



Desire and Practice. Above: "2009: Year of the Civilized City."  
Below: Urban traffic, Ho Chi Minh City. Photos by Christina Schwenkel





## **Civilizing the City:**

### **Socialist Ruins and Urban Renewal in Central Vietnam**

Christina Schwenkel

In the January 1985 issue of the provincial newspaper *Nghệ Tĩnh*, a full-page color calendar greeted its readership. Toward the bottom of the page, the words *Chúc Mừng Năm Mới!* (Happy New Year!) flanked the months of the upcoming year, signaling the start of *Tết Ất Sửu* (Year of the Buffalo). On top, an enlarged photograph showed four smiling women in colorful, patterned *áo dài* (silk tunics) posing next to a cascading fountain in front of an expansive socialist modernist backdrop that had come to symbolize Vinh City: Quang Trung five-story apartment blocks. Built with the assistance of East Germany in the immediate postwar years, Quang Trung public housing helped bring recognition to the city as a model for successful socialist modernization and urban planning, with its “advanced architectural design” and “high technical and industrial standards” that set it apart from socialist housing developments in other urban areas.<sup>1</sup>

Twenty years later, Building C1 of Quang Trung was demolished. The chief Vietnamese architect from Hanoi, Mr. Văn, who trained in Weimar, East Germany, and assisted in Vinh City's postbombing *Wiederaufbau* (reconstruction), handed me a copy of UN Habitat's 2001 action plan for the city's "sustainable urban development." In it, a consortium of international agencies, working with municipal authorities, identified Quang Trung housing as a series of "dilapidated blocks" and "run-down" public spaces and facilities that required urgent "planning intervention" and "revitalization." A strategy for the neighborhood's "rehabilitation" called for the demolition and reconstruction of the buildings in addition to the "redefinition" of its open public spaces.<sup>2</sup> In a short span of time, Quang Trung had changed from "modern" to "unmodern" housing, and its residents from privileged citizens in priority dwellings with lavish amenities to disadvantaged urban poor with inadequate facilities and destructive urban practices. What happened?

This essay is concerned with the "downfall" of Vinh City, from a center of socialist modernity and postwar urban recovery to a symbol of urban blight and late socialist decay. It traces the process through which an "ideal" urban community in local social memory marked Vinh internationally as the "least attractive" city in Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> It is a "success" story rewritten as a "failure," with new roles assigned to the main actors: new urban socialist citizens, who once contributed to the independence and industrial development of the city, have now inadvertently hastened its demise, turning a model socialist community into a dystopic urban "slum."<sup>4</sup>

### **Civilizing the Cityscape: Neoliberal Modes of Urban Governance**

Scholars have long noted the visual and sociospatial transformations that occurred in postsocialist cities after the end of the Cold War as new forms of urban governance identified as "neoliberal" reconfigured urban landscapes to advance a free-market economy. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, new strategies of urban renewal across Eastern Europe promoted the destruction of socialist cityscapes—including architecture, monuments, parks, public housing, and communal centers—while endorsing privatization and capitalist redevelopment as key to the construction of modern

and prosperous global cities. The collapse of communism, Anca Pusca has observed, “was marked by the literal collapse of structures and bodies previously perceived as indestructible,” such as the Berlin Wall and the statues and memorials honoring socialist heroes.<sup>5</sup> Ensuing struggles in urban space between memory and forgetting revealed the complex ways in which socialist institutions, modes of planning, and forms of knowledge and expertise were promptly devalued and dismissed by market- and profit-driven urban-renewal strategies. The demolition of socialist architectural landscapes, and their reinvention as capitalist entrepreneurial cities, have transformed or erased particular histories, experiences, identities, values, and worldviews that residents often aspire to maintain as the built environment around them assumes new spatial and material form.

Neoliberal modes of urban governance in post and late socialist cities have had a profound impact on residents, particularly the urban poor. Capitalist modernization has typically improved the quality of life for wealthier citizens, while the lower classes suffer disproportionately from new and emerging forms of private property that often result in forced evictions and displacement. Li Zhang has argued that in late socialist China, an increase in private home ownership produced new patterns of spatial segregation and social marginalization as urban zones of belonging and nonbelonging became more clearly defined and delineated.<sup>6</sup> In addition to emerging forms of exclusion and dispossession, urban renewal projects have prompted new discourses and categories of moral personhood that fit with visions of “civilized” urban living. The formation of (neo)liberal cities, according to Nikolas Rose, has entailed the reorganization of space and spatial forms, including housing, streets, parks, and buildings, with the intent to regulate and “shap[e] the conduct of free individuals in the direction of civility.”<sup>7</sup>

Urban planners have long identified cities as centers of social disorder and moral decay in need of particular design and technical practices to restore order and combat urban disease and misery. Consequently, strategies of urban governance have consistently focused on the domain of aesthetics as a means to “civilize” resident conduct and create cleaner, safer, and more livable communities. The nineteenth-century landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, for example, advocated the construction of scenic parks and gardens as an eco-aesthetic technique to rid the city of corruption and

vice and to promote healthier lifestyles and higher standards of living.<sup>8</sup> In the same period in Vienna, the Austrian architect Camillo Sitte, drawing upon Greek and Roman aesthetic ideals, called for the beautification of cities through collaborative projects between artists and engineers to produce grand public buildings, monuments, fountains, statues, and other public works of art that would cultivate and convey through their magnificence an ethos of civility.<sup>9</sup> Ethics and aesthetics in the built environment have thus been historically intertwined in the production of “civilized” cities as urban landscapes have been razed and rebuilt, destroyed by wars or new ideologies that see the old as obsolete and an obstacle to the formation of a new society.

In this essay I examine contemporary urban renewal projects in Vinh City to introduce a particular neoliberal mode of urban governance that similarly strives to aestheticize urban space and inculcate “proper” urban practices that are shaped by new moral, economic, and aesthetic regimes. With its fusion of socialist and capitalist practices, and its lack of fit in the “postsocialist” category, Vietnam offers a unique case study for examining urban governance associated with neoliberal redevelopment. This is not to argue that neoliberalism is dominant in Vietnam, or that Vinh City is becoming “neoliberal.” I agree with Donald Nonini’s caution against overstating the universality and inevitability of neoliberalism and its propensity to dominate, penetrate, and transform socialist societies.<sup>10</sup> As in other “late socialist” countries, alternatives to market logics continue to endure in Vietnam as the state envisions its recombinant economy as firmly grounded in principles and practices that will advance an equal and prosperous socialist society.<sup>11</sup> Yet clearly the government’s “socialist orientation” has been complicated, if not compromised, by its engagements with global capitalism and its adoption of free-trade policies that have helped Vietnam achieve the status of a “middle-income country,” but not without alarming increases in social and economic disparities.<sup>12</sup>

In what follows, I compare and contrast historical and contemporary processes of urban redevelopment in Vinh, focusing on both overlap and divergences in urbanization strategies, and the recent shift toward neoliberal governance as an exception to the usual rule.<sup>13</sup> I highlight the cycles of destruction and reconstruction that have marked Vinh’s urban landscape over the past century and shaped the formation of diverse urban subjec-

tivities. An analysis of the rise and fall of Quang Trung public housing provides deeper insights into the critical role that market economic reforms have played in new urban planning practices across Vietnam. In Vinh City, the demolition of socialist architecture deemed unsightly and disorderly reflects an approach to urban renewal that is intent on building a modern, prosperous, market-driven city with high-rise condominiums and expanding trade and business opportunities. The state has facilitated such changes in collaboration with international development agencies that advocate neoliberal reform as the most efficient means to reduce poverty and propel rapid growth of the economy.

Throughout Vietnamese history, the destruction of symbolic structures and the spatial reconfiguration of cities have accompanied radical regime changes and shifts in ideologies of nation building, for example, from colonial to postcolonial Hanoi, and from Saigon to Ho Chi Minh City after 1975.<sup>14</sup> The politics of architectural destruction in post–Cold War Vinh City—demolishing “the old” (socialist public housing) to make way for “the new” (private enterprise and private property)—index new modes of urban planning and urban management rooted in moral and rational discourses of safety, value, beauty, and quality. Privatization thus becomes a means to aestheticize and civilize both the city and its population, ridding the urban landscape of “failed” socialist projects while cultivating new values and ideologies of ownership that aim to transform negligent and apathetic resident-renters into rational and responsible citizen-homeowners.<sup>15</sup>

### **Socialist Arts and Neoliberal Aesthetics**

In her research on postsocialist cities, Pusca proposes a theory of urban aesthetic change based not on evolving standards of beauty or artistic form but on shifts in modes of affect, experience, and perception.<sup>16</sup> Using the examples of Tirana (Albania) and Prague (Czech Republic), she shows how the aesthetic rearrangement and redesign of urban space—which in both cases involved the dismantling and rebuilding of select areas of the cityscape—engendered new sensorial experiences of living in, moving through, and interacting with the city. Pusca’s work reminds us that capitalism and mass-consumer culture have long been linked to planned

obsolescence and the production of more spectacular and hyperreal sensory encounters in the public sphere.<sup>17</sup> Fredric Jameson's critique of late capitalism problematized the deeper integration of aesthetic and cultural creation in the arts and architecture into mass-commodity production. As desires for and consumption of new cultural experiences and sensibilities generated by global capitalism increase, "the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothes to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation."<sup>18</sup>

If cultural production in capitalist economies is conceptually associated with a set of aesthetic values and practices that are believed to enable the sensory (over)stimulation, free-flowing innovation, and endless variation that Jameson alludes to, then socialist cultural forms and values, in conventional binary thinking, represent the antithesis: sensory deprivation, lack of variation, and uninspired uniformity—in short, a condition of aesthetic inferiority.<sup>19</sup> In classic neoliberal transition theory, economic reform is thus positioned as the savior and facilitator of aesthetic release from cultural incarceration and sensory anesthesia. The market, in other words, "frees" the mind to enable citizens to become desiring, feeling, self-actualizing subjects—a form of rehabilitation necessary for generating a consumer society deeply entangled with the global market.<sup>20</sup> This emphasis on affect has been integral to the spread of capitalism in Vietnam and to the creation of new material desires and desiring subjects. Advertisements in daily newspapers have been key to producing these new sensibilities. During the summer of 2010, for instance, a campaign for the high-status Vespa motorbike used vibrant shades of yellow and the English word *emotion* to sell both the product (which was beyond the means of most readers) and an ideology, symbolically suggesting movement away from a grim, grey, impoverished, and isolated socialist past toward a bright, vibrant, prosperous global capitalist future.<sup>21</sup>

Such emancipation narratives are problematic in their unequivocal view of the lived experiences of socialism and market reform both in and beyond Vietnam. At the same time, they clearly interpellate and help to create a growing middle class of consumers who have both the social and financial means

to navigate new commercial spaces (such as shopping malls) and consume the new tastes and experiences that an expanding global market may offer. Yet, as recent work on the aesthetics of socialist realism has shown, socialist art, architecture, film, and literature were more heterogeneous and experimental in content and form than commonly recognized.<sup>22</sup> Socialist cultural productions also traveled widely<sup>23</sup>—well beyond the “Iron Curtain”—and offered patrons of the arts a range of aesthetic experiences and expressions, and at times even critical reflection on official artistic styles and policies.<sup>24</sup> This is not to deny thematic and stylistic commonalities, but to point to diversity and innovation in artistic form across socialist states on account of radically different cultural and historical contexts (for example, differing artistic styles and techniques in Chinese and Soviet painting), as well as within nation-states, for example, in the variations of Vietnamese monumental art that drew upon French, Soviet, and Vietnamese aesthetic traditions.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, it has long been suggested, as far back as the Frankfurt School, that it is mass commodification that produces uniform tastes devoid of aura and originality.<sup>26</sup> More recently, Nora Taylor has pointed to concessions made by Vietnamese artists who produce art for the global market. Tourist desires for particular, often essentialist representations of Vietnam, she argues, compel painters to create redundant works of art with recurring images and tropes, thus suggesting that the market may inhibit aesthetic agency and modes of creativity.<sup>27</sup>

Commercialization of the arts thus both restricts and enables particular modes of production and consumption in Vietnam, as socialist ideologies that once promoted “art for the masses” have yielded to newer realities of “art for the few.” As aesthetic production is privatized and subjected to prevailing international standards and market values, the arts have emerged as an ambiguous force in society that both confirms and contests neoliberalism. The contradictions and paradoxes of neoliberal capitalism in Vietnam have been well noted in the work of Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương, among others.<sup>28</sup> In the arts, cultural production has become a site of critical public commentary by artists, musicians, performers, authors, and others who desire to publicly express their growing discontent and concerns about increasing economic inequalities, social disruptions, and forms of corruption that have accompanied market reforms. At the same time, cultural producers are also

involved in new social relations of aesthetic production that are increasingly competitive, monopolistic, and market oriented and that reaffirm neoliberal values of entrepreneurship.<sup>29</sup>

Ambivalence and cynicism toward neoliberal capitalism continue to manifest in Vietnam, particularly in impoverished areas unevenly affected by economic reforms. Such is the case in Vinh City, where traumatic memories of French colonial exploitation and US aerial bombardment dominate urban historiography and influence the pace of integration into the global market.<sup>30</sup> Along with municipal and provincial officials who approach the expansion of global capitalist relations with caution and concern, poorer residents likewise remain skeptical of urban plans to “renew” the city by demolishing socialist housing that no longer “fits” contemporary urban lifestyles and rising standards of living. To provide a deeper historical and cultural context for understanding such skepticism, it is important to examine the cycle of urban destruction and reconstruction that took place in Vinh City during and immediately following the “American War” and that precipitated the collaborative design and construction of the neighborhood of Quang Trung.

### **Rebuilding Postwar Vinh: Socialist Solidarity and East German Urban Planning**

During my research in the Bundesarchiv in Berlin, the Hoover Archives at Stanford University, and the National Archives in Hanoi, I repeatedly came across documents and images of East Germans—*anh*, or older brother as they were often called—extending material, financial, emotional, and technical assistance during the American War to their younger siblings—*em*—in the form of children’s protest letters written to Nixon, antiwar demonstrations, blood drives, food donations, fund-raisers, solidarity work with visiting Vietnamese delegations, and overseas training programs for Vietnamese students.

The legacies of socialist humanitarianism and solidarity aid continue to play an important role politically, economically, and materially in contemporary Vietnamese society, as my discussion below on Quang Trung housing will show. Just as important are the affective attachments that formed

between people, linking them across the “global socialist ecumene.”<sup>31</sup> These attachments are still strongly felt in Vietnam today and are remembered as having contributed in meaningful ways to the defeat of the United States. “The East Germans were the only people who believed in our victory,” an older Vietnamese man declared when he stood and addressed the audience in 2005 at the Goethe Institute in Hanoi during a public talk on East German aid to Vietnam. “The Russians didn’t believe in us, but the East Germans did. They provided us with the material and psychological support we needed to achieve victory.”<sup>32</sup>

This history of socialist solidarity aid and cooperation between Vietnam and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) extends back to 1950 when diplomatic ties were first established, following recognition of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) by the Soviet Union.<sup>33</sup> In the immediate postcolonial years after the defeat of France at Điện Biên Phủ, the two countries enjoyed a relatively close and cooperative relationship, with the exception of certain ambivalences in the late 1950s as Vietnam edged away from the Soviet Union and toward China.<sup>34</sup> During the American War, East Germany provided the DRV with instrumental military aid in the form of training and arms that totaled an estimated 200 million marks.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, humanitarian missions focused on carrying out “solidarity projects,” such as the expansion of the Vietnam-GDR Friendship Hospital in central Hanoi, which today serves as one of the most prestigious surgical centers in the country.<sup>36</sup> In the post-American War years, like other socialist nations, East Germany contributed to the reconstruction of Vietnam with financial and material aid, technological expertise, and the labor of highly trained experts. In line with the tenets of socialist internationalism and development politics of the 1970s, Soviet bloc nations commonly “adopted” a city or provincial area to help with Vietnam’s postwar reconstruction and integration into a Soviet-dominated export economy; for example, Poland worked to rebuild the heavily bombed port city of Hải Phòng, the Soviet Union aided efforts in the capital city of Hanoi, while Bulgaria and Romania worked in Thái Bình and Thanh Hóa provinces, respectively.<sup>37</sup> Many of these projects focused on the scientific development and expansion of large-scale agriculture and industry, the products of which would be exported to Eastern European and/or Soviet countries.<sup>38</sup> In the

case of East Germany, as per official agreement signed between the GDR and DRV on October 22, 1973, experts from both countries worked collaboratively to redesign and rebuild the devastated city of Vinh, capital of the north central province of Nghệ An.<sup>39</sup>

For more than half a century, Vinh City has endured cycles of urban destruction and reconstruction linked to its traumatic history of violence and war. In the late 1940s, under a scorched-earth policy that followed Hồ Chí Minh's call to "*phá hoại để kháng chiến*" (destroy as a means to resist), much of the colonial urban infrastructure was dismantled or demolished.<sup>40</sup> After a decade of postcolonial reconstruction and repopulation, the city was again reduced to rubble and ash. During the American War, fierce and prolonged bombing raids between 1964 and 1972 targeted the city's industry and nearby port of Cửa Lò, as well as a key supply route for the Trường Sơn Road (Hồ Chí Minh Trail) that began outside the city and wound its way west toward Laos.<sup>41</sup>

During an interview in Berlin, the chief German engineer responsible for the urban redesign and planning of postwar Vinh reflected on the devastation of the landscape as he flipped through a series of black-and-white photographs he had taken in 1973. The images showed a city that had been reduced to a "moonscape," as he described it, with contiguous rows of bomb craters and only a few structures left standing (one of which was renovated for use as a dormitory for the East German specialists and visitors to Vinh, including Jane Fonda). Placing the photographs back into his shirt pocket, he recalled the shock he felt upon first viewing the city: "When I arrived, Vinh was beyond ruins, worse than Dresden at the end of World War II. Just as that US general threatened, they had bombed it back into the Stone Age. There was nothing left."<sup>42</sup> Comparisons between Dresden and Vinh were not uncommon in interviews with GDR engineers and Vietnamese architects. In fact, several claimed that Dresden's destruction during World War II, and its rapid postwar reconstruction and transformation into an industrial center, had influenced Hanoi's decision to request East Germany's assistance with rebuilding Vinh City. As Mr. Văn, the Vietnamese architect, said, "Who else in recent history had experience with rebuilding a severely devastated urban infrastructure on this scale? Only the East Germans knew how to reconstruct an entire city quickly and efficiently."<sup>43</sup>

The massive *Wiederaufbau* of Vinh (*việc xây dựng lại thành phố*) entailed a comprehensive redesign and remapping of the city according to principles of socialist urban planning that emphasized the centrality of industry to modernization and urban development. Over the course of six years, between 1974 and 1980, a rotating group of East German experts (more than two hundred) carried out urban infrastructural projects that included the construction of colleges, schools, and kindergartens; roads and highways; cement, brick, textile, and other factories; a central marketplace and cinema; modern water and sewage systems; newly laid electric lines; and, most notably, Quang Trung public housing (*khu nhà chung cư Quang Trung*). By the end of the project in 1980, Quang Trung consisted of eighteen hundred apartments and dormitories in twenty-two five-story buildings that housed more than eight thousand residents, mainly “priority” workers, veterans, and civil servants in urgent need of permanent housing. Notably, it was the only urban complex in Vietnam to incorporate aesthetic and design principles widely disseminated across Eastern Germany, if not Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, that integrated communal, educational, cultural, and economic activities into a self-contained urban neighborhood.<sup>44</sup> For example, it included a youth clubhouse, cinema, market and trade center, post office, library, hotel, cultural houses, day cares, and primary schools. As such, Quang Trung was hailed as exemplary socialist urban planning that could create and meet the needs of a modern, worker-oriented society.

It is important to note the critical need for housing that existed for the eighty-five thousand residents of Vinh in the postwar years, the majority of whom had evacuated to the surrounding countryside during periods of intensified bombing. In 1973, thousands of displaced citizens returned to the city to find themselves living in makeshift, collective housing that was susceptible to wind, rain, and flooding. Quang Trung tenements were built in rapid succession in order to satisfy the urgent demand for more spacious and permanent housing (see fig. 1). Moreover, one of the central problems that Vietnamese officials and GDR experts faced in the aftermath of Vinh’s destruction was *how* to rebuild the city (and, in the words of the GDR urban planner, where to begin?). A local, mostly female labor force worked industriously to clear the rubble (much of which had been scavenged), fill in the bomb craters, and create a level landscape. Teams of work-



**Figure 1** Postwar reconstruction of Vinh, 1980. Bundesarchiv, Berlin, Germany

ers manually broke up and removed the remaining debris, bailed out water from the craters, and filled them with earth, rubble, sand, and gravel from nearby waterways — “one hole after the next,” the chief German engineer explained — before reconstruction could even begin. There were also few resources available in Vinh at that time, and most of the materials — from cranes, supply trucks, and steel to plaster pigment, nails, staples, and even food — had to be imported from East Germany and brought in through local ports. This was documented through a detailed accounting system that listed the exact numbers of items requested and supplied (right down to the quantity of nails) by East German enterprises that donated to the “solidarity

fund,” and this despite their own shortages and difficulties maintaining productivity.<sup>45</sup> Bricks, cement, and sand were provided locally after the upgrade or new construction of production facilities.

As the first five-story structures to be built on the urban landscape, Quang Trung quickly became a showcase for modern socialist housing in Nghệ An, if not all of the newly reunified Socialist Republic of Vietnam. This changed the identity of Vinh—a city that occupied a paradoxical place in the imagination of northern Vietnamese as a locus of backwards provincialism and entrenched poverty, and yet also the seat of the revolution and of communist intellectualism.<sup>46</sup> Quang Trung housing showed Vinh to be a future-oriented city at the forefront of socialist modernization and industrialization. The housing blocks were often used as a backdrop in media images, as well as in personal photographs, to showcase the city’s use of modern science and technology to improve lives and build a new and prosperous urban socialist society. In contrast to “traditional” housing made with thatch, wood, mud, and other natural materials, the industrial steel and reinforced concrete used in the construction of Quang Trung signified technologically progressive materials that were aesthetic, modern, versatile, and durable in design.<sup>47</sup> The apartment blocks were, in the recollection of Mr. Văn, the best available housing in the city, if not all of Vietnam: “Quang Trung was considered ideal living. It was the first time people in Vinh lived in single-family apartments with kitchens and indoor plumbing. It was comfortable living, even though electricity and water were irregular. This meant a lot to people returning after the war.”

Quang Trung housing blocks index a particular moment in the history of Vietnamese urban planning when architects and engineers were preoccupied with designing new forms of mass housing for workers, veterans, and civil servants with “priority status” (*ưu tiên*), namely, those who excelled in their work units and whose families had participated in the revolution.<sup>48</sup> In Hanoi, most public housing was built according to a “collective” (*tập thể*) style that adhered to the principles of communalism and egalitarianism as a means to engender broad social transformation.<sup>49</sup> Such tenements tended to be uniform in size and allotment of living space, with shared kitchen and toilet facilities in collective areas outside private sleeping quarters.<sup>50</sup> At times, more than one family also shared the apartments.<sup>51</sup> During my field-

work, this style of architectural design was commonly identified by research respondents as “Vietnamese” or “Chinese,” often to the chagrin of architects and urban planners who saw such naturalized associations between Asian culture and communal practices as historically inaccurate and culturally problematic. Nonetheless, beliefs that communal housing “fit” with Vietnamese worldviews and spatial practices persisted and served to justify difficult and inadequate living conditions. In the words of one academic, shared facilities reflected “village dwelling styles and customs that residents would be most familiar with since they possessed no image about a separate and privatized housing space due to their humble and collective rural roots.”<sup>52</sup> Yet for my respondents, the majority of whom had migrated to urban centers from rural areas, collective housing was neither usual nor desirable, and thus became the focus of much scorn.

Quang Trung public housing, on the other hand, was conceptually different in design and intent. Most notably, it was strongly influenced by East German principles of the built environment that in the 1960s embraced a new socialist *Wohnkultur* (domestic culture) that emphasized particular values and practices as necessary to “building a model socialist culture at home.”<sup>53</sup> Like housing blocks in East German cities, Quang Trung’s design emphasized the family unit and the private sphere as critical dimensions to politicization, socialist education, and consciousness raising. This was achieved through a particular mode of “independent” living—namely, the private apartment—that offered modern comforts such as indoor plumbing, kitchen, separate washroom and toilet, a living room, and, for some, separate sleeping quarters (one or two bedrooms depending on the size of the family). These self-contained units (*căn hộ khép kín*) were designed to accommodate families averaging five to seven members, with a ration of approximately four square meters of living space per person—higher than the average of two to three square meters in areas of Hanoi that experienced severe housing shortages and overcrowded conditions. Not unlike the architects of housing projects in the GDR in the 1960s, Quang Trung architects and planners attempted to forge a new type of urban socialist community that “integrated residence, shopping, and communal activity in a tightly organized architectonic whole.”<sup>54</sup> Notably, this was the only socialist housing project in Vietnam to do so at this scale. Officially, the underlying

consumerist orientations and family-focused logics reflected in the design of East German neighborhoods and residential units remained unaddressed by Vietnamese authorities who approved of the Quang Trung project, despite Hanoi's anxieties about the moral contamination of its citizens by East German consumerism and individualism, and what Vietnamese Party officials identified as the GDR's bourgeois-influenced "revisionist" socialism.<sup>55</sup>

### **Quang Trung Demolition: Recasting Socialist Architecture as "Ruins"**

Vietnamese and German architects and urban planners I spoke with who contributed to the construction of Quang Trung considered it to be an innovative and highly successful project insofar as it achieved, under extremely difficult circumstances, its immediate goal of providing permanent shelter and modern facilities to over eight thousand civilians. Quang Trung housing, they pointed out, was regarded as a tremendous accomplishment because of the lack of urban infrastructure and material resources in Vinh at the time. In the original design plan, drafted in Berlin in 1973, East German engineers projected that the apartment blocks, constructed with reinforced concrete columns and steel beams with brick walls and concrete floor plates, would remain structurally sound and inhabitable for at least eighty years.<sup>56</sup> Less than two decades later, however, many of the buildings were in a serious state of disrepair. UN Habitat and other international organizations subsequently described the project as a failed socialist experiment and called for its demolition and replacement with private nonsubsidized housing (see fig. 2).

Not unlike colonial constructs of "backwards" colonies,<sup>57</sup> public discourse in the capitalist West has often used terms that connote deficiency and pathology to describe socialist countries, including *lack*, *decay*, *failure*, and *breakdown*.<sup>58</sup> Descriptions of socialist cultural production have often drawn upon analogous imagery: socialist art and architecture are generally held to be failed aesthetic projects—uninspired, unsophisticated, monotonous, and endowed with little value, agency, and meaning.<sup>59</sup> Public monuments, in particular, have been the focus of much artistic scorn in postsocialist countries, with public spectacles of their demolition and dismemberment signifying new political, economic, and scopic regimes.<sup>60</sup> Given that architecture



**Figure 2** Socialist “ruins,” Quang Trung, 2006. Photo by the author

and the built environment shape and are shaped by prevailing values and ideologies, and that they reflect particular social, political, and economic conditions and interests, it is perhaps not surprising that late and postsocialist urbanization has targeted devalued “ruins” for demolition and advocated the construction of architecturally sound and sustainable structures that use and organize space in ways that are more profitable.

Vietnam, of course, differs significantly from the case of European postsocialism, given that it remains a socialist state with a ruling communist party. It also differs from the case of China in terms of its scope and pace of urban redevelopment. Nonetheless, similar tensions have played out in Vietnamese cityscapes, as socialist architecture and urban planning are reassessed by state and international actors, as well as by residents, and held accountable to new and often competing standards and needs. This has not resulted in the mass demolition and removal of socialist landmarks and monuments from urban centers as it has in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. On the contrary, public monuments, markers, and

memorial sites in Vietnam have been renovated or newly constructed to produce dynamic, hybrid landscapes that suggest intersecting and overlapping visions of urban development.<sup>61</sup>

It is precisely this tension between continuity and change, and the very real impact that urban transformation has on people's lives, that generates anxieties about the demolition and reconstruction of Quang Trung. While Quang Trung housing may signify "failure," "breakdown," and "decay" to international experts working on urban redevelopment projects in Vinh, there are complex histories, memories, identities, and meanings attached to the apartment blocks by low-income residents at risk of displacement. This is not to deny the critical need to repair and upgrade the apartments and public facilities in the area. Residents themselves would welcome such an investment. Yet both state and international actors also assert the need for a new approach to urban planning that will facilitate the expansion of commercial and entrepreneurial opportunities. Such changes require clearing the landscape of "the old" to allow construction of "the new." I offer here a brief analysis of the discourse used by international agencies, in coalition with state officials and private investment firms, to assess responsibility for the dilapidated state of Quang Trung and to justify its replacement with high-rise condominiums and an adjoining business and trade center (see fig. 3).

Localizing Agenda 21 (LA21), a UN Habitat urban redevelopment initiative, has been at the forefront of "revitalizing" Quang Trung since 1997. Advocating a neoliberal approach to urban governance that views the rapid growth of the private sector as a viable means to eradicate poverty and build



**Figure 3** Quang Trung Trade and Living Center

prosperous cities, LA21 has faulted state socialist principles and residents' daily practices for Quang Trung's current state of decay and disrepair. Its glossy English- and Vietnamese-language brochures, with vibrant images of economic productivity and growth, outline the "problems" with state-subsidized housing and lack of "good governance." "Housing is essentially a private matter and best left in the hands of the market," the text insisted while calling for the adoption of new urban governance practices such as capacity building and participatory decision making. Centralization of both power and planning, LA21 maintained, resulted in mismanagement of the buildings and a lack of regular maintenance, inspection, and care, which contributed to accelerated deterioration of the structures. Rapid decay is further attributed to "low-quality" materials not suitable for Vietnam's climate, as well as to inadequate design and "poor technical detailing" on the part of GDR planners and engineers. The housing blocks were built too quickly, without strict controls, and with little consideration of Vinh's harsh climate (a claim East German experts steadfastly denied<sup>62</sup>). In LA21 discourse, Quang Trung was an offense to the senses, visual and olfactory—moldy smelling and an eyesore—and thus needed to be removed, on aesthetic and economic grounds, from the landscape of urban memory.<sup>63</sup>

In addition to faulting state policies and East German engineering as producing "unmodern" socialist housing (ill-planned, unsustainable, and of inferior quality), LA21 also extended blame to the inhabitants of Quang Trung for their undisciplined and disorderly urban practices. As Michele Rivkin-Fish has shown in her work on stratification and the emergence of class subjectivities in postsocialist Russia, moral caliber has been increasingly mapped onto class distinctions, as rising social inequalities have come to be understood (and justified) by logics of *individual* failure to assume personal responsibility.<sup>64</sup> Likewise, international experts contended (and complicit state officials agreed) that low-income residents hastened the aesthetic and structural demise of the tenements through "uncivilized" behavior that included overcrowding apartments beyond their intended capacity, storing vehicles in apartments rather than in designated parking areas, and haphazardly building illegal and presumably dangerous extensions onto the rear balcony to increase a family's living space (see fig. 4).



**Figure 4** Expanding living space in Quang Trung apartments. Photo by the author

In public spaces, citizens carried out informal market and other economic activities, which, LA21 contended, further contributed to sociospatial disorganization and disorder. Moreover, UN Habitat experts surmised that because state subsidies kept monthly rents extremely low (between 30,000 and 50,000 Vietnamese đồng<sup>65</sup>), residents had little motivation to properly manage the upkeep of their homes or surrounding communal areas, such as stairways. If, as Ann Marie Leshkovich points out, urbanization in reform-era Vietnam is propelled by imaginings of “order and civilization that conjure a specific vision of modernity,”<sup>66</sup> then the nonproperty-owning dweller in public housing remains a lingering (socialist) threat to capitalist urban planning and the dream of a modern, prosperous, civilized city. However, as recent research on public tenements in Hanoi has shown, privatization and ownership have not in fact created a sense of individual responsibility that has spurred increased investment in and improved maintenance of privately owned housing.<sup>67</sup>

### Late Socialist Urban Renewal

When I returned to Vinh City in 2006 after a five-year absence, I was immediately struck by the visual and material changes in the urban landscape. In addition to expanding suburbs with three- and four-story homes lining newly laid streets, the city itself had become a regional center of commerce and services for an emerging middle class, offering more affluent residents a range of consumer choices in newly opened restaurants, cafés, and retail shops that sold imported fashions, electronics, computers, and other popular goods. The first-time visitor to Vinh might find the vitality of the city's public life and economic sphere to be a sharp contrast to the conspicuous consumption and displays of wealth found in the more prosperous urban centers of Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City. By comparison, Vinh is noticeably poorer and less commercialized. However, relative to my previous stays in 2000 and 2001 when, for example, restaurants and cafés were few and far between, save for the local *phở* soup shops and international hotels that drew mostly wedding parties or foreign tourists passing through on Highway 1, such changes were significant and revealed a growing consumer sensibility developing alongside a visual-spatial reordering of the city. While previously I would sit on a small plastic stool at a street stall drinking strong coffee in chipped glasses for 3,000 Vietnamese đồng (US\$0.18), in 2006 I found myself in a trendy, crowded café that offered a range of sensory experiences: patrons sipped their US\$1.50 drinks, served in specialty glasses adorned with fruit and colorful umbrellas while listening to Vietnamese soft rock in an open-air patio designed to imitate the natural environment, with waterfalls, rock gardens, “ethnic” sculptures, and exotic flowers and trees.

A few months later, I attended a dinner hosted by friends in a crowded new restaurant in the center of town. After a series of toasts, a government official presented me with a gift to assist me in my research—a video compact disc entitled *Vinh: Thành phố bình minh (Vinh: Dawn of a City)* (Vinh: Nghệ An, 2006). Footage of Vinh's beautiful mountainous scenery juxtaposed with closeups of bustling economic activity presented a vision of the city as advancing toward prosperity and integration into a global market economy. An emphasis on modern systems of telecommunication and transportation that link Vinh to the “outside” world promised easy connecti-

ties for transnational (predominantly Asian) corporations and investors. A “civilized” (*văn minh*) and “modern” (*hiện đại*) city — notably devoid of any poverty — lies in the future for Vinh, the narrator stressed, in its emerging position as “the economic and cultural center of north central Vietnam” (*trung tâm kinh tế văn hóa vùng Bắc Trung Bộ*).

Yet for all the new capitalist industry, corporate logos, and foreign companies, Vinh City, the video maintained, continues to embrace its revolutionary history as it progresses toward a future of socialist-oriented political and cultural development. Urban renewal has meant not only the construction of a new entrepreneurial city but also the (re)construction of socialist monuments, museums, and martyr cemeteries. As urban geographers have argued, neoliberalization is a highly contingent process that occurs alongside other parallel, and at times conflicting, urban practices.<sup>68</sup> As such, surplus funds from free-trade policies have been invested in refurbished public spaces that affirm Vinh’s revolutionary past. For example, adjacent to the city’s central park, east of Quang Trung, an eighteen-meter-high granite statue of Hồ Chí Minh was erected in 2003, while the Xô Viết Nghệ Tĩnh Museum of the Revolution, on the grounds of the former French colonial prison, has recently undergone substantial renovation (and in the video is shown crowded with visiting Lao school children). These coexisting and at times intersecting logics of neoliberal economics and socialist cultural politics have significantly modified the urban landscape in Vinh, and they represent not contradictory but corresponding modes of urban governance and urban design that aspire to aestheticize and civilize the city in ways that are notably similar.

The most striking visual changes to the cityscape began in 2004 with the demolition of the northern section of Quang Trung housing, Building C1, and the construction of private, high-rise condominiums, the first “skyscrapers” to go up in Vinh. On a walking tour with Mr. Văn in 2006, we strolled through Areas A and B (slated for demolition in 2012), before arriving at Area C where two high-rise towers were being built by a real estate and investment firm from Ho Chi Minh City (see fig. 5). As we examined a billboard that showcased the multi-year project with images of a modern affluent city on a par with Singapore and Hong Kong, Mr. Văn described the future of Quang Trung C1: The remodeled area would consist of three



**Figure 5** Quang Trung renovation, 2006. Photo by the author

fifteen-story towers connected by a series of four-story office buildings.<sup>69</sup> The basements of the towers would be used for private parking of motor-bikes and automobiles, while the ground floors would be reserved for business and trade. Apartments (of sixty, seventy-five, eighty, or one hundred square meters) would occupy the second through fifteenth floors, the prices of which decrease with a rise in story.<sup>70</sup> In 2006, only 60 percent of the tower units had been purchased, at an average price of US\$38,000. “The demand for these condominiums is not so strong,” Mr. Văn explained, pointing to

high costs and “unfamiliar ways of living.”<sup>71</sup> But by 2010 the towers had achieved full occupancy and the selling price per square meter had doubled.

The long-term redesign and rebuilding of Quang Trung will not only replace socialist housing and open public spaces with those of private property and large-scale commerce. It will also displace tight-knit communities formed around histories of shared trauma and recovery, as well as force poor residents, the majority of whom are retirees living on a monthly pension of less than US\$100, to abandon their homes of thirty years and resettle elsewhere. Located in the heart of the city center, Quang Trung currently occupies some of the most valuable real estate in the city — “golden land” (*đất vàng*) sought by wealthy investors from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City. Given that households in Quang Trung have typically represented some of the poorest of the urban populace—those who acquired enough capital have purchased land and moved out to build freestanding homes—their ability to invest in a new condominium remains unlikely, even with proposed subsidies and compensation for loss of their housing. For example, residents who acquire ownership of their apartment as per Decree 61–CP (which requires privatization of all state-owned public housing) will receive compensation in the form of space in the new complex at a rate of 1.3 square meters. Accordingly, if a family loses their forty-square-meter apartment to redevelopment and desires to purchase an eighty-square-meter condominium in the new complex, they will be compensated for up to fifty-two square meters. The family will then be required to pay for the remaining twenty-eight square meters at a below-market rate of 13.5 million đồng per square meter, for a total of approximately US\$19,000, an exorbitant amount of money for Quang Trung residents. Here, Aihwa Ong and Li Zhang’s observation of China also holds true for Vinh: under late socialism “the collusion between the power of the state and the power of property has contributed greatly to the dispossession of the poor.”<sup>72</sup>

In tandem with the displacement of the urban poor has been the emplacement of the middle classes, who have the financial means to purchase property and enjoy a higher and more stable standard of living. In her research on villa lifestyles in Kunming, Li Zhang examines neoliberal logics of private property that envision home ownership as creating a middle class of responsible and self-disciplined civilians who internalize rational tech-

niques of self-management to enjoy new forms of privilege and power that separate them (spatially and economically) from the rest of society.<sup>73</sup> The expanding privatization of interior worlds, Walter Benjamin once argued with regard to urbanization in nineteenth-century Paris, was key to forging middle-class social imaginaries, and, as Li also demonstrates in the case of late socialist China, new exclusionary practices.<sup>74</sup> Rose similarly argues that both nineteenth- and twentieth-century spatialization involved “the casting of a web of civility over public space, to be sustained, at least in part, by the reciprocal gaze of subjects themselves.”<sup>75</sup> Likewise, in Quang Trung, the civilizing strategies advocated by UN Habitat and the Vietnamese state have aimed to create a well-ordered urban environment cared for by an emerging class of self-regulating owners of property. Most notably, these techniques of governance have served to recast Quang Trung residents, in a short period of time, from priority citizens (*người ưu tiên*) in modern socialist housing to disadvantaged urban poor (*người nghèo*) whose homes and conduct are in need of upgrade and reform.<sup>76</sup>

The media has also been central to producing and disseminating logics that promote middle-class respectability and an aesthetic sensibility that faults the lower classes for urban blight in neighborhoods with public housing. Newspaper articles that emphasize the need to renovate decaying tenements, for instance, commonly highlight unsafe living conditions created by residents who have hastened decay by building dangerous and unsightly additions onto their homes, a critique similar to that made by UN Habitat. In contrast to lower-class indifference and irresponsibility, newspapers often advertise for new residential communities that show the middle classes enjoying prosperous, orderly, and moral lives. Unlike the images of urban chaos and unsightliness in neighborhoods with mass housing that are regularly featured in the media, here images depict a disciplined, largely unpeopled world free from the disorder of haphazard construction, informal markets, and swarming motorbikes, with expensive new cars, law-abiding pedestrians, and well-cared-for homes. Middle-class lifestyles, such images convey, are also marked by a particular environmental aesthetic and concern for nature with properly maintained grass, trees, and gardens that remain free of human activity (see fig. 6). These stock images also fill the pages of university textbooks, Ministry of Construction manuals, and architectural



**Figure 6** “New Saigon living.” Newspaper ad, *Tuổi Trẻ* (Youth), July 20, 2007

journals, demonstrating what Rose has called a “pedagogy of civility” in which specific “technologies of responsabilization” serve to regulate conduct, maintain social order, and discipline those whose “transgressions are now seen as an affront to the order of proper comportment and propriety.”<sup>77</sup>

The circulating logics of self-discipline and responsibility that inform neoliberal projects of urban renewal are not entirely new in Vietnam. State socialist discourses of civilization (*văn minh*)—civilized cities (*thành phố văn minh*) and civilized streets (*đường phố văn minh*), for example—have also been employed in conjunction with policies that aim to “clean up” urban areas and rid them of unmanaged, mobile bodies, in this case largely poor, rural-to-urban migrants in the informal economy.<sup>78</sup> As Leshkovich has argued, female petty traders, in particular, whose mode of survival in late socialism signifies an irrational, “backward subsistence economy,” have been targeted by government decrees that aim to restore urban order and “implant modernity through rational economic development.”<sup>79</sup> Such cam-

paigns to control “feminine disorder,” Leshkovich shows, have emerged from a long history of government efforts in the prereform era to eliminate black-market trade and maintain the city as “civilized.” Likewise, in Vinh, one finds overlapping ideologies at work in the production of urban order and the elimination of unruly practices; both “socialist” and “neoliberal” forms of governance similarly identify the poor as engaged in socially disruptive activities that hinder the creation of an orderly and aesthetic modern city.

### **Conclusion: Nostalgic Ambivalence**

Plans to revitalize Vinh City have transformed the urban landscape and the ways people interact with, move through, experience, and live in the city. The emphasis here, as in other urban areas in Vietnam, has been on the mass construction of multifunctional high-rise buildings that integrate commercial, entertainment, office, and living spaces; to date, Vinh City has more than fifty such projects underway. In 2010, a high-ranking official at the municipal People’s Committee shared with me his idea of the future of public housing in Quang Trung and beyond: “It is our long-term plan to demolish all the old buildings and move everybody into newly built high-rise apartments. This will be implemented across the city.”<sup>80</sup> How low-income residents will fit into this vision is not yet clear. What is clear, however, is that many residents of Quang Trung district have already been displaced, while others anxiously await news of impending resettlement. Lack of knowledge and confusion remain as to how relocation and compensation will work, and to what residents are legally entitled.

Yet the threat of demolition and displacement for people in buildings targeted for reconstruction has been as productive as it has been destructive. Ambivalence about contemporary urban planning and its effects on local communities has generated a range of critical responses. Commentaries in the newspapers, for instance, have been an important way that citizens, in and beyond Quang Trung, have voiced their opinions on proposed urban development plans and the lack of clarity regarding impact and implementation. Local representatives have called neighborhood meetings to help residents comprehend and prepare for new regulations. Petitions that protest

privatization and proposed rates of compensation have been filed at local government offices. A foreign anthropologist (myself) also became a sounding board for concerns. In all of these cases, a legal discourse of rights has emerged as crucial to these exchanges, such as the right to efficient and affordable housing, the right to adequate compensation, and the right to be informed of and clearly understand new government policy. As anxiety about a retreating welfare state increases, and as the impact of urban renewal policies is more keenly felt, such civic participation and engagement are an efficacious way in which residents attempt to mitigate urban economic uncertainty and strive to maintain their communities.

Anthropologists have long recognized that privatization strengthens rather than diminishes existing socioeconomic inequalities, creating a class of property owners set apart from those who remain propertyless. In the case of Vinh, privatization has also led to the creation of a new category of “urban poor” who no longer reap the benefits of their “privileged” (*ưu đãi*) status, despite their service to the state. Given that few low-income families will be able to purchase private property and may be at risk of homelessness after demolition, an important question remains: does the redevelopment of Quang Trung housing then signify a failed neoliberal strategy? Andrew Kipnis has cautioned against seeing neoliberalism as a “world-shaping force” that overhauls state economies and reshapes cultural practices. Neoliberal governing techniques, he points out, have “rarely led to economic efficiency and growth, well-functioning markets, or autonomous individuals.”<sup>81</sup> Yet it is not only the disproportionate impact on the poor that makes the demolition of Quang Trung controversial and contested but also its symbolic erasure of meaningful histories (GDR solidarity work), emotionally charged memories (of postwar trauma and recovery), and socially valued identities (“priority” cadres/workers). “Quang Trung was a source of pride and hope in the postwar years,” Mr. Văn reminisced.<sup>82</sup> Today it stands as a mark of shame and indignity; for some, its decaying structures are a sign of chronic urban underdevelopment, while for others they serve as a reminder of state disinvestment in the public sector and diminishing care of the populace.

While it can be argued that cynicism and ambivalence toward Quang Trung’s demolition reflect widespread anxieties about the intrusions of global capitalism and its disruptions to perceived social(ist) stability, such

comments also reveal deep apprehensions about the instability of memory and its manipulation by state urban development policies. In an interview, a former resident of Area C who advocates restoration rather than reconstruction argued that Quang Trung stands as an important historical reminder of the spirit of friendship and solidarity that unites the people of Vietnam and Germany.<sup>83</sup> Likewise, one journalist called for preservation of at least one of the housing blocks as a heritage site to commemorate this friendship and to recognize the unique role that East Germany played in the city's postwar recovery. Regretfully, he pointed out, this is unlikely to happen, as government officials, investment firms, and international agencies see the decaying buildings as an obstacle to their lucrative development schemes.<sup>84</sup> In an urban environment increasingly driven by market forces, Quang Trung's crumbling façade seems to suggest socialism's progressive disappearance from the landscape despite the endurance of its political, cultural, and historical meanings. Desires to renovate and upgrade rather than demolish and destroy East German architecture in Vinh are as much about nostalgia for the values and affect associated with the city's global socialist past<sup>85</sup> as they are an expression of the uncertainties that people face in their everyday lives as their social and material worlds literally come crashing down around them.

## Notes

Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the Soyuz Symposium on Global Socialisms and Postsocialisms at Yale University, the American Anthropological Association meetings, the conference of the Society for East Asian Anthropology, and the Harvard University Asia Center workshop "Under Construction: Social, Political, and Commemorative Space in Vietnam." I thank Mary Hancock, Erik Harms, Richard Kurin, Heonik Kwon, Ann Marie Leshkovich, Hue-Tam Ho Tai, and two anonymous reviewers for their valuable commentaries and suggestions. Research for this project was supported by Fulbright-Hays, the American Council of Learned Societies, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), and the UC Pacific Rim Research Program.

1. Trương Huy Chinh, "Phương pháp hiện thực trong quy hoạch thành phố Vinh" ("New Methods in the Planning of Vinh City"), *Kiến trúc (Architecture)* 2 (1985): 55–57.
2. Localizing Agenda 21, "Action Planning for Sustainable Urban Development: Vinh City, Vietnam" (UN Habitat 2001), 4.

3. See David Lamb, "Country's Least Attractive City Trying to Put on a New Face," *Los Angeles Times*, July 9, 1999, 5.
4. Ibid.
5. Anca Pusca, "The Aesthetics of Change: Exploring Post-Communist Spaces," *Global Society* 22, no. 3 (2008): 371–72.
6. Li Zhang, "Private Homes, Distinct Lifestyles: Performing a New Middle Class," in *Privatizing China: Socialism from Afar*, ed. Li Zhang and Aihwa Ong (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 23–40. See also Li Zhang, *In Search of Paradise: Middle-Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).
7. Nikolas Rose, *Power of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 73.
8. Frederick Law Olmsted, *Civilizing American Cities: Writings on City Landscapes*, ed. S. B. Sutton (Boston: MIT Press, 1971).
9. Camillo Sitte, *The Art of Building Cities: City Building According to Its Artistic Fundamentals*, trans. Charles T. Stewart (1889; repr., New York: Reinhold, 1945).
10. Donald M. Nonini, "Is China Becoming Neoliberal?" *Critique of Anthropology* 28, no. 2 (2008): 145–76.
11. Pham Van Thuyet, "Legal Framework and Private Sector Development in Transitional Economies: The Case of Viet-Nam," *Law and Policy in International Business* 27, no. 3 (1996): 541–600.
12. See, for example, Suiwah Leung, "Vietnam: The Next BRIC?" *East Asia Forum*, October 15, 2010, [www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/10/15/vietnam-the-next-bric/](http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/10/15/vietnam-the-next-bric/).
13. Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
14. Christina Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 110–14. On Hanoi, see William S. Logan, *Hanoi: Biography of a City* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2000).
15. Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, 65.
16. Pusca, "Aesthetics of Change." See also Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).
17. See, especially, Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994) and Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
18. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 4–5.
19. Matthew Cullerne Bown and Brandon Taylor, *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture in a One-Party State, 1917–1992* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1993), 2.

20. Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, 87.
21. See also Allison Truitt, "On the Back of a Motorbike: Middle-Class Mobility in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam," *American Ethnologist* 35, no. 1 (2008): 3–19.
22. See, especially, the edited volume by Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko, eds., *Socialist Realism without Shores* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).
23. Christina Schwenkel, "'The Camera Was My Weapon': News Production and Representation of War in Vietnam," in *The Anthropology of News and Journalism: Global Perspectives*, ed. S. Elizabeth Bird (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 86–99.
24. Lahusen and Dobrenko, *Socialist Realism*.
25. Schwenkel, *American War*, 102–41.
26. Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991); Walter Benjamin, "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. H. Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217–51.
27. Nora Annesley Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 108–26.
28. Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương, *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008); see also guest editors' introduction to this special issue, "How Is Neoliberalism Good to Think Vietnam? How Is Vietnam Good to Think Neoliberalism?"
29. Jyotsna Kapur and Sunny Yoon, "Gender, Neoliberalism, and Contemporary Asian Cinemas," *Visual Anthropology* 22, nos. 2–3 (2009): 91–94. On the marketization of literature and cinema in Vietnam, see Nguyễn-võ, *Ironies of Freedom, Part 3*; and Annette Hamilton, "Renovated: Gender and Cinema in Contemporary Vietnam," *Visual Anthropology* 22, nos. 2–3 (2009): 141–54.
30. Đảng Ủy Phường Quang Trung (Central Committee of Quang Trung District), *Lịch sử Phường Quang Trung—Thành Phố Vinh (History of Quang Trung District—Vinh City)* (Vinh: Báo Nghệ An, 2007). See also Schwenkel, *American War*, 201–2.
31. Susan Bayly, "Vietnamese Narratives of Tradition, Exchange, and Friendship in the Worlds of the Global Socialist Ecumene," in *Enduring Socialism: Explorations of Revolution and Transformation, Restoration and Continuation*, ed. Harry G. West and Parvathi Raman (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 125–47.
32. Author's fieldnotes, October 2005.
33. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam was founded in 1945. On the five-year delay in its recognition by the international communist community, see Christopher E. Goscha, "Courting Diplomatic Disaster? The Difficult Integration of Vietnam into the Internationalist Communist Movement (1945–1950)," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, nos. 1–2 (2006): 59–103.
34. Martin Grossheim, "'Revisionism' in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam: New Evidence

- from the East German Archives,” *Cold War History* 5, no. 4 (2005): 451–77; Trần Dương, *Đến với văn hóa Đức (On German Culture)* (Hanoi: Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 2001).
35. Bernd Schaefer, “East German Support for Vietnam (1966–1990)” (paper presented at Goethe Institute, Hanoi, Vietnam, October 16, 2005).
  36. In 1991, following reunification, the name of the medical facility was changed to the Vietnam–Germany Hospital.
  37. Note that not all postwar development aid came from socialist countries. Despite the common misconception that Vietnam was “closed” to the West following the end of the war, in 1979, reconstruction projects throughout Vietnam were also supported by more than twenty nonsocialist countries, constituting 24 percent of all foreign experts in Vietnam at that time. File Á3–H92 VT, Văn Phòng Chính Phủ, năm 1957–1995, Hanoi National Archives 3.
  38. For example, in the 1980s, East German experts from the Institute for Tropical Agriculture worked alongside Cuban colleagues on rural development projects with the aim to export much-needed (in the GDR) foodstuffs such as coffee, pepper, and coconut oil—commodities that remain Vietnam’s chief exports to Germany even today. Nguyễn Thanh Đức, *Quan hệ thương mại và đầu tư Việt Nam—CHLB Đức (Vietnam-Germany Trade and Investment Relations)* (Hanoi: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2005), 32.
  39. Postwar aid also included a 1980 “work cooperation” agreement between Vietnam and East Germany to provide Vietnamese labor to industrial centers in Berlin, Leipzig, Karl-Marx Stadt (now Chemnitz), Dresden, Halle, Magdeburg, and so forth. In the course of ten years, over seventy thousand Vietnamese workers signed contracts to work in East German factories for up to five years. A good number of these workers were from Vinh City. See Friedrich Ebert Stiftung mit MOLISA (Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs of Vietnam), *Zur Situation ehemaliger Vietnamesischer Gastarbeiter: Eine Studie über die aus der einstigen DDR vorzeitig zurückgekehrten Arbeitnehmer/innen in der SR Vietnam (On the Situation of Former Vietnamese Guest Workers: A Study of Vietnamese Worker Returnees from the GDR to the SR Vietnam)* (Hanoi/Bonn, 1991).
  40. Đảng Ủy, *History of Quang Trung*, 58–60.
  41. Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Thành Phố Vinh (People’s Committee of Vinh City), *Lịch sử thành phố Vinh, 1945–1975 (History of Vinh City, 1945–1975)* (Vinh: Nghệ An, 2003).
  42. Interview with the author, August 18, 2008. A resident of Vinh recollected, “You could stand anywhere and see the entire city without anything blocking your view.” Author’s fieldnotes, February 2011.
  43. Interview with the author, August 20, 2009.
  44. Paul Betts, “Building Socialism at Home: The Case of East German Interiors,” in *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics*, ed. Katherine Pence and Paul Betts (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 96–132.
  45. This system worked in accordance with what scholars have identified as a socialist gift economy, in which the exchange of rare and desirable material goods as a “favor” served to

- create and maintain important social relationships and political capital that could be drawn upon for future reciprocity. Elizabeth C. Dunn, *Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 95.
46. Rural areas adjacent to Vinh are well known for being the center of the Xô Viết Nghệ Tĩnh uprising and the birthplace of Hồ Chí Minh.
  47. Nguyễn Quân, *Nghệ thuật tạo hình Việt Nam hiện đại (Modern Vietnamese Plastic Arts)* (Hanoi: Văn Hóa, 1982), 103–4.
  48. Mass housing as a means to modernize cities and solve endemic housing shortages was a common theme in the Hanoi-based journal, *Kiến trúc* from the late 1960s through the 1970s.
  49. Trinh Duy Luan, “The Urban Housing Problem before and during ‘Renovation,’” *PGCHS Design Studio 2001*, 2001: 41–49; Logan, *Hanoi*.
  50. Tran Hoai Anh and Elisabeth Dalholm, “Favoured Owners, Neglected Tenants: Privatisation of State Owned Housing in Hanoi,” *Housing Studies* 20, no. 6 (2005): 897–929.
  51. Logan, *Hanoi*, 204. See also Đặng Thái Hoàng, *Kiến trúc Hà Nội thế kỷ XIX—thế kỷ XX (Hanoi Architecture in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries)* (Hanoi: Hanoi, 1999).
  52. Trinh Duy Luan, “Urban Housing Problem,” 41.
  53. Betts, “Building Socialism at Home,” 99.
  54. Betts, “Building Socialism at Home,” 102.
  55. Grossheim, “‘Revisionism’ in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam,” 467–8.
  56. “Konzeption für die Bebauung Quang Trung” (“Concept for the Development of Quang Trung”), May 15, 1974, Bundesarchiv Deutschland, File DH1 28549.
  57. See Chakrabarty on the “Indian” as a figure of lack and failure. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 31–32.
  58. See, for example, Axel Goodbody, Dennis Tate, and Ian Wallace, “The Failed Socialist Experiment: Culture in the GDR,” in *German Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, ed. Rob Burns (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 147–207.
  59. Schwenkel, “‘Camera Was My Weapon.’”
  60. See, for example, the documentary by Mark Lewis and Laura Mulvey, *Disgraced Monuments* (1993, Monumental Pictures; New York: Cinema Guild, 2007), DVD; and a follow-up piece by Laura Mulvey entitled “Reflections on Disgraced Monuments,” in *Architecture and Revolution: Contemporary Perspectives on Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Neil Leach (London: Routledge, 1999), 219–27; see also Dore Ashton, *Monumental Propaganda* (New York: Independent Curators Incorporated, 1994).
  61. For example, a new memorial to the female revolutionary Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai stands beside a construction site for a digital, 3D cinema complex.
  62. In fact, according to archival documents and interviews, experts carried out detailed scientific analyses of Vinh’s climate and produced precise calculations concerning its potential

- effect on the built environment, to construct what today would be considered “green” housing. The area is designed, for instance, to facilitate maximum velocity of air flow through the buildings, which are positioned at an angle of 23 degrees to harness the summer and winter winds and act as a natural heating and cooling system.
63. Cf. Jim Drobnick, “Volatile Effects: Olfactory Dimensions of Art and Architecture,” in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 265–80.
  64. Michele Rivkin-Fish, “Tracing Landscapes of the Past in Class Subjectivity: Practices of Memory and Distinction in Marketizing Russia,” *American Ethnologist* 36, no. 1 (2009): 79–95.
  65. In 2010, US\$1.50–\$2.50.
  66. Ann Marie Leshkovich, “Feminine Disorder: State Campaigns against Street Traders in Socialist and Late Socialist Việt Nam,” in *Le Việt Nam au Féminin: Việt Nam: Women’s Realities*, ed. Gisèle Bousquet and Nora Taylor (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2005), 199.
  67. Tran and Dalholm, “Favoured Owners.”
  68. Jason Hackworth, *The Neoliberal City: Governance, Ideology, and Development in American Urbanism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).
  69. After construction, Tower A had fifteen stories while Tower B had eighteen. The construction of Tower C has been postponed until 2012 but will be built with thirty stories, “the highest in Vinh,” the director of the firm’s real estate office bragged to me in 2010 (until another firm down the street claimed that their project would surpass that with thirty-two floors).
  70. Common throughout Vietnam, there are two reasons often given for this. First, there are more business opportunities on the lower levels; and second, in the event of an electrical outage (not infrequent) or fire, residents have fewer flights of stairs to navigate.
  71. Author’s fieldnotes, August 2006. As a point of comparison, in 2002 a friend took out a loan at 7 percent to build a one-hundred-square-meter, one-story home on the outskirts of Vinh for only US\$6,000 (in addition to US\$3,000 cash paid for land-use rights in 2000).
  72. Aihwa Ong and Li Zhang, “Introduction: Privatizing China; Powers of the Self, Socialism from Afar,” in Zhang and Ong, *Privatizing China*, 1–19. See also Nonini, “Is China Becoming Neoliberal?” 158.
  73. Zhang, “Private Homes, Distinct Lifestyles.”
  74. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 19–20.
  75. Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, 251.
  76. On the new social categories and identities produced by shifts in modes of urban governance in China, see Wing Chung Ho, “Negotiating Subalternity in a Former Socialist ‘Model Community’ in Shanghai: From ‘Model Proletarians’ to ‘Society People,’” *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 6, no. 2 (2005): 159–79.
  77. Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, 74.
  78. See also Erik Harms, *Saigon’s Edge: On the Margins of Ho Chi Minh City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

79. Leshkovich, "Feminine Disorder," 187.
80. Author's fieldnotes, September 2010.
81. Andrew Kipnis, "Audit Cultures: Neoliberal Governmentality, Socialist Legacy, or Technologies of Governing?" *American Ethnologist* 35, no. 2 (2008): 285.
82. Author's fieldnotes, June 2006.
83. Author's fieldnotes, September 2010.
84. Author's fieldnotes, March 2011.
85. On socialist nostalgia as a response to the erasure of historical memory, see Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); and Daphne Berdahl, "(N)ostalgic for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things," *Ethnos* 64, no. 2 (1999): 192–211.