

Christina Schwenkel, *Building Socialism: The Afterlife of East German Architecture in Urban Vietnam*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. 432 pp, with illustrations. ISBN 9781478012603

Ethnographically vivid and meticulously written, *Building Socialism* analyses the remarkably diverse array of affects, meanings and practices that have been attached to the buildings and spaces that comprise Quang Trung housing estate (*khu chung cư Quang Trung*). In the 1970s, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) designed and constructed this housing estate in Vinh, a city in central Vietnam, both as a token of friendship and mutual support to help Vietnam recover from the aftermath of US air strikes and build the foundation of socialism, and as a showcase of socialist modernity and GDR's technological advance as an emerging modernising force of the socialist world. Using socialist high-modernist architecture as the entry point, the book examines the process of socialist nation building in northern Vietnam as driven by the interplay between Western utopian fantasies and universal rational planning practices on the one hand, and national aspirations and local post-war conditions on the other hand. The word 'Western' here does not mean the capitalist West as opposed to the socialist bloc, but rather encompasses European socialist elites such as the USSR and GDR, which were at the time perceived in Vietnam as embodiments of global forms of modernity in contrast to the state of 'backwardness' in former colonies in the global South. The book tells how people of Vinh strived to rebuild their city from the rubble left behind by US bombardments, focusing particularly on their desires to transform its infrastructure in accordance with socialist ideals of modernity. Yet it also documents the attrition of that fantasy into a dystopia, as well as how today's residents cope with both the decay of the buildings and the 'slow material disintegration of socialism' (Schwenkel 2020: 9).

The book is divided into three parts with ten substantive chapters. The first part, 'Ruination', charts the historical context that inspires Vietnamese authorities' efforts to transform Vinh into a model socialist city, focusing particularly on the city's destruction by US air assaults.

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Chapter One examines US air attacks as driven both by techno-fanaticism and an ambition of deliberate de-modernisation by means of excessive force to eradicate all the conditions for human life in Vietnam. Chapter Two moves the focus from US military tacticians and from above to on-the-ground sensory experiences of war by the people of Vinh as they struggled to survive the destruction and hardships of evacuation. Chapter Three shifts the attention to East Germany, where painful experiences of war in Vietnam captured on public media inspired boisterous public sentiments of socialist solidarity and internationalism. This chapter explains how Vietnam came to see East Germany as both a sincere socialist ally and an icon of modernity that could help with the country's reconstruction, as well as why East Germany was so enthusiastic about supporting Vietnam, not only out of compassionate sentiments but also out of political ambitions to showcase East Germany as a rising economic and technological power in the socialist system.

The second part, 'Reconstruction', documents how Vinh was rebuilt with GDR's financial and technological support, focusing on the tension between global and national approaches to Vietnam's modernisation process, both as a way of liberating the country from post-war 'backwardness' and as a technique of socialist governance. Chapter Four documents the distinctive approach the GDR took in the rebuilding of Vinh that made this project a more effective cooperation than most of the reconstruction efforts supported by other socialist allies of Vietnam. GDR experts made deliberate efforts to avoid the asymmetric politics of foreign aid between unequal states through engaging in field research and an extended planning period to obtain first-hand knowledge of Vietnamese culture and history. Chapter Five looks at the design of Vinh as a civilising project intended to create an optimal socialist city. However, despite the efforts by both the GDR and Vietnam to frame the transfer of technical knowledge as benevolent and equal, there were remarkable conflicts between universal socialist ideals and local practices regarding urban lived spaces, such as between European values of individual happiness and privacy and Vietnam's effort of fostering the spirit of collectivism. Chapter Six further illustrates this tension by examining one particular aspect of urban planning: standardised housing. It shows that the GDR's effort to make Quang Trung a utopian housing estate was informed by ecological rationalism, socialist hygienic modernity, European value of privacy and functional segregation of space. This introduced a logic of spatiality

that was dominant in socialist Eastern Europe at the time, yet one that was in many aspects at odds with the local conditions of Vinh's post-war recovery and Vietnamese visions of socialist nation building and urban futurity.

The final part, 'Obsolescence', moves from the planning of the city to Vinh citizens' lived experiences of both the quick emergence of modernist housing and its equally rapid decline, demonstrating that urban subjects are remarkably capable of intervening in spaces to challenge and remake urban policies and forms of spatial governance, rather than merely docile subjects of the state and modern spatial regimes. Chapter Seven documents how unruly practices commonly associated with the female sphere of rural domesticity, notably improper disposal of domestic trash, threatened to derail the state's project to build an advanced socialist society. Those unruly practices, however, were actually tenants' means to translate rational planning and utopian design and to contest the spatial regime of high-modernist housing. Chapter Eight charts Quang Trung's rapid change from a symbol of modernity and future fantasy to an outdated housing estate that symbolised the downfall of socialist architecture, focusing particularly on how local residents lived with, responded to and made sense of various forms of decay of the buildings, such as leaks, dry taps and the disrepair of corridors. Chapter Nine documents tenants' manifold efforts to reverse the process of decay as a linear decline through interior renovations of their apartments to meet their diverse and changing urban needs, thus converting generic flats into 'vibrant spaces for homemaking, worship, socializing and livelihood opportunities' (Schwenkel 2020: 262). Chapter Ten documents how Quang Trung residents negotiated the state policy to convert state-managed housing into private ownership and later to replace the socialist housing estate with new forms of private housing in a process driven by market logics. Despite its decay, the residents, particularly old ones, expressed strong attachment to the buildings not only as a source of home, identity and sociability, but also as a symbol of many socialist values they still cherished and wanted to preserve from the threat of marketisation, such as the spirit of giving and international solidarity and the idea of housing as a public good rather than a tool of capital accumulation.

As a historical ethnography of post-war reconstruction of a city in northern socialist Vietnam with foreign financial and technological assistance, the book contributes to postcolonial urban scholarship with a vivid account of how an 'ordinary' city in decolonised Asia became

a site of active interaction between multiple modernist visions and rational planning practices in an effort to create novel urban spatialities and subjects. This particular case of socialist urbanism and modernist experimentalism in Asia contributes to filling a remarkable gap in the literature on postcolonial urban transformations, which has paid insufficient attention to state-led socialist modernisation as a global urbanising force that has shaped urban forms across Asia, Africa and Latin America. Although scholars have recently attended to the global circulations of architectural forms and planning practices among socialist countries, the scholarship has mostly examined these distinctive forms and practices as spatial representations and regimes of regulations rather than as lived spaces of social practice (Lefebvre 1991). Furthermore, scholars have focused predominantly on the one-sided 'transfer' of knowledge and technology from the Global North rather than on the agency of beneficiaries in the decolonising Global South to translate, appropriate and remake modernist architecture in ways imbued with locally constituted affects and meanings (Akcan 2012).

Not only a rich contribution to global urban scholarship, this book also adds new insights in the historical and anthropological literature on Vietnam as a distinctive case of decolonisation, socialism and late-socialist transformations. While the scholarship on past and present Vietnam remains focused on major cities and far-away villages, *Building Socialism* shows that an attention to 'secondary' cities can shed remarkable light on Vietnam's years of post-war reconstruction and socialist modernisation, often referred to as the subsidy period (*thời kỳ bao cấp*). Through looking at a secondary city as such, this book demonstrates a different picture of this special chapter in Vietnamese history, which has been widely represented as times of extreme privation with little coordinated effort at urban planning and modernisation. In line with Susan Bayly's (2007; 2008) work on the aspirations for modernity and global connectivity as a central feature of Vietnam's socialist transformations, this book demonstrates the remarkable scale of multidirectional exchanges and circulations of people, technology, finance and ideas that have connected Vietnam to the farthest corners of the modern socialist world, even during times of brutal war destruction, crushing poverty and global efforts of circumvention by Western capitalism.

Building Socialism impresses readers in multiple ways. Schwenkel demonstrates an admirable capacity to combine history and anthropology in a well-balanced account of socialist modernisation in past

and present Vietnam. The book features both a rich recollection of Vietnam's post-war reconstruction and socialist development processes informed by refreshing archival materials, photographs and maps, and one of the most vivid ethnographic accounts of urban life in contemporary Vietnam, crafted from in-depth interviews, casual conversations, meticulous surveys and personal observations. The author demonstrates a striking attention to details, as seen from her close analysis of freehand sketches, elaborate figures of various housing arrangements and masterful use of technical military jargons in the chapter on US airstrikes.

Anthropology researchers and students will also find in *Building Socialism* a textbook on how to do fieldwork in and about Vietnam. It shows how a white, female American anthropologist, with a German surname, could become the first foreigner to conduct extended fieldwork in a socialist housing estate in a city once brutally destroyed by US air assaults. The book shows how an anthropologist can cultivate rapport based on trust and obligation with not only the community with whom she lives, but also with local cadres, how to negotiate access to various official sources of materials that would otherwise be impossible to a foreign researcher, how to make qualitative survey a productive part of fieldwork and how fieldwork on the other side of the world, in former East Germany, can remarkably enrich an anthropological account of Vietnam as a site of intersection between global connectivities.

What impresses me the most is the author's consistent and informed refusal to describe Vietnam's process of socialist nation building and modernisation – as a clash between binary oppositions, such as between universal models and local conditions, global modernist visions and national anti-modern sentiments, control and resistance, telos and metis (Scott 1998). The focus of *Building Socialism* has consistently been on affects, meanings and practices that cannot be reduced to mutually exclusive spheres. German experts did introduce Western values to their design of Vinh, but they also paid attention to local conditions (Chapter Four). While Vietnamese authorities were cautious about aspects of global modernism that were at odds with the country's vision of nation-building, they were at the same time enthusiastic about catching up with international standards of modernity (Chapter Five). And while Quang Trung residents did not uncritically accept the imposition of foreign forms of spatiality and socialist practices of control, they also valorised East German design and technology, and cherished

socialist values such as the dedication to common good, modernity and equality (Chapter Ten).

If there is a point of critique, it would be the fact that the book does not advance a brand-new theoretical concept that would signify a complete move away from the grand narratives on socialism, post-colonial urbanisation or high-modernism. But perhaps such an expectation would miss the book's main theoretical strength. While it does not offer a revolutionary break with the current theoretical literature, *Building Socialism* offers numerous nuances to and refinements of grand theories developed by Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault and James Scott, with a remarkable level of ethnographic vividness, clarity and persuasiveness.

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