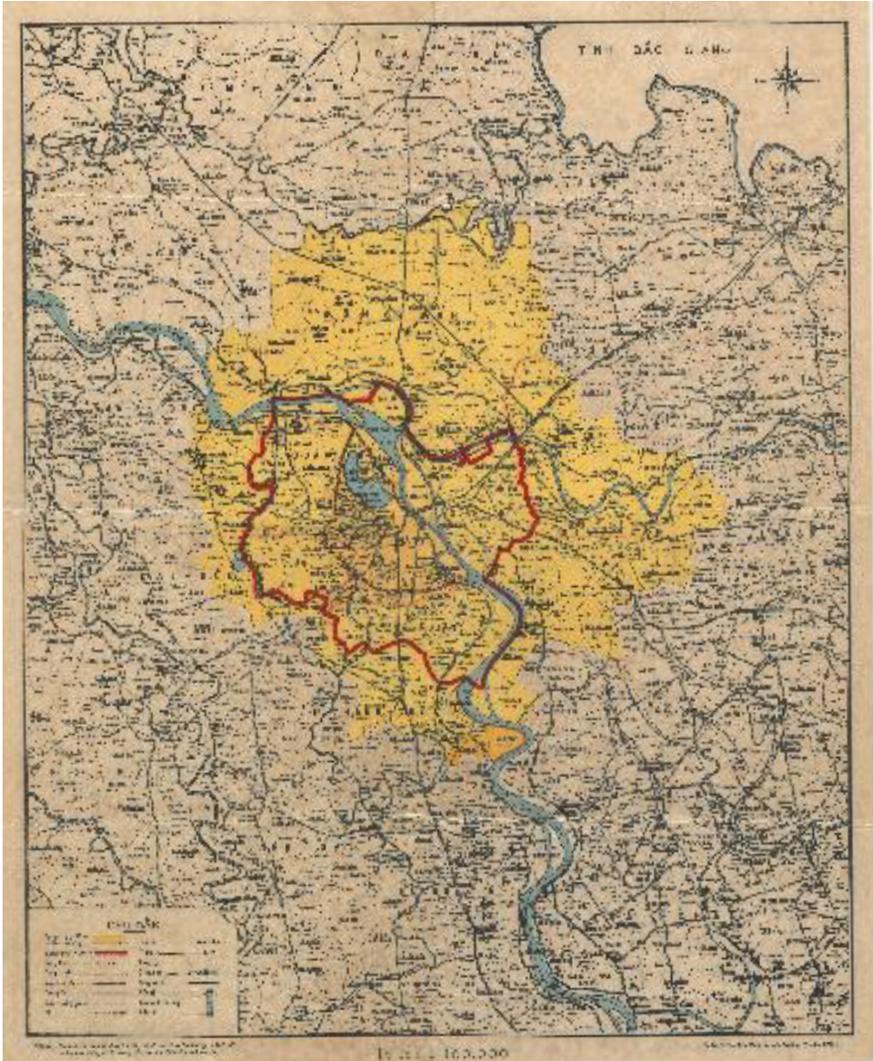


Fig. 4. Hanoi expanded its outer areas in 1961. The area of the city belt after expansion is 15 times larger than the inner city area.

Around this time, Hanoi received help from research groups from the Soviet Union, most notably the “Leningrad Plan” (Figure 2) of the Leningrad Institute of Urban and Planning led by SI Sokolov (1974). This plan brought the image of an autonomous residential area⁷ with a system of cities, satellite towns and supporting agricultural belts⁸ into Hanoi’s planning. This idea is similar to Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City theory when the city belt has a large, continuous belt structure, prioritising agricultural development, supporting an urban area of 1 million people. The Green Belt inherently has the function of shaping the urban area, but Hanoi has not yet identified clear development goals, leading to urban boundaries frequently

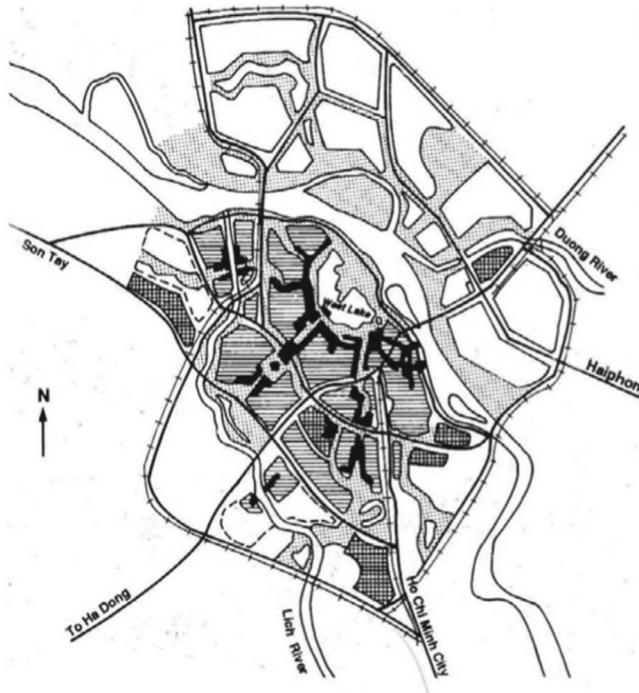


Fig. 5. The plan of the Leningrad school for Hanoi

changing in the later stages, so when the Agricultural Belt is included in planning, the Managers focus on food support functions for urban residents and military defence capabilities.

Although the city belt was officially included in the national urban design standards in 1987⁹, it is the image of the extensive outer area like the previous directives of the Politburo. During the transition period from a subsidised economy to a market economy (in 1986), the nature of the food belt in suburban areas gradually declined¹⁰.

THE DECLINING FUNCTIONS OF GREEN BELT IN THE MARKET ECONOMY STAGE(1986-1998)

The significance of Hanoi's Green Belt prior to 1986 is undeniable. However, the rebirth of the Market economy under the Party's Renewal Guidelines, as marked by the 4th Congress in December 1986, fundamentally transformed the function and attention of urban planners towards this region. The establishment of a unified national market enabled localities to engage in trade based on their respective strengths, eliminating the previous reliance on central planning. This is necessary to restructure the relationship between the outer areas and the inner city. The "self-sufficient" food supply has declined, leading to a reduction in the outer areas

in 1991. In 1985, Hanoi had 2088km² of Green Belt land in the outer area, far surpassing the 43km² of urban land, then by 2001, many years after the revision of spatial scope, there was a clear change despite agricultural area still accounts for a large part but is only about 160km² compared to urban land of 98km².¹¹

The obvious shrinkage of land in rural areas can also be attributed to urbanisation, with numerous industrial and manufacturing projects encroaching upon agricultural land. Immediately after the boundary narrowing in 1991, on April 18, 1992, the Master Planning of Hanoi to 2010 was released through Decision No. 132/CT but without the appearance of the Green Belt. From this stage onward, the Green Belt became indistinct and became a vacuum in both theoretical research and practical application.

GREEN BELT: GREEN BELT FOR ECOLOGICAL BALANCE (1998 - 2011)

Post-1998 urban planning has been influenced by globalisation, raising concerns about linking urban and surrounding areas, establishing long-term goals, and achieving sustainable development. The process of industrialization and modernization during this period caused many problems that negatively affected the environment¹² and compromised the urban aesthetic due to the placement of industrial development right in the inner city¹³.

In 1998, the green belt was mentioned by its correct international name in the Decision no.108 on Approving the reversion of Hanoi's Master Planning to 2020(Figure 3)¹⁴. This approval document marked a turning point in the development of the Green Belt by identifying subjects and establishing new functional roles. Accordingly, the green belt was established in the area adjacent to planned urban construction land with a width of 1-4 km and plays the role of "forming a framework to protect nature and maintain the city's ecological balance"¹⁵ in the context of the natural environment being ravaged by rapid urban development. Once a vast outer area providing food for the city, the Green Belt has transformed into a specifically defined zone in width with ecological functions.

The 1998 Master Planning project was a collaborative effort between American, Japanese, Dutch, and Vietnamese experts¹⁶. This collaboration shaped the ecological characteristics of Hanoi's Green Belt. Influenced by the United Nations' "One Earth" program and awareness of environmental protection in the context of globalisation, Hanoi's green belt was envisioned as a buffer zone, protecting the city's green space and separating the capital from neighbouring provinces¹⁷. The ambitious goals set for the green belt to protect the city's ecosystem with a projected population of 2.5 million. However, the context at that time was not positive, leading to the green belt development plan not being focused. Hanoi was hit by the 1997 Asian economic crisis, and despite attempts to seek support from foreign partners¹⁸, private foreign investment focused on more profitable projects rather than the ecologically balanced Green Belt plan. Although considered the most effectively used Master planning to 2011¹⁹, the Green Belt lacked effective development directions, faced encroachment from urbanisation, and was at risk of being lost.

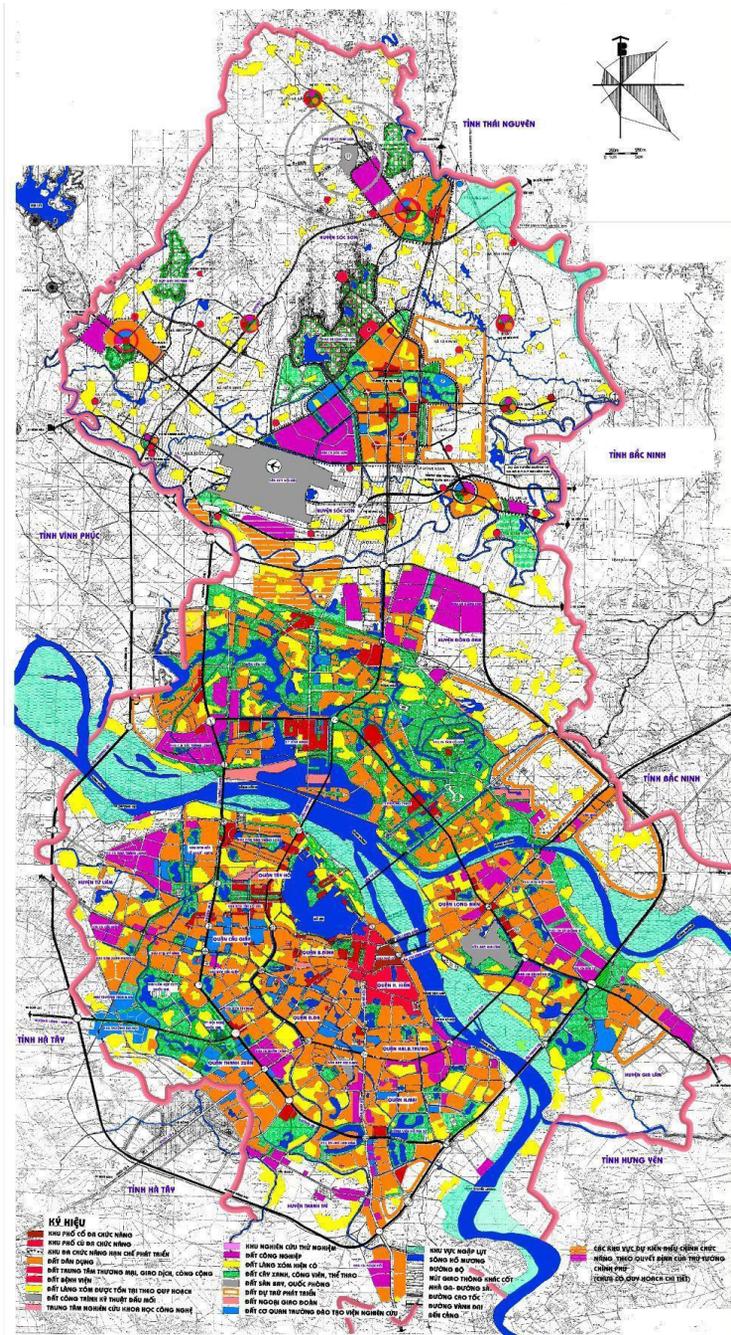


Fig. 6. The revised Master Planning of Hanoi capital to 2020. The Green Belt is located in a system of green lands, parks, and sports.

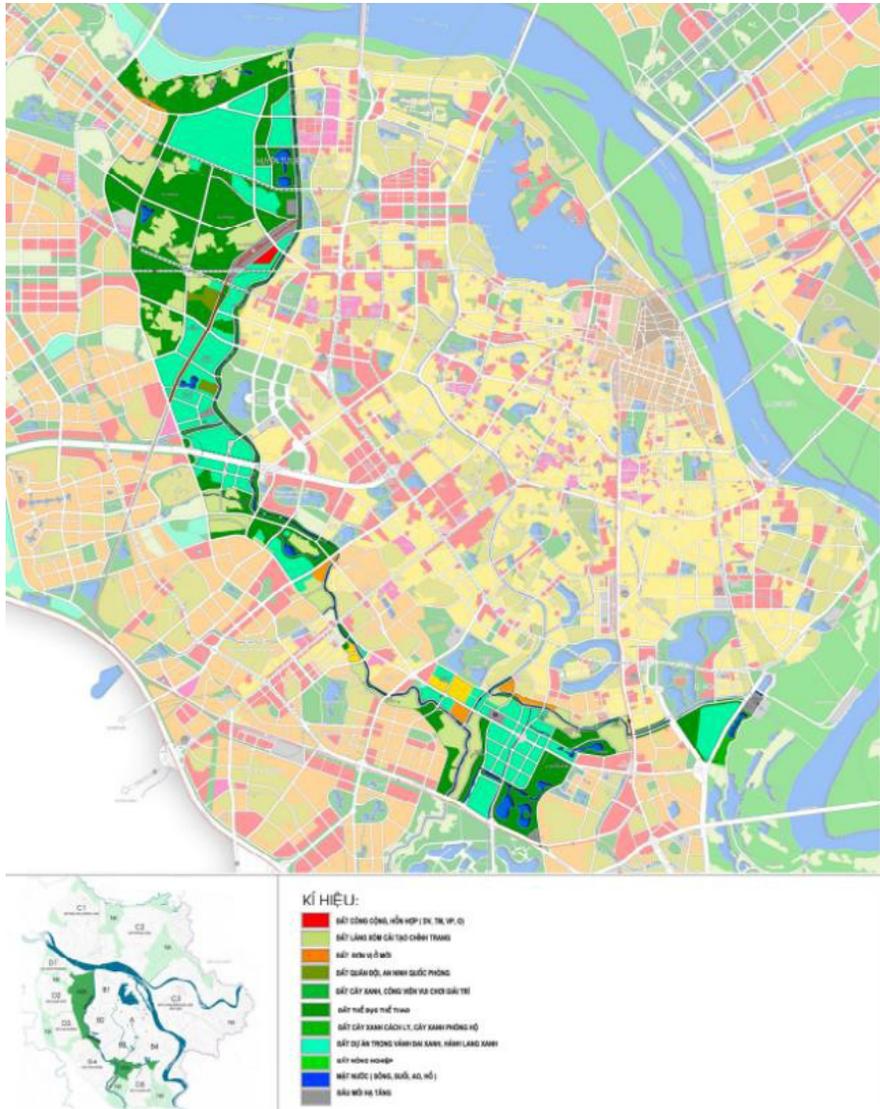


Fig. 7. The shape of Hanoi's Green Belt has followed the Nhue River since 2011

GREEN BELT SHAPING URBAN AREAS IN MASTER PLAN (2011 -2023)

In the 2011 Hanoi's Capital Master Planning Project, the Green Belt has become an attention in establishing the general layout in the context of high urbanisation.²⁰ If the 1998 General

Plan aimed for Hanoi to reach a population of 4.5-5 million by 2020, by 2011, planners had to reassess the city's development direction due to the population exceeding 6 million, beyond planning vision. Although previously, Hanoi's Master Planning had divided lands into development and restricted areas, it was not until 2011 that Hanoi for the first time included tools to control urban expansion into its planning.

According to Decision 1259 of the Prime Minister approving the Master Planning for the construction of Hanoi to 2030 with vision to 2050, Hanoi's Green Belt was established along the Nhue River to prevent encroachment of the rural urbanisation process, as part of the urban-rural system, serving as a buffer zone between the expanded inner-city area and the expanded urban area at the South of the Red River, covering approximately 4,000 hectares (40km²) (Figure 4). Thus, the Nhue River green belt has been reduced in size compared to before, covering half of the central urban area, cut off a former part to become an urban alternating green wedge and a green corridor embracing the remaining central part (Figure 5).

The 2011 Hanoi's Master Planning was a collaborative effort involving experts from international consultancy firms: the Perkins Eastman - Posco E&C - Jina Architects Co.Ltd (the USA and Korea) with the Institute of Architecture, Vietnam Institute for Urban and Rural Planning (VIUP) and the Hanoi Urban Planning Institute (HUPI). The change in the shape of the Green Belt comes from referencing international models and the context of rapid urbanisation. In particular, Hanoi has referred to the Green Belt development model from London - where the Green Belt system is closely combined with newtowns²¹.

Overall, Hanoi's Green Belt has a herringbone structure with a combination of Green Corridors along the Red River and Green Wedges. If the London's Green Belt surrounds the city to prevent urban sprawl, the Hanoi's Green Belt following the Nhue River has the function of a Green Wedge in shaping the urban areas by preventing

the connection between component urban areas in the urban system. Meanwhile, Green Corridors are Green Belt according to international theory, aiming to limit the development of urban areas. Hanoi has used many tools but there has been confusion in identifying and applying them to solve problems.

PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS: CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY OF HANOI'S GREEN BELT PLANNING

THE CONTINUATION OF HANOI'S GREEN BELT PLANNING

THE CONTINUATION

Hanoi's green belt has gone through more than 60 years of development but still maintains the original planning concepts in forming the green belt. If in the first two stages, the green belt was used with the most prominent function of ensuring food supply and ecological balance, then after the development process, the previous functions are still retained and developed based on

the practice of urban development. Until now, Hanoi's Green Belt has been built with multi-functions to make the most effective use of resources. From perseverance in aiming at agricultural development, preserving traditional village culture and protecting the environment, planners through the periods have had unity in how to deal with the situation and adapt to the environment conditions and geographical basis. Right from the name "Hanoi", the capital of Vietnam has the advantage of rivers and lakes, developing along the river, taking advantage of geographical advantages to improve agricultural production and create ecological space, improving quality of life for people through the Green Belt. Planners have similar perspectives in shaping green belts with scales and structures that change according to changes in the urban system.

Although the green belt diagram was built based on the views of foreign experts, Hanoi's Green Belt still has its own characteristics based on local development progress and resources.

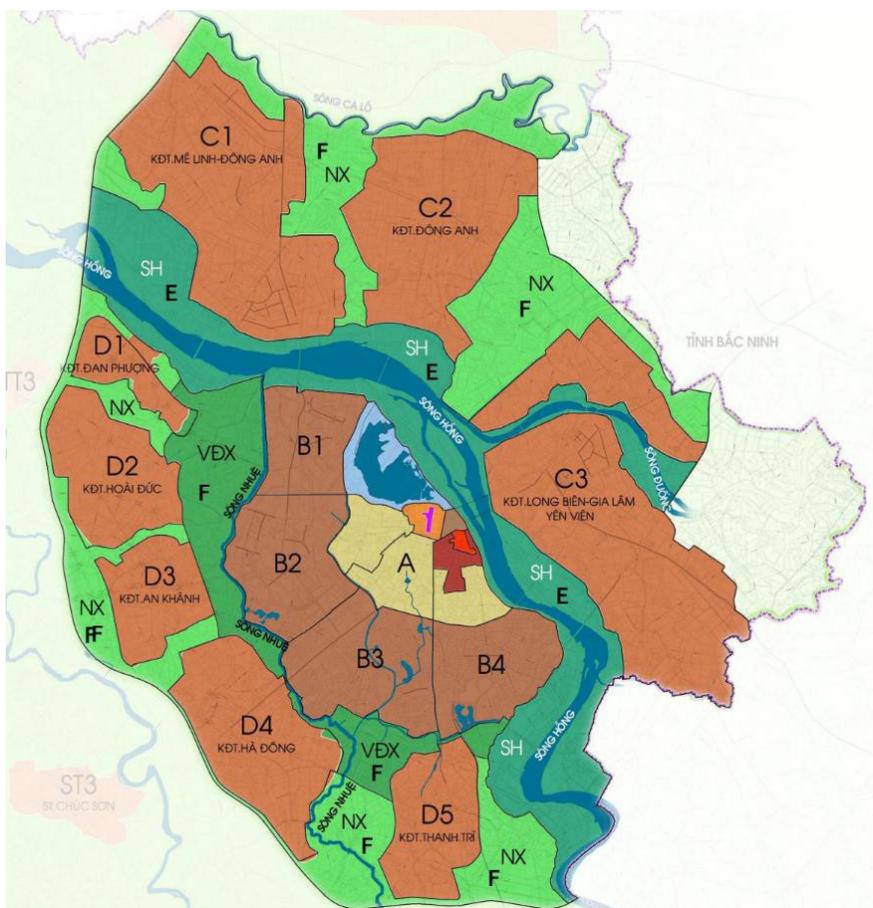


Fig. 8. Three tools for controlling Urban growth: Green Belt (VĐX), Green Corridors (HLX), and Green Wedges (NX).

THE REASONS

The continuity in Hanoi's Green Belt planning comes from the evolution of general development rules and local characteristics. Hanoi is an urban area that developed from rice cultivation civilizations, with unique geographical features, green spaces are optimally utilised. The development of the Green Belt is associated with a change in Hanoi's urban planning orientation. From the unipolar urban construction orientation to counterbalancing and expanding urban space in the form of a capital city, the green belt over time has been applied to separate and control development according to the general layout vision of Hanoi.

THE DISCONTINUATION OF HANOI'S GREEN BELT PLANNING

THE DISCONTINUATION

Hanoi's planning process has undergone numerous transformations driven by political, economic, and the subjects participating in planning. Despite its over 60 years of development, Hanoi's Green Belt exhibits discontinuity vacuums. Once a hallmark of urban development, the Green Belt was subsequently neglected, lacking a mechanism to safeguard this paradigm, yet it resurfaced as a focal point in the 2011 planning framework. Across different periods, the Green Belt has undergone distinct changes in planning perspectives, structure, functionality, and form, evolving from a perspective of food security, ideal of ecological balance to a planning tool for controlling growth and the role of the green belt in general layout. The Green Belt has transcended its role as a mere supporting tool to become an integral component of Hanoi's comprehensive development.

THE REASONS

The discontinuities in Hanoi's Green Belt planning stem of political factors, economic structures, and the involvement of foreign experts. Shifting political systems and economic structures lead to alterations in resource allocation and a dynamic adaptation of development goals to the evolving context. The structure of the subsidised economy and the market economy, as well as the domestic political system and international relations, have many differences in development directions, resources, conditions, and requirements for planners who must select planning strategies aligned with practical realities. Furthermore, each period of the Green Belt's development has involved diverse planning entities from various countries, each bringing their own distinct and incompatible planning ideals.

Above all, beyond the influence of imported international theories and political-economic shifts, social factors, evolving lifestyles, and strategic urban development goals also significantly impact Green Belt planning perspectives. As society progresses and modernises, individuals gain more choices, and competition intensifies. In the past, residents lived in communal housing and relied on bicycles and walking for daily commutes. Today, a shift towards single-family households and personal vehicles has become prevalent. The urban scale has rapidly expanded from a population of less than one million to accommodating two million

and now exceeding eight million. Hanoi's position has evolved into that of a key urban development hub with multi-functional, acting as the driving engine for regional development. Aligned with its goals of sustainable development and its established prominence, Hanoi's Green Belt planners are constantly refining measures to mitigate the impacts of urbanisation while still optimising effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

The development of Hanoi's Green Belt is a synthesis of learnings from international concepts and adaptation to different development periods, varying visionary goals. However, Hanoi has yet to put Green Belt into practice due to institutional complexities, the region's chaotic nature, and planners' incomplete understanding about Green Belt theory, construction methods, appropriate planning tools, and the identification of key bottlenecks and expansion areas that need to be prevented. Despite these challenges, Hanoi has persevered in preserving green spaces for many years, holding onto the hope of balanced and sustainable development.

Green Belt theory has a long history of development with various forms. While London opted for a wide green belt encircling the city to control the expansion of the core urban area and utilise newtowns system to mitigate the contradictions of the theory, Beijing chose an organic form, separating the historic inner city from the outer expansion area and incorporating green lines to flexibly regulate urban development. The success of Green Belts worldwide lies in the harmonious integration of different development stages, planning methods, management approaches, political and economic systems, and socio-cultural characteristics in each location. Hanoi's Green Belt is currently pursuing a flexible combination of functions and structures to achieve sustainability goals. But the question is how should Hanoi's Green Belt be shaped to control an urban area? Each city, with its unique size and characteristics, has different carrying capacities, infrastructure, and development goals. The choice of stringent or flexible control tools among various urban separation forms hinges on the vision of urban planners and managers, the development strategy outlined for the city's population growth, accurate growth projections, and robust policy implementation. Hanoi can still adopt the London model if it possesses an effective policy enforcement tool to manage its current population of 8 million and integrates it with a well-established newtown system. Alternatively, Hanoi could continue with the Beijing-style fan-shaped Green Belt diagram, aiming for looser control, prioritising land using for urban development, and optimising the multifunctional Green Belt's effectiveness.

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IMAGE SOURCES

Figure 1 Politburo (January 04, 1960)

Figure 2 Logan (2000)

Figure 3 Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam (1998)

Figure 4 Urban Development Agency - Ministry of Construction (July 2011)

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