

Book Reviews

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Building Socialism: The Afterlife of East German Architecture in Urban Vietnam. By Christina Schwenkel. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. xviii+403 pp.

Building Socialism is a richly interdisciplinary study of the Quang Trung housing estate in the Vietnamese city of Vinh. Comprehensively destroyed by over four thousand US airstrikes during the Vietnam War (p. 42), Vinh's reconstruction was intended as a showpiece of modernist planning, and a statement of socialist solidarity between East Germany and Vietnam. Drawing on both architectural history and ethnography, Schwenkel has produced a compelling account of the complexities of post-war socialist utopianism, and its enduring—if contested—legacy.

The destruction of Vinh created a *tabula rasa* for planners; its “landscape of ruins and rubble provided fertile ground for utopian experiments” (p. 131). It also mobilized international solidarity, most significantly from the German Democratic Republic (GDR, the official name of then East Germany). The rebuilding of Vinh resulted in the transfer of planning ideas, and expertise in post-war reconstruction, from East Germany to Vietnam (pp. 101–2). As Schwenkel notes, “the reconstruction of Vinh was Hanoi’s—and Berlin’s—paramount prestige project ... [and] would become a benchmark for socialist planning” (p. 112).

Yet, solidarity was not without obstacles, and “was, in fact, a fraught and fragile game that both sides played tactically” (p. 126). Authorities in both nations had to navigate sensitivities around their economic asymmetries, the political optics of aid and the persistence of racist attitudes to translate the dream of solidarity into reality (pp. 87–91, 96–97). The spectre of colonialism also meant that considerable sensitivity was required to make the intervention of foreign planners palatable to the Vietnamese (pp. 142–43).

If the goal of solidarity was difficult to realize, the architectural vision of utopian modernism would prove even more so. Perhaps the most compelling aspect of *Building Socialism* is its approach to the tensions and ambiguities found in the affective responses to Vinh's architecture. Schwenkel cautions against reading "the story of mass housing and visionary planning ... as a triumph of postcolonial progress and modernist experimentation in Vietnam" (p. 211). *Building Socialism* demonstrates how the clean lines drawn by Vinh's modernist planners—realized in bricks and mortar in the Quang Trung housing estate—faced the reality of non-compliance and urban decay. Residents' unease regarding the *phong thủy* (feng shui) of the new housing estate, particularly in the centralized placement of toilets and difficulties in placing ancestral altars (pp. 264–71), exemplify the tensions between the international aspirations of socialist modernism and the enduring hold of local traditions.

Problems of planning have been coupled with what Schwenkel describes as "unplanned obsolescence", which "exposed the limits of GDR spatial logics of modernity" and its translation in Vietnam (p. 257). Neglect has left many of the flats in Quang Trung severely decayed, "subjecting residents to bodily harm" (p. 250). For some, the modernist dream became a nightmare. Despite this, residents have shown a great deal of ambivalence towards demolition plans. Quang Trung's future is a contested one: its buildings "not modern anymore" and its residents "recalibrating their temporal relationships to past and future modernities" (p. 319). *Building Socialism* is thus a study of the aftermath of modernism in Vietnam, and of past futurities.

As Schwenkel notes in her introduction (p. 6), provincial centres like Vinh have attracted relatively little scholarly attention compared to the major cities of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. *Building Socialism* addresses this gap in the literature. By demonstrating the extent to which a place like Vinh was entangled in global flows of people, culture and architectural ideas, the book provides a strong case for reassessing the role of socialist reconstruction in processes of globalization and decolonization. Vinh's story is in some ways exceptional, with the comprehensive scale of wartime destruction

allowing for a level of urban experimentation that would have been impossible in either Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City. Further discussion of how socialist modernism was translated in these cities, and how that differed from the comprehensive urban planning in Vinh, would have helped further contextualize Vinh's unique urban experience.

Modernism, in many varied guises, became the architectural language of independence across much of Southeast Asia in the era of decolonization. *Building Socialism* is an important book that enriches our understanding of how anti-imperialist struggles shaped the region's urban environment. The book thus adds to and complements the growing body of literature exploring the varied ways in which postcolonial Southeast Asian states articulated their vision of independence through architectural modernism, including Lai Chee Kien's *Building Merdeka: Independence Architecture in Kuala Lumpur, 1957–1966* and Chang Jiat-Hwee and Imran bin Tajudeen's *Southeast Asia's Modern Architecture: Questions of Translation, Epistemology and Power*, as well as more geographically focused studies such as Ruth Iversen Rollitt's *Iversen: Architect of Ipoh and Modern Malaya*.

In *Building Socialism*, Schwenkel shines a light on an understudied but deeply significant aspect of the Southeast Asian urban experience. One can only hope that more scholars follow her lead.

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