

## PUBLIC FUNCTIONS OF THE SQUARES IN THE CENTRAL AREA OF HO CHI MINH CITY

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### Abstract

*Square as special public space of the urban area plays an important role in the urban structure and urban life. Each square is constructed to represent one or several functions through space with the corresponding structure. To understand the public space functions of the square, the article analyzes and evaluates the current use of the square in the center of Ho Chi Minh City. Specifically, the squares such as Nguyen Hue Walking Street, Paris Commune Square, Me Linh Square, Quach Thi Trang Square and International Square. The methods used for the study included the collection and processing of available information, questionnaire surveys, quick interviews, and observation - participant research.*

**Keywords:** function, public space, square

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### INTRODUCTION

Urban public space is an important area of scholar concern, being a critical factor which indicates the urban living standard. Public space has historically been described as "open space", meaning streets, parks, and creation areas, plaza and publicly owned and managed outdoor spaces, etc. (Stéphane Tonnelat, 2010). The concept "public space" can be understood in both literal and senses. The former denotes public space including streets, parks, squares, stations, etc. The latter refers to the place where citizens assemble, such as the plazas or shopping malls (DiGregorio, 2011). During the history of development of European cities, square has played a significant role as the center of politics, education, and entertainment events. Square is built among a wide space, surrounded by streets or relevantly public utilities. Square also has some facilities such as fountains, benches, shelters, or some decorations (Ho Viet Vinh, 2005).

Square is built with multifunctional uses in mind. In Corrigan's (2011) view, its first function is political, followed by democratically functions as the public assemble for their social or commercial activities. However, the more developed the society becomes, the more modern the urban areas are, and the more individual needs the citizens desire in their need of using and living in urban public spaces. According to Ta Nam Chien (2015) in "Báo Xây Dựng" (Construction Newspaper), the space of squares Ho Chi Minh City "is continually invaded by motor vehicle",

resulting in restricting its functions. To clarify this issue and seek the answer to the question “Is there any restriction of functions for social activities at some squares in Ho Chi Minh City?”, this study explores the functions of public space of squares in the city center in Ho Chi Minh City such as Nguyen Hue Walking Street, Quach Thi Trang Rotary, Paris Commune Rotary, Me Linh Rotary, Quoc Te Rotary (International Rotary).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Public space represents an interest among many researchers in substantial urban planning and development. Both academic and public discourse have provided insights into various aspects of the square such as the appearance, concept, characteristics, functions, design, description, and evaluation in Ho Chi Minh City and elsewhere. In *Urban Infrastructure Early Saigon*, Tran Huu Quang (2002) highlights that although the square was mentioned in Western architectural urban planning, there was no specific mention of the square of Saigon at that time. Le Trung Hoa (2003) in his book *Principle and Methodology of Site Research (Ho Chi Minh City Locations)* while discussing concepts such as "roundabout", "square", "public square" Paris commune, suggests that the term "square" is a Sino-Vietnamese word followed by a place name or French name (such as "Paris commune ") to indicate a specific place. In addition, the article "Looking back at Quach Thi Trang ancient and present time before breaking down" by Minh Tri (2017) explains how the square in front of Ben Thanh market was named after Quach Thi Trang together with its modified significance.

Some scholars choose to focus on basic concepts, features, functions, design criteria of the square in general. Vo Dinh Diep, et al., (2003) discuss the factors that govern the spatial morphology of squares, city squares and city imagery, size, structure, and ways of utilizing spaces in a square. However, these discussions only stop at general information about the city square without clarifying any differences between the squares and other open spaces. In addition, "The City of Issues of Interest" by Ly The Dan (2003) in magazine *Văn Hóa Xưa và Nay (Ancient and Current Cultures)* states essential features and functions of Greek squares with some the main architectural and special points by using miniature scene for the square in these two ancient countries. Nguyen The Ba (2004) in his book *Urban Construction Planning* presents details of the square scale and structure.

Other works describe and evaluate squares in Vietnam and those around the world. An article in magazine *Văn Hóa Xưa và Nay (Ancient and Current Cultures)*, "City Square issues need attention" by Ly The Dan (2003) comments that the square in Ho Chi Minh City must be sufficiently spacious to serve large gathering during national festivals. In *Ho Chi Minh City Cultural Land Volume III*, Tran Van Giau and Tran Bach Dang (1998) contend that some of the squares in the city are no longer suitable for the modern urban landscape. In *The New World Architecture and Urban Integration in Vietnam*, Nguyen Huu Thai (2003) recognizes how large public spaces such as Time Square and Wall Street, Broadway have brought the "urban soul" and converged on many cultures. However, Saigon with its urban space planning still lacks public parks for festivals and other cultural gatherings. Ta Nam Chien (2015) in his article "Architecture Square in the big cities of Vietnam" also notes a similar observation.

In addition, a research study on "Improving and building new squares in Ho Chi Minh City" by Ho Viet Vinh (2005) shared an overview of the theoretical basis of the square yet without clarifying the concept of square and site in Saigon - Ho Chi Minh City. While highlighting that the square according to the author's own standards is not suitable for the common square in other cities of Vietnam and in the world, the author tends to apply his applying own standards to other spaces in Ho Chi Minh City, thus confusing between parks and open spaces other than the square.

The study that shapes this paper employed qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. Particularly, research tools include questionnaire surveys, observation, and brief interviews with the participants at study sites. The questionnaire survey utilizes a non-probability sampling method, namely the convenient sampling, with 250 questionnaires divided equally for 5 study sites in the center (50 questionnaires for each site). The survey result was processed through the SPSS software.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The project outcome shows that the main functions displayed in the square in the center of Ho Chi Minh City include politics and culture, celebration of special events or characters with merit, traffic coordination, trade, religion and spirituality, entertainment and social gathering.

### *Political and cultural functions*

The political and cultural functions of the square embraces political meetings parades, acknowledgement, commendations, and cultural activities such as street festivals, Tet holiday, traditional folk events, and so on. To organize these activities, the structure of the square must be spacious with the abundance of seats and footholds. The square for these functions "should not be arranged many architectural and equipment performance" (Vo Dinh Diep et al., 2003).

Among the five squares or sites surveyed in the city center, only Nguyen Hue Walking Street seems well qualified for this function. Nguyen Hue Walking Street was built and officially used in 2015 with 670m in total length and 64m in width. The large, airy structure falls into two sections: the area of President Ho Chi Minh Statue Park and the walking zone extending from the building of the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City to Bach Dang wharf. The square is designed with two lines of trees, granite tiles, benches, and decorative lights. With two lanes for vehicles and an empty space in the middle, the structure of Nguyen Hue Walking Street is suitable for the political-cultural events.

*Political Function:* Since its inception, the Nguyen Hue Walking Square has been the site of choice for events of political values, particularly the commemoration of Liberation Day, Reunification Day with military parade (2015), incense offering, flowers display for annual commemoration of President Ho Chi Minh, exhibitions of political and educational posters and billboards for public awareness, promotion of patriotism, protection of territorial sovereignty (2018), artistic performances (2016, 2017 and 2018), among others. In addition, many ceremonial commendations were held here including annual acknowledgement of Uncle Ho and honoring individual and team title of Advanced Youth on the occasion of President Ho Chi Minh's birthday (19/5); and award ceremonies for outstanding teachers of the city.

*Cultural activities:* Nguyen Hue Walking Square is also selected as the site of many large-scale activities. Especially, in March 2018, the “Ao dai” festival honors the beauty of Vietnamese dress and promotes other traditional costumes of the nation, which includes Ao dai performances and exchanges, co-operative programs with Ao dai, and other events which feature fashion varieties and which honors outstanding individuals who have devoted to Ao dai in their work and life. Besides, Lunar New Year celebration on flowered streets is also an annual activity here where activities and decorations convey meaningful messages of triumph and patriotism. Moreover, this location is also a well known site for collective wedding ceremony where participants offer flowers to Uncle Ho, take part in the "City badge" award ceremony, and witness other cultural performances. By and large, with a spacious and airy structure, the Nguyen Hue Walking Street meets the political and cultural functions. Other sites at the center due to limited space and structure do not handle the above function.

***Celebrate events or commemorating characters with merit functions***

This function is manifested by the construction of a monument of one or several historical figures at the center of the square. To satisfy such need, the square is equipped with monuments of significant characters. Space of the square is designed to pay attention to the layout and form to increase the art to create majestic and stately monument and have space to perform ritual when necessary.

At the square/site in the center of Ho Chi Minh City, Nguyen Hue Walking Street, Quach Thi Trang, Me Linh site, Paris Commune Square and International arena demonstrate this function. Nguyen Hue Walking Square with the spotlight point of President Ho Chi Minh Monument which was inaugurated on May 17, 2015 and which is highly accessible to the general public. Monument of President Ho Chi Minh is 7.2 meters high, standing posture raised his hand as coming to the Southern compatriots.

Since 2015, this location has hosted many activities to commemorate President Ho Chi Minh, such as the incense-offering ceremony, offering flowers to Uncle Ho during national celebrations, programs honoring the portraitists of the city such as exemplary teachers, youths who follow Uncle Ho’s teachings, among others. Through the commemoration or celebration activities of the City, many participants who perform rituals to Uncle Ho are representatives of the Communist Party, the city, mass organizations, working classes, farmers, intellectuals of all ages.

Quach Thi Trang Square, the intersection of major roads such as Ham Nghi, Le Loi, Tran Hung Dao, Le Lai, which is located in front of Ben Thanh Market and which has recently been dismantled for the construction of the underground Metro station. Before the reunification in 1975, the site was known as Dien Hong Square, when Tran Nguyen Han monument replaced the previous one in 1965 on the order of the Saigon authorities to "build a symbol of the regime at the park or the square" (Minh Tri, 2017). After 1975, it was renamed to mark the martyrdom of Quach Thi Trang.

Me Linh Square, which is adjacent to Ben Bach Dang street and which forms the intersection of Hai Ba Trung, Phan Van Dat, Ho Huyen Nghiep, Ngo Duc Ke and Ton Duc Thang street, hosts green trees, stone benches, fountains and other facilities in a small semicircular park. Here, Tran Hung Dao statue is placed in a solemn and majestic position, in honor of the national hero with the defeat of Mongolian – Yuan army in the 13th century.

The site was changed by many monuments such as Rigault de Genouilly (1878), Hai Ba Trung (1962), Tran Hung Dao (1967). Tran Hung Dao statue is still preserved today. The statue is nearly 6 meters high, standing on the triumphal pedestal on the triangle 10 meters high, pointing down the Saigon River as reminiscent of the oath to defeat the old enemy of General Yuan. Although this space has not yet been used for celebrations, the existence of the monument is considered as a symbol to remember the merits of the national heroes.

The International Intersection, which is located at the intersection of Pham Ngoc Thach, Tran Cao Van and Vo Van Tan streets, retains the basic structure as it was originally built in 1970, with a roundabout about 100 meters in diameter, with a fountain, and four spiral walks to the center of the site. Formed in the French colonial period, under Coffin's planning, the site has a special historical meaning in each period.

The Three-Ball Quarter was established in the the 18th century as a monument of three French soldiers. By 1956, the Government of the Republic of Vietnam had demolished the statues. In 1970, the Soldier Field was rebuilt with a roundabout, decorated with trees, fountains and four copper spiral walkways heading to the center area which is a turtle-shaped monument and on its back, with a large stone with inscription denoting the end of the Republic of Vietnam (the turtle and the memorial stone was destroyed in 1976). In 1972, the government of Nguyen Van Thieu abandoned the statues of French soldiers, transformed them into "International aid square" to "gratitude" for the "allies" who helped the Saigon regime (Hoang Anh, 1997); Since then, this space has been officially named International Square; whose name exists till the present day.

The Paris Commune Square in front of Notre Dame Cathedral boasts famous historical buildings such as Notre Dame Cathedral and City Post Office. Since the formation, although this space has not altered much in its structure, due to various functions of public celebrations, this landmark has taken on new enrichment of cultural meanings.

After the Church was built in 1903, in front of the French Church, the monument of Bishop Ba Da Loc, who supported King Ton Nguyen Phuc Canh (son of Gia Long), was built. Da Loc was the envoy of Nguyen Anh in France, who helped Nguyen Anh to fight the Tay Son Dynasty. In 1945, this monument was demolished. In 1958, the statue of Our Lady of Peace standing upright, holding the globe, looked up as a prayer for the peace of Vietnam and the world, located in this park, and preserved to this day with spiritual meaning. During the Second Republic of Vietnam regime (1963 - 1975), this site was named the John F. Kennedy Memorial Site to commemorate the 35th US President who died in 1963. Since 1975, the site was named Paris Commune with a special historical significance for the world's first proletariat revolution, which was of great significance to the Vietnamese revolution. Depending on the historical situation and the location or the intention of the city government, each square has brought significance and memory to preserve the ancient spirit of the city.

### ***Traffic Coordination Fuction***

Due to its role as a part of urban system and transport hub, square can carry out the functions as the traffic coordination (Nguyen Khai, 2007). It served as an intersection of main routes of transportation, arrival and departure, transit, parking, pedestrian traffic or streamlined spot. To suit the traffic complex system, most square have vertical high structure in dimension (Vo Dinh Diep et

al., 2003). Most squares in Ho Chi Minh City perform such functions. Since the French Colonial Periods, most squares are not only located as the intersection, but also serve open space for community activities for residents. Here are some instances.

Quách Thị Trang Square (now called Quach Thi Trang Rotary), which was previously named *Place Eugène-Cuniac or Square of Market* (Place Les Halles Centrales or Place Marché), is situated near The Sai Gon – My Tho Railway Line, the intersection of Boulevard *Bonnard* (now Le Loi), Boulevard Galliéni (now Tran Hung Dao) and De la Somme (now Ham Nghi). Because of its larger design, this square serves public events like fairs, circuses, traditional opera, and even boxing games. Quach Thi Trang Square, nowadays, is used as a Rotary, performing traffic coordination.

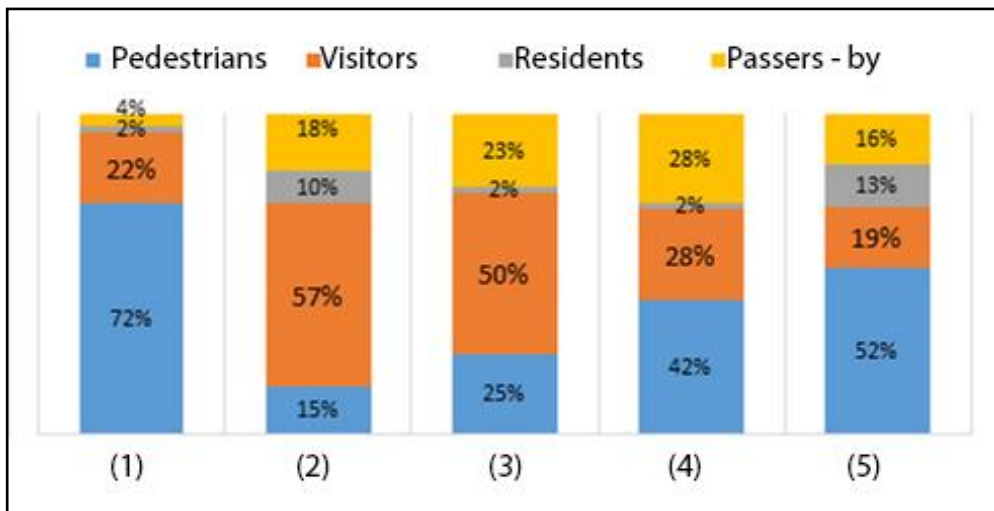
*Mê Linh Square* (now Me Linh Rotary) was constructed in 1863, and initially was the intersection of rue Impériale (Hai Ba Trung), quai Napoléon (Ton Duc Thang), and the rue Vannier (Ngo Duc Ke), rue Turc (Ho Huan Nghiep) and the rue Thu-Dau-Mot (Thi Sách) were added. Me Linh Square plays the role of traffic coordination. Thus, Charles Lemire, in 1868, said that this square was adapted from a vast area to a rotary (Tim Doling, 2016). Today it is a five-way intersection joining streets such as Hai Ba Trung, Phan Van Dat, Ho Huan Nghiep and Ngo Duc Ke.

*International Square* (now Quoc Te – International Rotary), which was based on Coffyn's plan, forms the intersection of Blancsubé (now Pham Ngoc Thach), Testard (now Vo Van Tan), Larclauze (now Tran cao Van) (Hoang Anh, 1997). At present, it, though, is a public place for community's recreational area, Quoc Te Square functions as crossroads of Vo Van Tan and Pham Ngoc Thach. *Paris Commune Square* has not had more changes since its establishment, and not been functioned traffic coordination. With the present-day heavy traffic, it officially becomes the intersection joining streets such as Dong Khoi, Han Thuyen, Pham Ngoc Thach, Le Duan and Nguyen Du.

### ***Commercial functions***

This function serves as the link between indoor and outdoor structures that bring sales people and customers together. The spatial structure offers walking paths, the facilities for resting, sightseeing, dining and the layout of visual arts and media (Vo Dinh Diep et al., 2003). In Ho Chi Minh City, Nguyen Hue Walking Street with a spacious open space for pedestrians, seats, trees and other decorative pieces, associated with commercial stores around and small street vendors. The survey results in five study sites show that the most prominent place of business is where large gathering is possible.

Figure 1 shows that the Nguyen Hue Walking Square occupies the highest percentage of pedestrians due to its wide open space structure, attractive landscapes, and a variety of activities for recreation. The survey shows many shops and trading activities occur well in the area of Nguyen Hue Walking Street with convenience stores, food stalls, fashion shops, even galleries, bookstores and other services. In the square, there are also many street vendors. In the meanwhile, the International Square, apart from a few shopping activities for fast food catering, it is unsuitable for gathering a large number of buyers and sellers. As a result, unlike Paris Commune Square and Me Linh Square, commercial activities here remain constrained and informal only to serve the small-scale needs of residents and visitors.



**Figure 1.** Comparison of user composition ratios at study sites

(1) Ho Chi Minh monument park and Nguyen Hue Walking Street, (2) Quach Thi Trang Square, (3) Paris Commune Square, (4) Me Linh Square, (5) International Square

**Religious and spiritual functions**

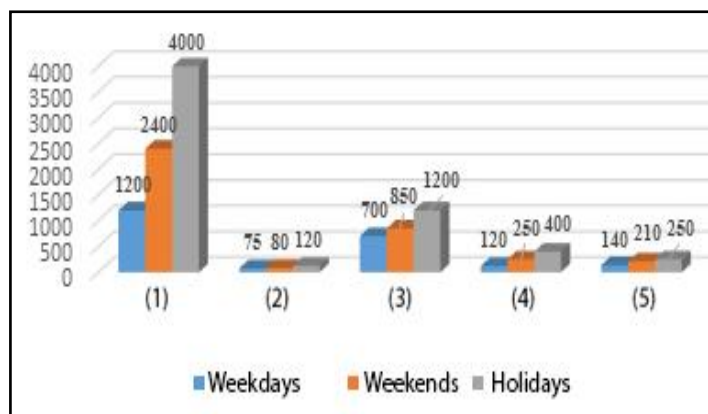
This function occurs at churches, temples, and worship halls during religious festivals. Since its formation, the Notre Dame Cathedral has been associated with the famous religious events. During the First Republic of Vietnam (1954 - 1963), it was known as Peace Square (to pay respect to the Mother of Peace). Prayer activities of the Catholic religion are regularly held in this space within the Cathedral and around the Statue of Mary. However, nowadays the tranquility for spiritual activity is affected by traffic noise. In addition, walking is less comfortable due to the lack of pedestrian traffic lights.

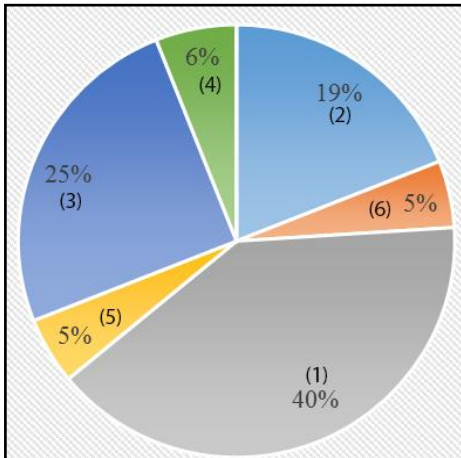
**Entertainment functions – exchanging and meeting friends**

Entertainment functions and performances are displayed in the square where all the people socialize in all types of activities. In the five surveyed sites, Nguyen Hue Walking Street and the Paris Commune indicate this function. The International and Me Linh sites also share this function but seem more limited in accessibility and safety for users. According to the survey results, Nguyen Hue Walking Street is the most satisfying place for the number of people involved in entertainment here (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Comparison of the number of participants in the study sites on days in the year

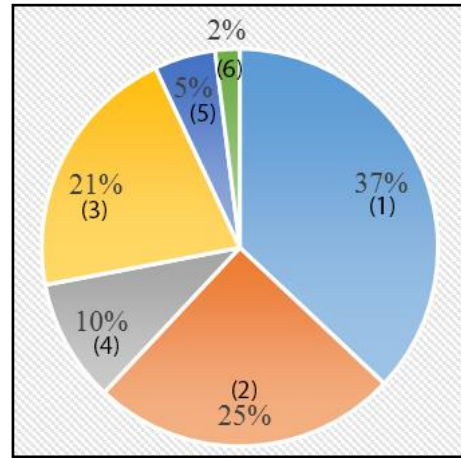
(1) Ho Chi Minh monument park and Nguyen Hue Walking Street, (2) Quach Thi Trang Square, (3) Paris Commune Square, (4) Me Linh Square, (5) International Square





**Figure 3.** Percentage of approaching on Nguyen Hue Pedestrian Street

- (1) Sightseeing, (2) History and local identity,
- (3) Entertainment and relaxation, (4) Surrounding buildings, (5) Friend Meeting, (6) Exercising



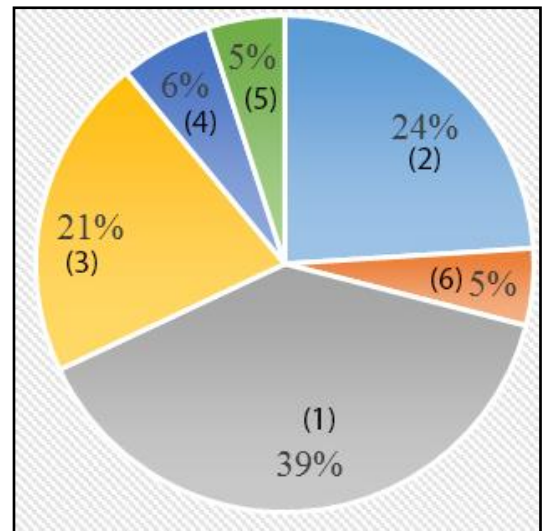
**Figure 4.** Percentage of approaching on Paris Commune Square

- (1) Sightseeing, (2) History and local identity,
- (3) Entertainment and relaxation, (4) Surrounding buildings, (5) Friend Meeting, (6) Exercising

At the Paris Commune Square, limited space seems to constraint public activities. For example, visitors need to utilize grass as seating areas rather than benches. Other attractive landmarks such as the Statue of Mary, the Notre Dame Cathedral and the Post Office, are able to host visitors only on a small scale for communication among tourists and local people. The activities of the people and tourists include: sightseeing (37%), history and local identity (25%), entertainment and relaxation (10%), the surrounding buildings (21%), friend meetings (5%), exercising (2%) (Figure 4). Me Linh site includes surrounding streets and roundabouts. Although the semicircular roundabout which is designed as a small park is space available for public use, it is not crowded due to its small size, many flowerbeds and lakes which occupy most of the area. Many activities including sightseeing (24%), history and local identity (5%), entertainment and relaxation (39%), walking to access works (6%), exercising (5%) (Figure 5) remain relatively low in frequency (figure 2).

**Figure 5.** Percentage of approaching of Me Linh Square

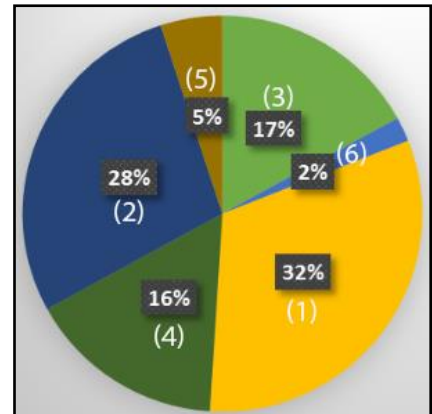
- (1) Sightseeing,
- (2) History and local identity
- (3) Entertainment and relaxation,
- (4) Surrounding buildings,
- (5) Friend Meeting,
- (6) Exercising,





**Figure 6.** Percentage of approaching of International Square

- (1) Sightseeing,
- (2) History and local identity
- (3) Entertainment and relaxation,
- (4) Surrounding buildings,
- (5) Friend Meeting,
- (6) Exercising,



International Square consists of streets and a roundabout. Although the space available for public use is a circular roundabout with a small park, it is densely concentrated with high traffic density and many ponds which seem to restrict the population in coming here for their leisure activities. Ho Chi Minh City is also not considered a popular place for entertainment and community activities, as there is an adjacent 23/9 park. Before being collapsed in February, people in Ho Chi Minh city did not consider Quach Thi Trang as a place for entertaining and social activities. However, in the new master plan for the Ben Thanh-Suoi Tien metro station, the future part of the Quach Thi Trang site will become a modern square, leisure and other public activities for the people.

## CONCLUSION

Square is built for multifunctional uses with its valuable public significance has played a vital role in the life of citizens and urban authorities. The study of five public squares in Ho Chi Minh City has highlighted many functions of politics, culture, anniversaries, traffic coordination, trade, religion, entertainment, and other public gatherings. Additionally, the functions of square are constantly changing as they adapt to the update of infrastructure and population density. In the past, squares in Ho Chi Minh City were functioned as venues of community activities, festivals, entertainment major events, and meetings. Such functions of Ho Chi Minh City's square nowadays, however, seem unable to accommodate the needs of a fast-growing population of 8 million citizens. Every vacant space of square is planted with trees to intensify green cover and regulate the climate. Many French colonial squares have been adapted to suit the developing Ho Chi Minh City traffic system. For example, Quach Thi Trang Square serves as a rotary to control traffic, Me Linh Square and International Square serve social events, and Paris Commune Square has become a tourist attraction. Although these squares continues to hold on to perform various functions, each of them has its own constraint. The question of improving Ho Chi Minh City urban development, especially in the city center, should come under more comprehensive consideration.

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