Building Socialism: The Afterlife of East German Architecture in Urban Vietnam by Christina Schwenkel (Duke University Press, 2020).

Reviewed by

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Building Socialism: The Afterlife of East German Architecture in Urban Vietnam by Christina Schwenkel will be interesting to scholars and students of Vietnam and Southeast Asia, historians of architecture and urban planning, anthropologists, as well as scholars of the cultural Cold War, global socialism, and cultural exchanges between the Second and the Third World. It is a rich historical and anthropological account of an urban planning and housing complex development project in the city of Vinh in the wake of post-war reconstruction in Vietnam. Schwenkel masterfully combines materials from ten years of studying the site with archival research and anthropological analysis to make sense of the ruination and reconstruction of the city and, later, the obsolescence of its once most modern socialist housing complex, Quang Trung. At the core of this book is a project of socialist solidarity between East Germany and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam undertaken to transfer socialist technology of urban reconstruction and the engineering of an ideal socialist living to build Vietnamese socialist modernity. Schwenkel examines the conflating motivations and contradictions of this project, exploring the agendas of international socialist solidarity, the differences in the ideals of socialist modernity and its built spatiality in the Second and Third World, and the lingering power of a socialist dream in Vietnam in the present. The latter also opens up a question about the (after)lives of Asian socialism and whether the term "post-socialism" is a misnomer for Asian countries where communist parties remain in power (High 2021).

Building Socialism achieves three important intellectual tasks, which Schwenkel summarizes in the book's conclusion. Firstly, it reappraises socialist architecture and, by extension, the socialist engineering of sociality in urban and domestic spaces as a radically creative process. In so doing, Schwenkel (2020, 320) refutes the dominant sentiment in Western academia and public opinion that socialist architecture was a monotonous, drab monolith. She writes, "Dominant discourse has typically associated socialism with a lack of imagination and limited sensations or dullness […]. In contrast, my account provincializes the capitalist West and reveals imagination as central to the historical experience of socialist decolonization." I add that not only was socialist architecture evaluated unfavorably in Cold War cultural warfare, but the creative power and vernacular specificity of Asian socialism in building postcolonial modernity are largely overlooked in scholarship to date. In this regard, Schwenkel's analysis goes beyond "provincializing the capitalist West," as her attention to decolonization through imagining Asian socialism provides a valuable methodological contribution to Cold War studies of the Third World. Secondly, *Building Socialism* highlights the plurality and the cultural difference within the socialist cosmopolis, concomitantly decentering its Western nodes of the Soviet Union and East Germany alike and decolonizing the field of socialist studies. "It is therefore impossible to speak of a uniform 'socialist city,' if

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such an urban construct ever existed, or to see modernist forms as devoid of any cultural specificity," argues Schwenkel (2020, 321). Architectural history has already started to explore the nexus of modernism, urban planning, and non-Western socialism; yet more work needs to be done in the field of comparative socialism (Stanek 2020). Lastly, *Building Socialism* is deeply involved with socialist temporalities. The book is structured chronologically from the aerial bombardment to present-day Vietnam, yet underneath this linearity, it deals with temporal structures of socialist modernity. It asks the questions why the design interventions of Vietnamese architects were perceived as unmodern by their East German counterparts, and why the living practices of migrant rural female workers in the complex of Quang Trung were deemed by the housing administration as corrupting a model socialist space. In other words, it asks who is an authority on a socialist ideal and its built form, and how the hierarchy of being modern is produced along the lines of race, gender, and economic development. Most importantly, the book ponders the obsolescence of a socialist utopian dream in Vietnam as its built environment crumbles, but its promises endure in the expectations for social futurity. Schwenkel notes that the advent of post-socialism does not engender the same condition in the former Second and Third World. If the socialist dream is abandoned in the practice of urban governance but lingers in social demands of Quang Trung residents, how does it structure the affects between the two? More than that, how should an abiding dream of a socialist utopia be accounted for in Asian contemporaneity?

Building Socialism comprises three parts, each with a distinct subject, period, and methodology, attesting to the breadth and depth of Schwenkel's academic inquiry and mastery of interdisciplinary research. What makes the book especially enjoyable to read is an impressive array of cultural theories that Schwenkel employs to unpack the phenomena under her investigation.

The first part, *Ruination*, attends to the destruction of Vinh and the logic of the US air war in Vietnam. In this part's opening chapter, *Annihilation*, Schwenkel takes the technologies of visuality as her locus of analysis. She explores the photographic techniques used by US intelligence to render visible and dehumanize the air raid targets in North Vietnam. As bombing statistics focused on "killing" infrastructure—trucks, bridges, and rail stations—they recast Vietnamese communists as unhuman subjects and unleashed an "orientalist male fantasy of material annihilation," she asserts. This material annihilation was also a temporal violence against Vietnamese modernity, put infamously as "to bomb them back to the Stone Age." Thus, what was deemed a "rational war" for the safety of Western civilization turned into "irrational techno-fanatism" that destroyed the material condition of human life.

Moving from the air and photographic panopticon of US military intelligence-gathering to the underground, the chapter *Evacuation* narrates the experience of Vinh's residents deprived of sight and reliant on sonic awareness. If American bombers possessed total vision, the citizens of Vinh had to forgo the capacity to see and had moved to the darkness of bunkers and tunnels, becoming undetectable. This argument of Vietnamese invisibility in the visuality of the Vietnam War corroborates the analysis developed by scholars of photography, film, and media studies (Phu 2022). The sight and soundscape of violence is one subject of this chapter; another is a prolonged and repeated displacement of people, an itinerant mode of survival, and the state control of a perpetually moving and socially dislocated population. The evacuation of Vinh and other cities, Schwenkel observes, prompted deurbanization of Vietnam and socio-temporally equalized urban dwellers with peasants and ethnic minorities.

All of these groups would migrate, contribute, and be subjected to socialist (re)modernization through Vinh's reconstruction after the end of the war.

The *Solidarity* chapter turns to a comparative historical account of the urban destruction of East Germany, and specifically Dresden, at the end of WWII, and lays the ground for appreciating the German Democratic Republic's commitment to reconstructing Vinh. This chapter unpacks historical insights into why the GDR was invested in the project of international socialist solidarity and was a partner of choice for the DRV. Schwenkel remarks that, in the GDR, fraternal help to the Third World was "a political stand and the structure of feelings," powered by memories of destruction by the capitalist West. Beyond the benevolent surface of solidarity, she uncovers the state's desire to attack the US and the Federal Republic of Germany on moral grounds, to contain domestic critique, to present itself as a vanguard of socialist modernity, and thereby to gain international legitimacy.

The second part of the book, *Reconstruction*, focuses on two projects—the development of the urban plan of Vinh and the design of a model socialist housing complex, Quang Trung. Both served a common goal of scientific engineering and practical realization of the Vietnamese socialist utopia as a built form and enabled by it living practice. Schwenkel carefully reconstructs the negotiations between East German and Vietnamese architects in working out a model Vietnamese city plan and housing blueprint and, through these debates, dissects the Second and the Third World visions of a socialist ideal, their predicaments, and incongruities.

The chapter *Spirited Internationalism* outlines a symbolic geography of socialist solidarity mapped onto the reconstructing Vietnam. The leader of the socialist cosmopolis, the USSR, is invited to rebuild Hanoi, while the GDR, the homeland of Karl Marx, is approached to reconstruct Vinh, the birthplace of Ho Chi Minh. In this chapter, Schwenkel answers the question of why many socialist solidarity projects, including the Soviets, failed to materialize and what stood behind the success of the GDR's involvement. She argues that, unlike architects from other socialist countries who visited Vietnamese cities for study trips, GDR advisors committed themselves to prolonged postings in Vinh and collaborated with Vietnamese experts and workers on the design and the following construction. The chapter *Rational Planning* goes into detail about developing the urban plan for Vinh, and *Urban Housing* describes the process of designing the housing complex of Quang Trung. These chapters highlight the differences in what constituted Second and Third World ideals and the practical limitations of socialist living in domestic specialty, dwelling practices, and quotidian recreation of productive labor. While East German architects paid attention to social science and calculated optimal square meters per resident, shading, and ventilation of buildings, Vietnamese architects were troubled by the overlap of service, living, and worship spaces in homes, which were otherwise differentiated in traditional Vietnamese housing. They introduced concerns about the disparity between East German scientific ideals of building and living and the priorities of poverty-stricken post-war Vietnam. As a result, East German technologies of building socialism were adapted and vernacularized by altering floor plans and housing amenities. The final product was an urban plan and housing complex design that both parties agreed on, admired some aspects of, and felt ambivalent about others.

The third part of *Building Socialism, Obsolescence,* studies the contemporary afterlife of a socialist dream, the deterioration of Quang Trung, and the marginalization of its residents, who were once the elites of building socialism. This part of the book probes the contradictions of Vietnamese market-oriented socialism through the precarity of the housing

complex and its occupants. The chapters *Indiscipline* and *Decay* describe a slow resistance of residents to the new practices of urban governmentality that deny them the right to a safe, modern living. These chapters are attentive to class and gender, as the working-class women who contributed their manual labor to the post-war reconstruction came to bear the burden and the blame for the failure of socialist living in Quang Trung. The chapter *Renovation* looks at the remodeling of apartments in the past decade, not only to further alter East German designs to satisfy vernacular living norms and *phong thuy* (feng shui) rules, but also to accommodate aspirations for prosperity at a time when the Vietnamese economy is reorienting itself towards global capitalism, and Quang Trung dwellers are sliding into the urban poor. Overall, *Obsolescence* is a caring anthropological account of everyday life, informed by the author's personal living experience in the housing complex.

Building Socialism is based on archival research in the US, Germany, and Vietnam, and anthropological fieldwork in the former Second and Third World. It is enabled by Schwenkel's multilingual fluency and enlivened by her attention to the literary, poetic, and iconographic. The interludes between the chapters feature songs and graphic design posters that offer the vocabulary and the imagery of survival, solidarity, utopian dreams, and communal intimacy enacted in and enabled by the built environment. The dense, eloquent language of *Building Socialism* suggests that it is aimed at a scholarly audience versed in cultural theory and Cold War history. Hence, my only critique of the book is that its separate parts do not lend themselves easily as readings for undergraduate courses. Schwenkel does not repeat herself by introducing the key concepts or terminology, and the individual chapters do not read as stand-alone pieces. Nonetheless, Schwenkel's essays, which were developed as precursors to the book, do an excellent job of introducing some of the themes of *Building Socialism* for teaching in a more succinct and accessible way. "Traveling Architecture: East German Urban Designs Abroad" works particularly well at summarizing her arguments, apart perhaps from the gender analysis.

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