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Socialist Palimpsests in Urban Vietnam

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Socialist Palimpsests in Urban Vietnam

- 1 Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam, is a dynamic city of global mobilities, and has been for much of its thousand-year history. The distinct styles of architecture that stand in close proximity to one another map the geographies of power and international influence that have historically shaped its landscape. Ancient temples on the shores of the lake, colonial villas, a stately mausoleum, and the newest, 65-story, skyscraper can all be found within a single urban district (Ba Đình). Internationalization has not only occurred in the major metropolises, such as the “mega city” of Ho Chi Minh, however.¹ In this essay, I bring attention to Vinh – an ostensibly non-global, provincial city of disconnectivity, 300 kilometers south of Hanoi – to argue, to the contrary, that Vinh has been historically one of the most international cities in Vietnam. Cycles of ruin and renewal, especially in the aftermath of a prolonged US air war, prompted international invention in urban planning and design at a scale not yet seen in postcolonial Vietnam. The transnational circulations of labor, technology, machinery and expertise that ensued transformed the landscape and the lives of residents through a new architectural style and morphology of the city built upon the material ruins of the past. Today these urban forms stand as monuments to a particular chapter in the Cold War history of socialist internationalism.
- 2 Urbanisms have always been mobile. Rather than fixed in a particular time and place, design knowledge and practices travel globally across national and cultural borders. Such planning concepts are never “pure” in their implementation, but are reworked and integrated into other aesthetic and cultural systems; here the critical question is not *if* forms are locally integrated, but *how*. Such was the case with East German reconstruction of Vinh City (1974–80), one of the focal points of this essay. The circulation and implementation of planning knowledge was not without contestation and renegotiation – from state planners to city residents.² Urban interventions were also invited rather than imposed, unlike during the colonial years.³ Moreover, internationalization of urban planning and construction in Vietnam during the Cold War serves to unsettle prevailing discourses about postwar isolation, claims that place the capitalist West at the center of global connectedness. As Łukasz Stanek has argued, a critical omission in the study of global planning has been the transfer of architecture and urban design from advanced socialist countries to their postcolonial allies in the developing world.⁴ Such transfers to Vietnam constituted a critical node in a broader network of international knowledge circulation in the arts and sciences that facilitated the multi-directional movement of bodies, goods, technologies, ideas and capital between Vietnam, the Soviet bloc, parts of Africa and East Asia, as well as Cuba. Global connectivity – as embodied and experienced, and as manifest in a range of material forms – was critical to Vietnamese nation building and to postwar recovery through the rehabilitation of industry and infrastructure. Rather than acting to “cut off” populations from the world, for many, the Cold War period signified an intensely global moment of socialist modernity, including for the population in Vinh who were sent abroad to work, train and study, and also for those skilled and unskilled laborers and professionals who worked jointly with East German technicians to rebuild the decimated city.
- 3 The project of East German urban design in Vinh also serves to complicate the narrative of Soviet hegemonic intervention in Third World urban planning. Scholars have documented how Soviet planning practices influenced the master plans of Beijing,⁵ Havana,⁶ and also Hanoi – all capital cities and seats of national power.⁷ Indeed, William Logan’s observation that Soviet planning was “one of the major globalising tendencies of the last half-century” makes an important contribution to literature on global urbanism that tends to focus on cities in the capitalist West.⁸ Buildings programs in East Germany, such as the model neighborhood of Stalinallee in East Berlin (after 1961, Karl-Marx-Allee), likewise emulated Soviet design and construction techniques.⁹ However, it would be an oversight not to identify technology and planning transfers that circumvented the Soviet Union, such as East German reconstruction

in North Korea¹⁰ and Polish planning in Iraq.¹¹ Attention to other city-building practices and their unique idioms of design (such as elements suggestive of Bauhaus style) raises important questions about socialist urban forms and practices that developed beyond the sphere of Soviet political and ideological influence.

4 In Vietnam, attention to broader circuits of urban planning likewise reveals a diversity of city-making projects that constitute a palimpsest of socialist architecture and infrastructure built upon the material ruins of past urbanisms. My use of the term palimpsest here draws on the work of Michael Crang to refer to both the temporality and spatiality of urban landscape transformation, that is, its material inscription across time and space through the “process of addition, amendment, and perpetual alteration” that leaves its mark – either burden or inheritance – upon the city.¹² For Logan, for example, each layer in the palimpsest of Hanoi represents a legacy of direct or indirect political and cultural domination by a foreign power (identified as French colonial, Soviet socialist or Chinese imperial).¹³ Here, I am less interested in the formation of urban palimpsests *across* regimes than *within* them. The materiality of the “gift” of urban design by fraternal countries during the Cold War produced dynamic landscapes of transnational constructions that intersected and bumped up against one another. In Hanoi, the socialist palimpsest includes Kim Liên public housing (for cadres) built by North Korea in the early 1960s, the Soviet-designed mausoleum (1975) and Hồ Chí Minh museum (1990), the GDR-funded friendship hospital (1958, and again through “solidarity donations” in 1973), the Cuban Thắng Lợi hotel (1975), and the Polish-rebuilt sugar factory on the southern outskirts (1973).¹⁴

5 This architectural and infrastructural landscape can also be read as a map of international diplomacy. It is perhaps not surprising that, at the height of the Sino-Soviet split after Vietnam had inched away from China to become more closely aligned with the Soviet Union, the latter implemented a number of highly symbolic national projects in the center of the capital city, while China engaged in infrastructure projects in more remote rural provinces, including the construction of power plants in Bắc Giang, Thái Nguyên, and Việt Trì between 1970 and 1974.¹⁵ The gifting of infrastructure thus reflected the strategic realignment of power among the contending communist countries.

6 In what follows, I examine the palimpsest of socialist urban planning in Vinh City across two periods of postcolonial urbanization: *khôi phục*, or rehabilitation (1954–63) after the defeat of France; and *xây dựng lại*, or reconstruction (1974–80) after the end of the US aerial attacks. I develop the idea of the urban palimpsest as both a methodological and theoretical tool for excavating the layers of urban infrastructure produced across these cycles of destruction and renewal. As Andreas Huyssen has argued, “The trope of the palimpsest... can also be fruitfully used to discuss configurations of urban spaces and their unfolding in time.”¹⁶ Thinking through the architectural history of ruins and reconstructions as a palimpsest, with distinct material, spatial and affective resonances,¹⁷ allows me to complexify the period of “socialist urbanization” by mapping the intersections of temporality and materiality in the project of socialist city-building. Although urban planning was centralized under the direction of the Ministry of Construction in Hanoi, the role and presence of international actors differed significantly across these periods. While *khôi phục* marked singular projects in a less systematic plan of urban development – such as a Polish hospital in one part of the city and a Soviet power plant in another – *xây dựng lại* signaled a comprehensive planning and redesign of the city with a seven-year commitment by the government of East Germany. As I discuss in the conclusion, the legacies of these architectural projects have generated different intensities of urban memory, as the landscape continues to undergo transformation amid new circulations of capital in a market economy, with the past preserved and repurposed in some urban forms and erased altogether from others.

Khôi Phục Thị Xã: On Building a Socialist City

7 For more than half a century, Vinh’s turbulent history of colonial domination, uprisings and revolution, war, famine, aerial bombing and natural disaster has led to an ongoing state of emergency and the cyclical destruction and recreation of urban space. Under the French,

government officials developed the Ville de Vinh–Ben Thuy into the largest industrial center in north central Vietnam in what was then referred to as the Indochina area of Annam, merging three townships into one colonial city. The maritime port of Bến Thủy became the focus of industry, with sawmills, docks, metal and wood factories, while the railway workshop at Trường Thi provided thousands of jobs to an emerging class of landless wage workers.¹⁸ Vinh, on the other hand, remained the commercial and administrative center, placing industry far beyond the everyday lives of the French, Chinese, Indian and Vietnamese elites. In 1946, one year after the August Revolution when Hồ Chí Minh declared the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the Việt Minh assumed control of Vinh, the French returned and war broke out soon after. In 1947, 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. More than 1,300 structures were destroyed.¹⁹ Streets were dug up and turned into trenches to stop the encroachment of tanks. Railways were destroyed and railcars dumped in the river to thwart the advance of French Navy ships.²⁰ According to resistance leaders, Vinh had to be sacrificed so as not to fall under the yoke of French colonialism yet again.²¹

8 By the end of the war in 1954, French air attacks and Việt Minh destruction had completely leveled the abandoned city. No basic infrastructure, including water, electricity, or usable roads for transportation, existed.²² The rutted land, moreover, proved unsuitable for construction of new housing. Industry also stood in ruins, and no bridge remained intact. Tremendous efforts and resources, especially human labor, would be needed for restoration (*khôi phục*). Because the central government in Hanoi recognized the strategic location of Vinh and its importance as a center of industry, the reconstruction of which subsequently became the initial focus of urban recovery. By 1958, Vinh boasted four national-level plants, including the largest power plant in central Vietnam, and six provincial-level factories. By 1960, these numbers increased to a total of 40 enterprises in operation.²³ With steady growth in industry and the founding of its first university in 1959, the region’s national significance grew even stronger. On 28 December 1961, the Politburo issued Resolution 32, which proposed to upgrade the status of the township (*thị xã*) to city (*thành phố*) and to transform Vinh into one of the largest industrial areas in the DRV.²⁴ With its rapid recovery – setbacks from floods and fire notwithstanding – Vinh had met the conditions put forward by Hanoi to transition to a socialist city.

9 The Third National Party Congress in 1960 resulted in Vietnam’s first five-year plan (1961–5) for economic growth and development in agriculture and industry. This agenda, in tandem with advancement to city status,²⁵ had a transformative impact on Vinh, allowing it to emerge as an important economic, political and cultural hub through increased state support and international assistance. Socialist urbanization thus initially marked an era of growing optimism, expressed in aspirations to build a new material and technological infrastructure to be enjoyed by new socialist persons. Novel architectural forms emerged on the landscape: durable, three-story housing blocks replaced thatched dwellings (a leading cause of urban conflagration). A stately museum – interestingly, in colonial style – replaced the French prison, a monumental sports stadium went up on the ruins of the imperial pagoda. Progress in the arts and technology was similarly observed: Hanoi officials, municipal authorities and local residents, including veterans, attended the opening ceremonies at the Xô Viết–Nghệ Tĩnh Museum on 16 September 1963 in recognition of the anti-colonial uprising.²⁶ Several months later, on 18 May 1964, more than 5,000 residents turned out, along with officials from Hanoi, to welcome the arrival of the first train to travel along the newly rebuilt and reconnected railway (much of it through voluntary youth labor). The train’s successful journey to Vinh – celebrated in a new station relocated to the outskirts of town – symbolized the realization of growth and progress not unlike that of the colonial railway inauguration in Vinh in 1905.²⁷ But here, another impending war hung over such festivities: while the press treated the train’s successful journey as a sign of postwar “healing and recovery” (*hàn gắn và phục hồi*), its disembarkation in Vinh, as the end point, was also a reminder of a new “injury” (*vết thương*) – the provisional division of the country into a north and south.²⁸

- 10 This new socialist urban modernity was decidedly international, but in directions that differed greatly from those under French colonialism. In the 1950s, expanding political and economic relations with the Soviet Union, China and other countries in the East bloc began to shape the urban landscape, as well as the more worldly orientations of its inhabitants. Workers produced goods for export to new markets in Eastern Europe; students went abroad to study in assigned technical and scientific disciplines – including architecture and urban planning – and brought home goods, including radios, fans and bicycles. At home, on a typical day in the city center in 1962, for example, the Quốc Danh cinema showed Soviet films, while the press reported on National Days celebrated in fraternal countries. In December of that year, an international match between GDR and Vietnamese military soccer teams took place at the stadium during a “friendship visit.” As Vinh City residents went about their daily activities, their lives became increasingly entangled in the tangible practices and materialities of global socialism.
- 11 Changes in international networks and circulations of people, goods and technologies could also be read on the cityscape in Vinh, with new construction projects facilitated by industrialized socialist countries. The thermal power plant in Vinh is the best-known project of this period – the largest in north central Vietnam, built with technical and material assistance of the Soviet Union. Construction on the plant began in June 1956 at the base of Quyết mountain, site of the former SIFA industrial complex (Société indochinoise forestière et des allumettes), which housed a match factory and sawmill, one of the most industrious in all of the French colonies, with exports to Hong Kong, Shanghai and Singapore.²⁹ Workers, cadres and soldiers worked alongside Soviet advisers to build a generator with a production capacity of 8,000 kWh for energy use in industry, agriculture, government and public services in the provinces in Nghệ An and neighboring Hà Tĩnh. As such, the power plant came to symbolize a crucial step in the direction of technological advancement, with the ability – literally and metaphorically – to power the regional economy. A popular photograph from the time captured the national significance of this international initiative, with President Hồ Chí Minh walking and inspecting the construction site with Soviet technicians (**fig. 1**). In June 1958, the power plant entered into operation. Seven years later, on 4 June 1965, US bombs targeted the plant in two aggressive air raids, killing eight workers and rendering it inoperable.

Figure 1: Hồ Chí Minh meets with Russian advisers during construction of the power plant in Vinh City, 15 June 1957.



Source: Public domain.

- 12 The Vietnam–Poland Friendship Hospital, another international project unfolding at the time, had less success in its immediate realization. While the power plant was built and put into operation within two years, the friendship hospital took more than two decades. The decision to build a general hospital in Vinh with Polish assistance originated in 1961 during the first diplomatic visit of a Polish head of state, Aleksander Zawadzki, to the DRV at the invitation of Hồ Chí Minh. Zawadzki’s travels to Vinh prompted a bilateral agreement, which was signed on 2 June 1961.³⁰ The total aid package pledged “in support of the people” amounted to 50 million zlotys. Polish technical advisers assumed responsibility for designing the modern, 500-bed general hospital that would be outfitted with Polish medical equipment. However, the escalating war and aerial bombing forced the suspension of construction. In August 1965, two months after the power plant had been hit, the site of the hospital was demolished in another powerful attack (**fig. 2**). The project remained frozen until the end of the air war in 1973, when government services and personnel returned to the city after eight years of evacuation. Yet construction materials in the aftermath of a war that annihilated urban industry proved scarce. After a devastating flood in 1978, Polish advisers traveled again to Vinh and construction continued.³¹ By this time, as I describe below, the GDR had rehabilitated much of the industrial infrastructure that supported the hospital’s construction. In 1979, fifteen Polish experts were living in Vinh and working on the hospital, along with teams of Vietnamese workers (**fig. 3**). It would be another six years, however, before the project would be completed and officially

presented as a “gift” to the people of Nghệ Tĩnh (provinces of Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh). In February 1986, the inauguration of the “spacious and modern” two-story facility that would provide “healthcare for workers” took place, with the Polish ambassador to Vietnam and the Polish Minister of Health and Social Insurance in attendance.³² In 1988, the hospital burned down, and was subsequently rebuilt yet again.

Figure 2: Site of the Vietnamese-Polish Friendship Hospital hit by US bombs on 14 August 1965.



Source: Courtesy of the Nghệ An Provincial Museum.

Figure 3: A team of female bricklayers helps to build the Vietnamese-Polish Friendship Hospital.



Source: *Nghệ An News*, 6 June 1978.

- 13 After ten arduous years of urban recovery (1954–64), the onset of US air raids swiftly undid the achievements of socialist city-making celebrated by municipal and central authorities. This

setback marked an important moment in the urban palimpsest of infrastructure. On the one hand, international projects, such as the Soviet-supported power plant and the Polish-backed friendship hospital, signified Vietnam's embrace of internationalization and its "fraternal cooperation" with allied countries in the postcolonial period of restoration. Like the rest of the city, these constructions – some of which remain on the landscape today – were left in ruins from protracted bombing. This first phase in postcolonial urbanization did not take place on a *tabula rasa*, however. In some cases, socialist urban forms built between 1954 and 1964 drew upon the colonial infrastructure that had preceded it (industry built upon industry, as in the example of the power plant). But they also transformed urban space in radically different ways, such as re-routing the railway system along the western edge of town, rather than through its center according to French urban design. These changes to the landscape were less schematized than might be expected. Singular projects were implemented in accordance with the government's five-year plan for economic development, but no master plan for the city existed. This was to change, however, when Vinh's destruction spurred another period of intensive city-building, this time carried out with the support of East Germany.

Xây Dựng Lại Thành Phố: Rebuilding a Socialist City

- 14 The undoing of socialist infrastructure came at a high cost for Vinh: over the course of eight years, more than 250,000 tons of ordnance were dropped on the city, averaging 424 tons per square kilometer.³³ The entire social and economic infrastructure built and restored during the previous decade of urbanization was obliterated: markets, churches, pagodas, the museum, cinema and bookstore, public buildings, housing, hospitals, schools, the university, the stadium and factories all stood in rubble and ash (**fig. 4**). This devastation was not confined to Vinh, although no urban industrial center in northern Vietnam experienced destruction on such a scale.

Figure 4: Urban destruction in an aerial attack on Vinh, n.d.



Source: Courtesy of Hồ Xuân Thành.

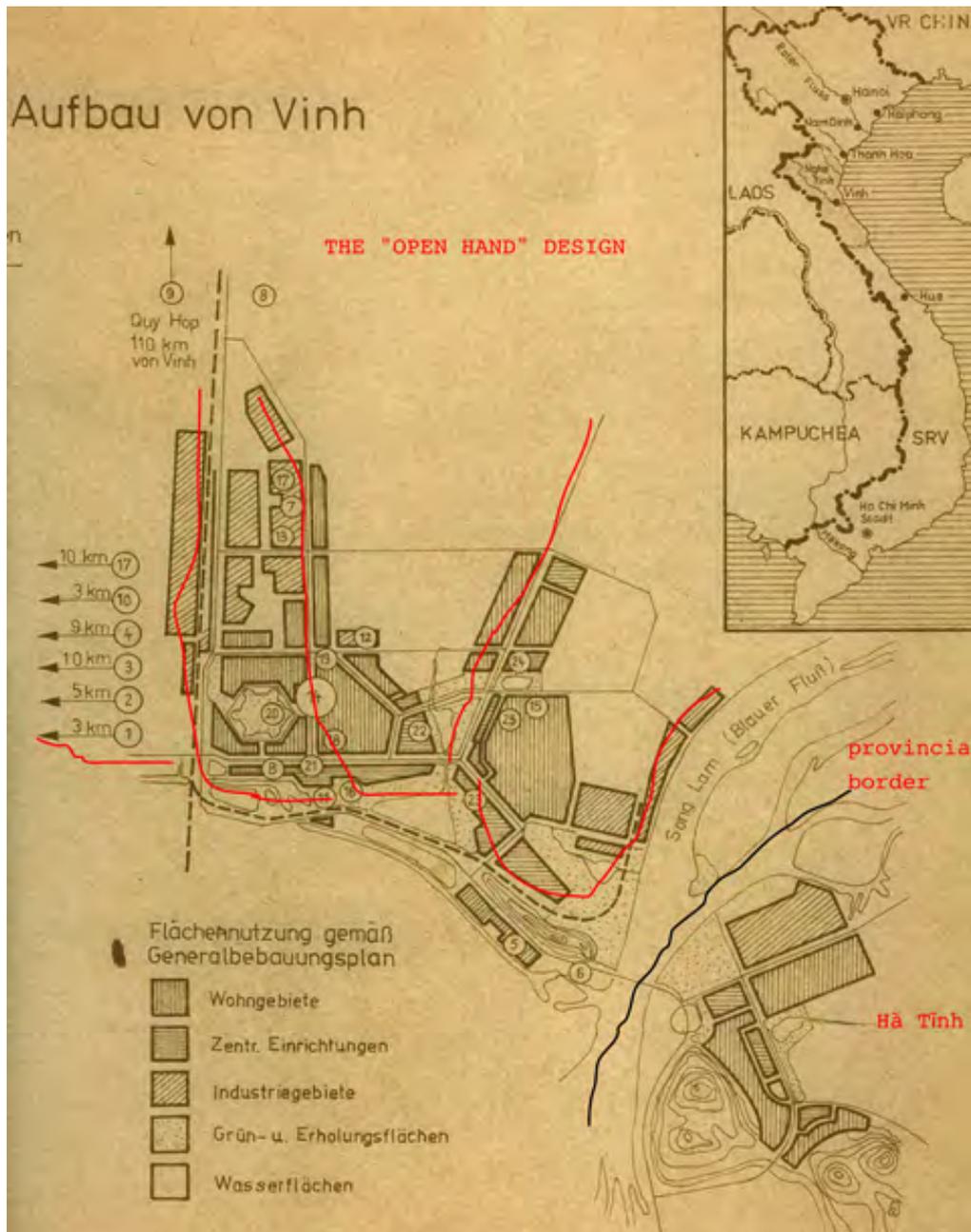
- 15 The end of the air war led to an unprecedented moment of internationalization as advanced socialist countries in the Soviet bloc mobilized their resources to support Vietnam in its program of national reconstruction (*xây dựng lại*). By 15 June 1974, an estimated 537 Soviet and Eastern European experts were in Vietnam working on a range of infrastructure projects; more than 359 projects had been approved at an investment of 516 million rubles.³⁴ Concurrently, the Office of the Prime Minister worked with participating governments on the larger task of urban design and planning: Bulgaria was requested, and agreed to help design

the provincial city in Thái Bình; Romania in Nam Định; Poland in Hải Phòng, Czechoslovakia in Thanh Hóa, Hungary in Quảng Ninh, and the GDR in Nghệ An. Experts met with enormous difficulties, however, in carrying out their work, given the lack of infrastructural, material and skilled human resources in war-torn regions. Critical documents, for example, were not accessible or were no longer available. And the Ministry of National Defense was resistant to providing aerial photography for reasons of national security (the war in the south was ongoing). Despite – and because of – the immense obstacles, Vinh City was the only urban plan realized on such a large scale and in so short a time.³⁵ Given that the GDR was tasked with both design and reconstruction,³⁶ the material product of their collaborative work – the rebuilt city – is crucial to urban memory and an enduring sense of friendship with Germany today.

16 In this postwar period of national reconstruction, the ideological themes underpinning urbanization remained the same as before: progress (through industrialization); socialist city-building (with “civilized” socialist persons); and global solidarity (manifest internationalism). One key difference, however, was the shift in discourse and practice from *khôi phục* to *xây dựng lại*. As argued above, a more spontaneous approach to urbanization, driven by ad hoc infrastructure projects rather than a guiding master plan, marked the former. The latter, conversely, aimed at a systematic, comprehensive redesign and reconstruction of the city. The resulting master plan, the first to be implemented in the city, integrated the previous urban landscape into a new socio-spatial order to build a “larger, more dignified, and more beautiful city” (*thành phố đàng hoàng hơn, to đẹp hơn*).

17 East German planners and engineers drafted the master plan in collaboration with local architects and municipal authorities, many of whom had trained at universities in Russia, East Germany and Poland. Both teams had corresponding, and at times diverging, ideas about the relationship between efficient design and use of urban space owing to resource constraints and differing cultural and ideological conceptions of dwelling and the ideal forms it should take.³⁷ The Ministry of Construction in Hanoi approved the final blueprint for Vinh in May 1975 just weeks after the “liberation” of Saigon that marked an end to the war. In interviews in 2011, local architects and city planners at the Institute of Urban Design, founded by the GDR to train a new generation of urban planners (some of whom were sent to the GDR for their education), described the master plan as resembling the form of an open hand (*tay xòe*): training and housing were concentrated in the palm (the city center), with each finger (or main transportation artery) leading to a sector of industry (**fig. 5**). Green belts, including trees, parks and urban agriculture, served as a bridge between work and living areas. Planners carved up the city into different types of functional space: industrial zones; public and administrative areas; residential neighborhoods; land for agricultural production; and green space for parks and recreation. “It was a science how they designed the city,” one architect who had studied modernist planning to advance industrial efficiency at the College of Architecture and Civil Engineering in Weimar exclaimed.³⁸

Figure 5: The “open-hand” design of Vinh by the GDR.

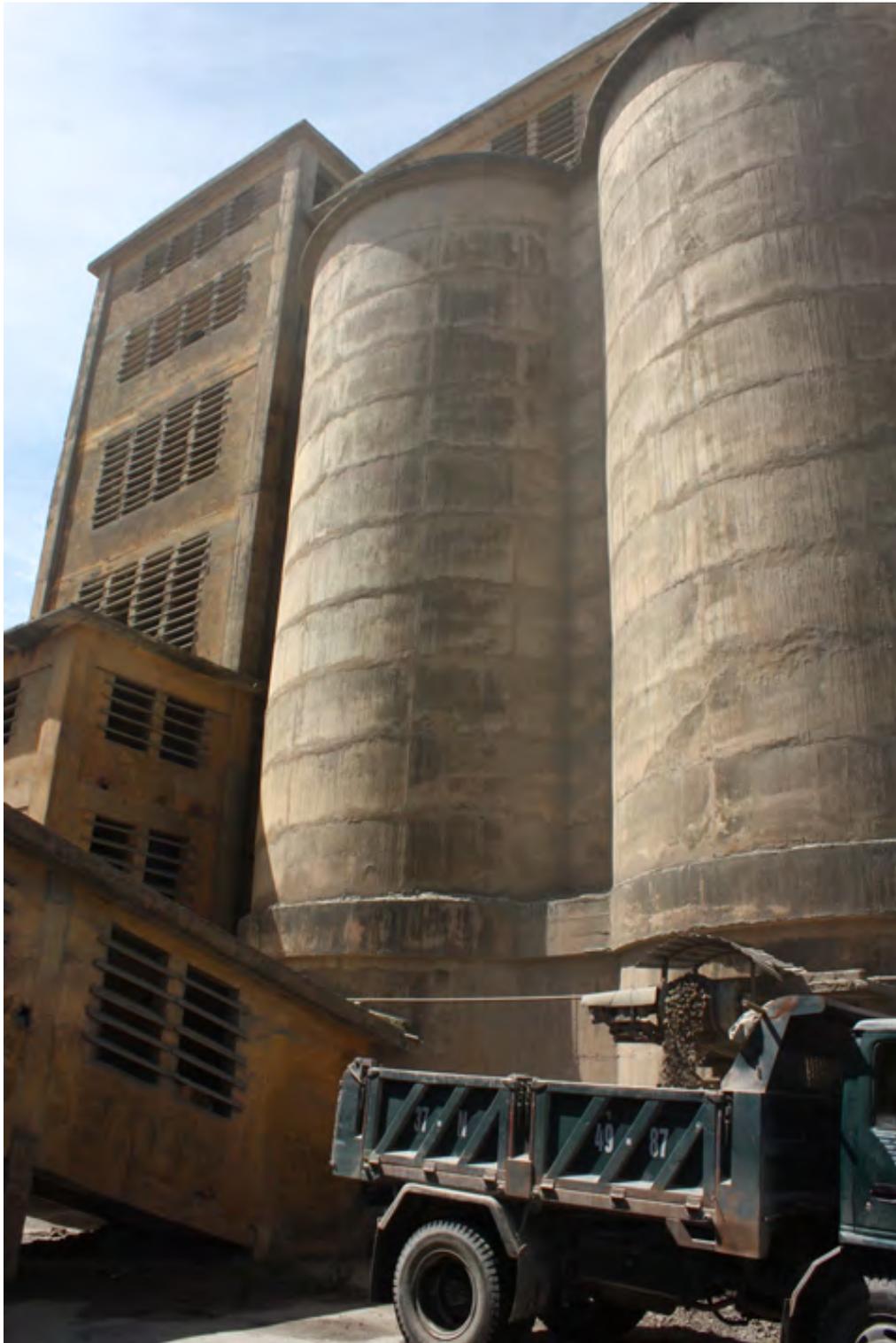


- 18 Local architects agreed with and praised what they saw as a radically different and highly efficient model of urban planning. Unlike Vietnamese settlements, which tended to be densely populated and disconnected from one another, the East German approach was more integrative through a network of new roads and transport infrastructure. “Everything was connected to the main center,” one retired architect explained. “There were clear lines of traffic, and a clear demarcation between areas of living and areas of industry, each of which had access to the main connecting thoroughfares.”³⁹ Yet, in practice, the urban architect Lương Bá Quảng has observed, such calculated planning proved difficult to sustain in the impoverished province. Suffering from hunger and postwar shortages, rural migrants flocked to Vinh to build provisional housing in the green belts, while informal market activities emerged across the city, blurring the boundaries between spaces and their designated function.⁴⁰ At its fundamental basis, the open-hand design was largely unsuccessful insofar as it attempted to disentangle what for Vietnamese residents was deeply culturally and economically entwined.
- 19 The task for German technical advisers, as stipulated in the bilateral agreement signed on 22 October 1973, was threefold: urban design, construction, and training to synthesize a holistic approach to socialist urbanization. In addition to the master plan and the founding of an urban

planning institute, the GDR provided technical, material and economic support to renovate, upgrade or build anew fifteen factories essential to the construction industry (including cement, brick, lime, concrete, sand and gravel factories, stone quarries, water works, machinery and repair shops). The Cầu Đước cement factory, for example, was another architectural work in the palimpsest of internationalism. Built in 1958 with Chinese assistance,⁴¹ after the war, it was in dire need of both repair (from bomb strikes) and upgrade (from outdated technology). Before it entered into operation in 1959, the province had relied on the main (and only) cement factory in French Indochina, built in Hải Phòng in 1899.⁴² Localizing the industrial production of building materials after 1954 thus became necessary to sustaining the pace and scope of postcolonial urbanization, and the larger project of socialist national building. After the end of the US air war, the GDR continued this work by modernizing the plant, replacing Chinese equipment with (second-hand) machinery imported from East Germany.

20 In the initial years of postwar reconstruction, cement – as well as other supplies, including steel, tools, glass plates, machinery, cranes, drills, trucks and other vehicles – had to be transported from East Germany. Over 60 cargo ships embarked from the port of Rostock between 1974 and 1980 carrying more than 5,000 tons of supplies and equipment to a total value of 19.5 million rubles.⁴³ To reduce dependence on donated German resources, which were becoming harder to secure over the years, German planners saw it as imperative to rebuild the industrial infrastructure as quickly as possible. In 1975, the cement factory resumed operation (**fig. 6-7**). Equipped with Germany technology that decreased the need for heavy manual labor, the repaired and modernized plant had the capacity to produce up to 20,000 tons of M300-strength cement per year – a twofold increase over earlier productions levels with a lower cement grade of M200.⁴⁴ The refurbishment of the building materials industry was also critical to the largest and most ambitious undertaking in the city center: the construction of the residential area (*Wohngebiet*) of Quang Trung.

Figures 6: East-German rebuilt cement factory of Cầu Đước, Vinh City, 2011.



Source: Christina Schwenkel.

Figures 7: East-German rebuilt cement factory of Cầu Đước, Vinh City, 2011.



Source: Christina Schwenkel.

- 21 In addition to a focus on economic production, especially the construction of modern factories to increase worker productivity, social reproduction of the labor force also took priority. One of the main tasks of the master plan was to build an integrated residential neighborhood, named Quang Trung after an eighteenth century emperor and military commander, in the center of the city between areas of industry, allowing for easy access to the workplace by bicycle or on foot. Built on the site of the former colonial railway station, which had remained undeveloped during the *khôi phục* period, the original plan for the complex called for 36, five-story housing blocks designed in “modern socialist architecture”⁴⁵ to be allocated to more than 15,000 residents of the working class, many of them migrants from rural areas. By the end of the project in 1980, technicians and laborers had completed only 22 of the targeted blocks, housing close to 9,000 workers and cadres. In interviews, GDR engineers reflected on the ambivalence that many Vietnamese residents expressed toward the socialist, high-rise block housing. In most cases, practical concerns needed to take precedence over cultural preferences, according to one architect, who explained the spatial, material and temporal constraints they faced in trying to build an urban environment while managing the desires of labor migrants.⁴⁶ Urban designers did attempt to integrate manageable concerns, such as the need for gardens, into the residential plan, however.
- 22 Planners also focused on building a social infrastructure of public services that could contribute to a higher quality of life for workers. Like integrated residential estates in East Germany and elsewhere, convenient and accessible amenities were made available on site or adjacent to the neighborhood, including a trade center for purchasing foodstuffs and household goods, a central market, a youth center, daycare facilities and a primary school. East German designers similarly emphasized green spaces of leisure, including parks, playgrounds, and the refurbished stadium. According to the master plan and their sketches of proposed improvements, in their free time, workers could visit the restored cinema (also showing East German films), get a haircut, or have a drink at a small café, much as they might do back home. Yet a lack of time and severe financial constraints in the postwar city made such outings unlikely. Broad tree-lined avenues with streetlights and a fountain that showcased German technology and the promise of socialist prosperity exemplified this fundamental disconnect between a celebrated ideal and a mundane reality: after GDR experts departed, the lights went out and water ceased to flow as infrastructure began to break down (**fig. 8**).

Figure 8: Quang Trung residential complex, northern end, n.d.



Source: Courtesy of Hồ Xuân Thành.

- 23 Over and above planning and construction, the third German task of *xây dựng lại* focused on training and education. One of the key objectives of socialist urbanization was to produce a skilled labor force that could work and take recreation on a daily basis in modern factories and living environments. The development of a vocational training infrastructure to acquire the technical skills required to improve industrial productivity was deemed essential to this project. Construction on the Vietnamese–German Vocational School began in 1975. In 1977, the school opened to its first cohort of students. In an interview, the East German specialist responsible for developing the curriculum reflected on his role in building the program: “We had to organize everything, from teacher training to developing and implementing the curriculum. The focus was on vocational training in the field of construction. It was a two-year program that utilized both classroom and hands-on learning in the workshops we built.”⁴⁷ Graduates would then go on to continue the project of socialist urbanization after the experts returned home.
- 24 The training programs were envisioned as a means to make the Vietnamese self-sufficient in building their city. The school would produce a qualified, experienced workforce that included mechanics, bricklayers, concrete workers, carpenters, welders and electricians who could work in the factories that had been built and restored by the GDR and participate in the larger project of socialist nation building. The multi-building campus had to be designed, built and properly equipped. Wood furniture, such as desks and chairs, could be produced in Vinh (in collaboration with a German master woodworker). Other supplies, from blackboards to workshop tools and machinery, had to be imported. Today, the socialist palimpsest in Vinh finds its socio-historical and affective meaning not only in the architecture of the built environment, that is, in the material structures themselves. Meaning is also constituted through the relationship between the buildings and the sheer quantities of imported goods and technologies that were necessary to rebuild the city. Many of these objects remain in circulation and use today, often in unpredictable ways as they travel between gift and commodity economies.

Conclusion: Socialist Palimpsests in Urban Memory

- 25 Scholars have observed the dismantling or repurposing of socialist architecture to accommodate the socioeconomic and political demands of global capitalism. Some of these

transformations have threatened social identity and obliterated historical memory from urban landscapes (as in the case of the Palast der Republik in former East Berlin), while others have reinscribed the past in new and creative ways, such as the international 798 Art Zone in Beijing, a refurbished industrial complex built by East Germany in the 1950s. Both the demolition and the repurposing of architecture have occurred in Vinh with the country's embrace of a "market economy with socialist orientation," adding yet another layer to the palimpsest of the city. The vocational school, for example, is still in operation today, though it has been upgraded to the level of a college, giving it more latitude to expand its curriculum. As the college struggles to achieve economic self-sufficiency with diminishing state subsidies, it has recently turned to training students to go overseas as part of a burgeoning, profitable (particularly for intermediaries) export labor industry. While the name of the school remains the same, continuing to mark the affective ties between Vietnam and (East) Germany, the Vietnam–Poland Friendship Hospital, on the other hand, removed the reference to Poland when it changed its name in 1992 to the General Friendship Hospital. In conversation, however, local residents continue to refer to it as the "Polish hospital," rewriting the socialist past onto the landscape.

26 Privatization continues to be one of the biggest threats to the socialist cityscape. Building C1 in Quang Trung, for example, was demolished in 2004 and replaced with private condominiums and a commercial center, the first modern "skyscrapers" in the city.⁴⁸ Plans to demolish and redevelop the entire neighborhood have met with firm resistance from many residents. Some have called for recognition of the housing blocks, each identified by the symbol "VĐ" (Vietnam–Germany), as an historical relic commemorating a transformative period of postwar international cooperation, much as the power plant was declared a site of national heritage in June 2007. While the crumbling blocks are irreparably outdated (a common complaint is that they are too small), they still hold important meaning for inhabitants, particularly for those who helped to build them.⁴⁹ "They served their purpose at the time," one architect–resident surmised, "but they no longer fit with modern life today." What was once socialist modern is now abjectly *not yet* modern, as the standards of urban modernity have been recalibrated over time.

27 In December 2000, the state-owned Cầu Đước cement factory was equitized and established as a public limited corporation. Yet the facility was in dire need of modernization to comply with ISO quality requirements. Inspectors assessed East German technology, once celebrated as capable of producing "superior quality" cement compared to its Chinese predecessor, as backward and inefficient. Managers complained that they had received obsolete, second-hand equipment from the GDR. The factory had to be upgraded again, this time with Chinese machinery purchased on the market rather than gifted between "friends." The cement factory itself embodies a micro-palimpsest: "The physical structure is still East German," the manager told me during a visit in 2011, also pointing to a few remaining pieces of GDR equipment from postwar refurbishment (see again fig. 6 and 7).

28 While global capitalism has facilitated the removal of material reminders of past worldliness and "socialist friendships" from the cityscape, such histories linger in the urban palimpsest in other important ways. In 1990, the Thälmann Youth Culture House underwent a name change after the fall of the Berlin Wall. This was carried out in a politically shrewd move to swiftly align the province with the newly unified government in order to assuage anxiety about loans owed to the GDR (which were subsequently converted to new aid programs). However, rather than repudiate the past, the new name – "Vietnamese–German Youth Culture House" – reaffirmed the central place and role of the building in the contemporary landscape of urban modernization, not unlike the college, the housing blocks, and other sites of postwar construction that remain integral to the social and material infrastructure of the city. From French colonial modernism to Soviet, Polish and East German socialist internationalism to Chinese state capitalism, international interventions in the city have given shape to a unique palimpsest of architecture based on divergent ideologies and urban design practices closely tied to changes in political economy, forms of diplomacy and the vibrant social life of the city.

Notes

- 1 Michael WAIBEL and Henning HILBERT (eds.), *TP. Ho Chi Minh: MEGA City*, New York, NY: Times Publishing House, 2014.
- 2 For the specifics of how this took place, see Christina SCHWENKEL, “Traveling Architecture: East German Urban Designs Abroad,” *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity*, vol. 2, 2014, p. 155–74.
- 3 Stephen V. WARD, “Transnational Planners in a Postcolonial World,” in Patsy HEALEY and Robert UPTON (eds.), *Crossing Borders: International Exchange and Planning Practices*, London: Routledge, 2010, p. 46–72.
- 4 Łukasz STANEK, “Introduction: The ‘Second World’s’ Architecture and Planning in the ‘Third World,’” *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2012, p. 299–307.
- 5 Gu CHAOLIN and Ian G. COOK, “Beijing: Socialist Chinese Capital and New World City”, in Stephen HAMNETT and Dean FORBES (eds.), *Planning Asian Cities: Risks and Resilience*, London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2011 (Planning, history, and the environment series), p. 90–130.
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- 7 William S. LOGAN, *Hanoi: Biography of a City*, Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2000.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 186.
- 9 Greg CASTILLO, “Promoting Socialist Cities and Citizens: East Germany’s National Building Program,” in Pamela E. SWETT, S. Jonathan WIESEN and Jonathan R. ZATLIN (eds.), *Selling Modernity: Advertising in Twentieth-Century Germany*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007, p. 287–306.
- 10 Charles K. ARMSTRONG, “‘Fraternal Socialism’: The International Reconstruction of North Korea, 1953–62,” *Cold War History*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2005, p. 161–87.
- 11 Łukasz STANEK, “Miastoprojekt Goes Abroad: The Transfer of Architectural Labour from Socialist Poland to Iraq (1958–1989),” *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2012, p. 361–86.
- 12 Michael CRANG, “Envisioning Urban Histories: Bristol as Palimpsest, Postcards, and Snapshots,” *Environment & Planning A*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1996, p. 429–52; quote on page 430.
- 13 William S. LOGAN, *Hanoi: Biography of a City*, *op. cit.* (note 7), p. 9.
- 14 Vietnam National Archives III, Ủy Ban Kế Hoạch Nhà Nước 1955-1978, Files 5578, 9109; and Phủ Thủ Tướng, 1954-1985, Files 9132, 8892.
- 15 Vietnam National Archives III, Phủ Thủ Tướng, 1954-1985, File 9567.
- 16 Andreas HUYSEN, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003 (Cultural memory in the present), p. 7.
- 17 Christina SCHWENKEL, “Post/Socialist Affect: Ruination and Reconstruction of the Nation in Urban Vietnam,” *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2013, p. 252–77.
- 18 David W. DEL TESTA, “Vinh, the Seed that Would Grow Red: Colonial Prelude, Revolutionary City,” *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2007, p. 305–25.
- 19 PHẠM Xuân CẦN, *Văn hóa đô thị với thực tiễn Thành phố Vinh* (The Practice of Urban Culture in Vinh City), Vinh: Nghệ An, 2008, p. 111. Historical sites, including pagodas, were spared.
- 20 MỸ Hà, “Vinh trong những ngày tiêu thổ kháng chiến” (Vinh in the Time of the Scorched Earth Policy), *Nghệ An News*, 19 December 2013, URL: <http://baonghean.vn/nghe-an-dat-va-nguoi/201312/ky-niem-ngay-toan-quoc-khang-chien-chong-thuc-dan-phap-19121946-vinh-trong-nhung-ngay-tieu-tho-khang-chien-430563/>. Accessed 15 December 2014.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 PHẠM Xuân CẦN and BUI Đình Sâm, *Lịch sử thành phố Vinh, 1945–1975* (History of Vinh City, 1945–75), Vinh: Nghệ An, 2003, p. 103–4.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 125. And by 1961, this number reached 60 (14 central plants and 46 provincial enterprises). *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- 24 Decision 148/CP issued by the Prime Minister on 10 October 1963 elevated Vinh to the status of city.
- 25 PHẠM Xuân CẦN and BUI Đình Sâm, *Lịch sử thành phố Vinh, 1945–1975* (History of Vinh City, 1945–75), *op. cit.* (note 22), p. 149 refers to this change in status as a “historical milestone” for Vinh.
- 26 *Nghệ An News*, 18 September 1963, p. 1, 4.
- 27 David W. DEL TESTA, “‘Imperial Corridor’: Association, Transportation and Power in French Colonial Indochina,” *Science, Technology, Society*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1999, p. 319–54.
- 28 *Nghệ An News*, 20 May 1964, p. 1, 4.

29 NGUYỄN Quang Hồng, *Kinh tế Nghệ An từ năm 1885 đến năm 1945* (The Economy of Nghệ An from 1885 to 1945), Vinh: Lý Luận Quốc Gia, 2008.

30 According to archival documents, Zawadzki had originally proposed a friendship hospital in the port city of Hải Phòng, but a Czech–Vietnamese Friendship Hospital had already been built there. The Vietnamese Minister of Health thus encouraged the head of state to carry out the project in Vinh. Vietnam National Archives III, Văn Phòng Chính Phủ 1957–95, File 9111.

31 *Ibid.*

32 *Nghệ An News*, 25 February 1986, p. 1, 4.

33 PHẠM Xuân Cầm and BUI Đình Sâm, *Lịch sử thành phố Vinh, 1945–1975* (History of Vinh City, 1945–75), *op. cit.* (note 22), p. 217.

34 Vietnam National Archives III, Văn Phòng Chính Phủ 1957–95, File 5578. Note that these figures do not include reconstruction projects by China, North Korea and Cuba, which were calculated in separate documents.

35 And even then, it was not able to complete the project in its entirety by the end of the agreement on 31 December 1980.

36 Hence the project's title: "Assistance in the Construction and Design of Vinh City" (Hilfe beim Aufbau und bei der Projektierung der Stadt Vinh).

37 For example, given the high demand for housing, municipal authorities pushed to allocate single-family apartments in the housing blocks to multiple households (as had occurred in the Kim Liên blocks in Hanoi). This was met with strong objection from East German engineers, who were concerned about the impact of overpopulation on the structure and longevity of the buildings. On the violation of feng shui in the apartment designs, see Christina SCHWENKEL, "Traveling Architecture: East German Urban Designs Abroad," *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 167.

38 Interview, Vinh City, 15 August 2011.

39 Interview, Vinh City, 23 May 2011.

40 LƯƠNG Bá Quảng, "Thành phố Vinh: Xu hướng tổ chức và mở rộng không gian qua các thời kì" (Vinh City: Trends in the Organization and Expansion of Space across Time), Institute of Design and Construction, Nghệ An, unpublished manuscript.

41 Per Decision 40/QĐ-UB of the provincial People's Committee of Nghệ An.

42 Targeted in the air war because of its industrial significance, the factory was rebuilt in 1975 with Romanian aid and technical support.

43 Berlin (Germany), Ministerium für Bauwesen, Bundesarchiv, File DH1 28526; Liên hiệp các tổ chức hữu nghị, Hội hữu nghị Việt–Đức tỉnh Nghệ An, Những dấu ấn lịch sử về tình hữu nghị Việt–Đức thời kỳ đầu xây dựng lại thành phố Vinh 1973–1980 (Historical Impressions of Vietnamese–German Friendship during Reconstruction of Vinh City, 1973–1980), Vinh: Nghệ An, 2011, p. 35–6.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 79–81.

45 "Alle Hochbauten sollen eine moderne sozialistische Architektur erhalten..." *Konzeption für die Bebauung Quang Trung*, 15 May 1974, Berlin (Germany), Ministerium für Bauwesen, Bundesarchiv, File DH1 28549.

46 Interview, Berlin, 9 September 2011.

47 Interview, Erfurt, 12 September 2011.

48 Christina SCHWENKEL, "Civilizing the City: Socialist Ruins and Urban Renewal in Central Vietnam," *positions: asia critique*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2012, p. 437–70.

49 These observations are based on nine months of living in the housing blocks as part of my ethnographic research in 2010–1.

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Résumés

Nach dem Kriegsende kamen sozialistische Fachleute aus der ganzen Welt in das stark bombengeschädigte Vietnam, um beim Wiederaufbau der zerstörten Industrie und Infrastruktur zu helfen. Heute bilden diese materiellen Überbleibsel sozialistischer Hilfeleistungen ein dynamisches Panorama stadtplanerischer und bautechnologischer Transfers. Dieser Essay untersucht die daraus entstandene allgemeine Form der Infrastruktur in Vinh City in Zentralvietnam und konzentriert sich dabei auf zwei aufeinanderfolgende Phasen der Zerstörung und des Wiederaufbaus der Stadt während der Unabhängigkeitskriege gegen Frankreich und die Vereinigten Staaten. In der ersten Phase des sozialistischen Städtebaus (1954-64), die Autorin analysiert internationale Bauvorhaben und die Anstrengungen, die unternommen wurden, um die Stadt und die Ruinen aus der Kolonialzeit in ein großes Industriezentrum zu verwandeln. In der zweiten Phase, nach dem Ende des Krieges 1973, die Autorin betrachtet an den kompletten Neuentwurf und den Wiederaufbau der Stadt mit Hilfe Ostdeutschlands. Um ein besseres Verständnis davon zu erlangen, wie diese vielschichtigen Architekturgeschichten immer noch das Leben der Stadtbewohner prägen, verwende ich den Begriff des *Urbanen Palimpsests*, um auf die Gewohnheiten hinzuweisen, durch die sozialistische Bauten in einer Marktwirtschaft neuen Sinn und Zweck annehmen, allerdings oft in unvorhergesehener Weise.

After the end of the war in Vietnam, socialist experts from around the world descended on the heavily bombed country to aid in the reconstruction of its demolished industry and infrastructure. Today, these material relics of socialist assistance reveal a dynamic landscape of urban design and building technology transfers. This essay examines the resulting global infrastructure-scape in Vinh City, central Vietnam, by focusing on two successive periods of urban destruction and renewal during the wars of independence against France and the United States. In the first period of socialist urbanization (1954–64), the author examines international construction projects and efforts to transform the leveled township and its colonial ruins into a major industrial center. In the second period, after the end of the air war in 1973, the author analyzes the full-scale redesign and reconstruction of the city with the assistance of East Germany. To better understand how these layered architectural histories continue to resonate in the lives of urban residents today, the author draws on the notion of the *urban palimpsest* to bring attention to the practices through which socialist constructions take on new use and meaning in a market economy, though often in unintended ways.

En las postrimerías de la guerra de Vietnam, expertos socialistas de todo el mundo llegaron a un país sometido a intensos bombardeos para ayudar a la reconstrucción de las infraestructuras y la industria destruidas. Actualmente, estas reliquias materiales de la ayuda socialista revelan un panorama dinámico de diseño urbano y transferencia tecnológica en materia de construcción. El presente ensayo analiza el paisaje de infraestructuras resultante de la ciudad de Vinh, en el centro de Vietnam, centrándose en dos periodos sucesivos de destrucción y renovación urbanas durante las guerras de la independencia contra Francia y Estados Unidos. Del primer periodo de la urbanización socialista (1954–64), se señala los proyectos internacionales de construcción y los esfuerzos desplegados para transformar el municipio y sus ruinas coloniales en un gran centro industrial. Del segundo periodo, después de la guerra aérea de 1973, se expone la remodelación y reconstrucción a gran escala de la ciudad con la colaboración de la antigua Alemania del Este. Para comprender mejor cómo siguen resonando y cómo perviven en las vidas de los residentes urbanos de hoy en día estas historias arquitectónicas de múltiples

capas, se recurre a la noción del *palimpsesto urbano* para llamar la atención sobre las prácticas que confieren un nuevo uso y significado a las edificaciones socialistas en una economía de mercado, aunque a menudo sea de forma involuntaria.

Après la fin de la guerre du Vietnam, des experts socialistes du monde entier se rendirent dans ce pays qui avait subi de lourds bombardements, afin de contribuer à la reconstruction de ses industries et de son infrastructure détruites. Aujourd'hui, ces vestiges matériels de l'aide socialiste révèlent un panorama dynamique en matière d'échanges dans les domaines de l'aménagement urbain et des techniques de construction. Cet article étudie un des produits de ces échanges, l'apparence générale de l'infrastructure de la ville de Vinh située au centre du Vietnam. Il se concentre sur deux périodes de destruction et de reconstruction urbaines pendant les guerres d'indépendance contre la France et les États-Unis. Pendant la première période d'urbanisation socialiste (1954-1964), l'auteur étudie les projets de construction internationaux ainsi que les efforts effectués pour transformer les communes (« townships ») anéanties et les ruines coloniales en un grand centre industriel. Concernant la deuxième période, après la fin de la guerre en 1973, l'auteur analyse la remodelisation à taille réelle et la reconstruction de la ville avec le soutien de l'Allemagne de l'Est. Pour mieux comprendre comment la complexité historique de ces architectures continue à résonner dans la vie des habitants de la ville aujourd'hui, l'auteur emprunte la notion de *palimpseste urbain* afin d'attirer l'attention sur les pratiques qui ont donné aux constructions socialistes, parfois même de façon involontaire, une nouvelle signification et un nouvel usage dans l'économie de marché.

Dopo la fine della guerra del Vietnam, gli esperti socialisti di tutto il mondo si recarono nel paese che aveva subito forti bombardamenti, per contribuire alla ricostruzione dell'industria e delle infrastrutture distrutte. Oggi questi resti materiali degli interventi socialisti rivelano un quadro dinamico di scambi nell'ambito del design urbano e delle tecnologie edili. Questo saggio esamina uno dei prodotti di questi scambi, il paesaggio globale delle infrastrutture della città di Vinh, nel Vietnam centrale, concentrandosi su due periodi successivi di distruzione e ristrutturazione urbana durante le guerre d'indipendenza contro la Francia e gli Stati Uniti. Del primo periodo di urbanizzazione socialista (1954-64), l'autore prende in esame i progetti internazionali di costruzione e gli sforzi per trasformare le municipalità rase al suolo e le loro rovine coloniali in un centro industriale di primo piano. Del secondo periodo, dopo la fine della guerra aerea nel 1973, analizza invece la nuova progettazione su vasta scala e la ricostruzione della città grazie agli aiuti della Germania dell'Est. Per spiegare come la complessità storica di quest'architettura continui a riflettersi nelle vite dei residenti urbani di oggi, l'autore evoca la nozione di *palimpsesto urbano* per attirare l'attenzione sulle modalità che permettono alle costruzioni socialiste di assumere – anche se spesso non intenzionalmente – un nuovo senso e una nuova utilità nell'economia di mercato.

Entrées d'index

Index de mots-clés : palimpseste, postcolonialisme, reconstruction d'après-guerre, architecture socialiste, solidarité, aménagement urbain

Index by keyword : palimpsest, postcolonialism, post-war reconstruction, socialist architecture, solidarity, urban design

Indice de palabras clave : palimpsesto, postcolonialismo, reconstrucción de la posguerra, arquitectura socialista, solidaridad, ordenación urbana

Schlagwortindex : Palimpsest, Postkolonialismus, Wiederaufbau nach dem Krieg, Sozialistische Architektur, Solidarität, Städtebau

Parole chiave : palimpsesto, postcolonialismo, ricostruzione del dopoguerra, architettura socialista, solidarietà, design urbano

Index géographique : Asie, Asie du Sud-Est, Vietnam, Vinh

Index chronologique : XXe siècle

Territoires anciens : Allemagne de l'Est