

Development as Palimpsest: Infrastructures Revived in Boten’s Architecture

Jessica DiCarlo

走进磨丁时间——

静谧与活力交融之下的枢纽新城

倘若给她贴上一个单一的标签、会显得既不客观又不准确。
磨丁绝非纯粹的旅游区域、也并非冷峻的工业化基地。

磨丁宛如仙境的热带雨林化身成绿色海洋荡漾于此。
在繁茂原始森林的掩映下、现代化高楼显得格外有活力，磨丁这座城市将原始风情和现代风范巧妙地融为一体、具有视觉冲击力的妙趣景象跃入眼帘。

从拂晓到黄昏、再到暮、地平线上的磨丁一直在平衡着生态自然与建设发展之间的尺度。
森林、楼、要有；生态、经济、都要。

Enter Boten Time—

A new hub city blending tranquility and vitality

If she is given a single label, it would appear neither objective nor accurate.
Boten is by no means a pure tourist area, nor a grim industrial base.

Boten is like a fairyland, tropical rainforest transformed into a green rippling ocean. Under the canopy of lush virgin forest, the modern high-rise buildings are particularly vibrant. The city of Boten cleverly blends original and modern styles into one, with visually striking impact.

From dawn to dusk and back to morning twilight, Boten on the horizon balances ecological nature and construction development. There must be forests and tall buildings; both ecology and economy.

Advertising shared on WeChat by Haicheng Group, a Yunnan-based conglomeration of real estate, construction, tourism, and logistics companies, and developer of the Boten SEZ in Laos. May 2020. Translation by author.

“A city is rising out of the jungle,” remarks my Lao colleague Siphong, eyes wide as we approach Boten and the tops of buildings emerge from behind the red hillsides. It is July 2019; the summer air is heavy and thick with dust as dump trucks buzz between construction sites. We soon hear what will become the familiar sound of explosives used to level the mountainous landscape. There is a stark difference between the razed red earth and dense green forests along our drive here. Boten—a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Laos at the border with Yunnan, China—is being built by Chinese developers primarily for Chinese investors, and like most SEZs it offers trade, tax, and investment incentives. This was Siphong’s first visit to the zone and she quickly determined: “I’ve never seen anything like this. It’s not Laos anymore”—a common conclusion where the use of the Chinese currency, language, and time zone have prompted intense debates over sovereignty and overlapping state power (Laungaramsri 2019). Tan (2012), for example, argues that this dynamic creates Chinese enclaves in Laos that actually reinforce Lao state power, while others contend that sovereignty lies with private corporations that borrow legitimacy from both states (Nyíri 2012).

Explosives used to clear hills and forest.

Photo: Jessica DiCarlo, 2019.



Designated an SEZ in 2003 by the Lao government, Boten developed a lawless reputation as a casino border town near China and Thailand, where gambling is illegal. Reports of violence, kidnapping, and the murder of gamblers who were unable to repay debts led to its shutdown in 2011 by the Lao government at the behest of the Chinese state. However, following the agreement to construct the Laos–China Railway, the respective central governments dubbed Boten a high-level project, and both the SEZ and railway have become flagship infrastructures under the Belt and Road Initiative, China’s gargantuan infrastructure project that spans over one hundred countries. After four years of planning and negotiation, reconstruction began in 2016 and Boten has swiftly become a space of anticipation founded on promises of regional connectivity. Haicheng Group, a Yunnan-based developer with a US\$10 billion+, fifteen-year construction plan, is reviving the city for real estate, tourism, and logistics, with a strict no-casino policy.

The zone model is often viewed as a blank slate for urban development (Bach 2019) or a city without history (Oakes 2019). Like many Chinese SEZs in and outside of China (Yueng et al. 2009; Bräutigam and Xiaoyang 2011), Boten is modeled on Shenzhen SEZ. Established in 1979, Shenzhen was an experimental area for China’s 1978 Reform and Opening policies. As the country’s first and exemplary SEZ, it ballooned from a 30,000-person town to a metropolis of 12 million with a GDP that recently exceeded that of Hong Kong (for a history of Shenzhen’s transformation see O’Donnell et al. 2017). Images of Boten as a new Shenzhen adorn billboards on the main thoroughfare declaring: “This is the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone in 1979. Different times, the same great cause.”¹ Yet the dust that blankets the bottom of these billboards, along with the adjacent decaying and vacant buildings diminish this spectacle and challenge the ahistorical, blank-slate notion of the SEZ.

Development as palimpsest

While portrayed as a city-making *tabula rasa*, Boten is built on the rubble of past infrastructures as well as on visions of modernity. Here, infrastructures encompass not only the pipes, concrete, and materials that make up the previously defunct casino town, but also the local and regional topological and cultural contexts that existed before SEZ construction. Facets of these contexts are replicated in the new city architecture and deemed essential to reviving Boten. Some are hidden: casinos transformed into shops and workers’ residences. Others are resurrected and made visible through the layering of architectures that accentuate certain cultural and ecological aesthetics: Buddhist temples and the reproduction of the Lao village that was displaced to make way for the SEZ. Haicheng Group’s use of these layers produces the effect of Boten’s development as palimpsest—something reused or altered that bears visible traces of earlier forms. A similar notion of palimpsest in urban planning conceptualizes land as artifact, project, and product shaped by human processes that “tirelessly erase and rewrite ... the soil” (Corboz 1983: 17).

As all infrastructure, from cities to roads, generates meaning (Larkin 2008; Harvey and Knox 2012; Larkin 2013), so architectural aesthetics evoke awe or desire that engender new norms in city-building (Ghertner 2015). While Shenzhen’s built environment



was designed to reflect globality and a modern China (Cartier 2002), Boten relies on both modern and vernacular architecture.² Here, architecture overlaps with and reproduces previous infrastructure to promote the city-to-be as one of “economy and ecology; tranquility and vitality”. Architecture—both its design and its representation—is inseparable from infrastructure as it generates visions for the future by reinscribing infrastructure of the past.

Turning an architectural lens on Boten reveals juxtapositions in design plans; far from cohesive, these amalgamate as a multicultural mix meant to render Boten investable as a global city. Encapsulated in the slogan «看见磨丁看见世界» (“See Boten, see the world”), it is a place where you can ‘have it all’: high-rises, villages, and pristine nature. The SEZ is divided into four sub-zones: a central business district, a cultural park, a tourism area, and the free trade zone. Plain, box-like high-rises tightly line the business district streets, while architectural flourishes decorate some structures, approximating their Southeast Asian-ness. Design plans draw on Buddhist symbols, colonial architecture, and the sweeping roofs of Lao and Thai temples to develop a sense of the exotic or authentic through material connections between people, places, and times.

Boten's skyline.

Photos: Jessica DiCarlo, 2020.

A temple under construction with Boten's city center in the distance.
Photo: Haicheng Marketing, 2020.



Replica of That Luang stupa at the Lao border checkpoint.
Photo: Jessica DiCarlo 2019.

Yet static cultural appeals—those that idealize Laos as simple and rural, neglecting the ever-evolving aspects of culture—can have contested meanings (Lees 2008; Su 2011). For example, That Luang stupa is considered to be Laos’ most important religious and national monument. In contrast to its esteemed location in Vientiane, a replica at the Boten border checkpoint is inundated by trucks and dwarfed by half-built high-rises. Other vaguely Buddhist replicas, including Lao-Thai-style temples, are under construction.



Architectural design plans and styles shared by Haicheng (translations by author).

Along with exhibiting representations of culture, village architectures signify proximity to nature. In my interviews, Haicheng employees, potential investors, and homebuyers (all from China) expressed desires to live in a clean environment. Yet amidst the ongoing construction, removal of vegetation, and leveling of land, this sought-after environment was very much elusive. I inquired about this conundrum with members of Haicheng’s tourism team, with whom I spent time throughout my fieldwork. They proposed that we visit Ban NanThong (*ban* or *baan* is the Lao word for village), a recently completed reproduction of a Lao village, which would provide the nature and culture they envisioned.

As our beat-up jeep rattled along a freshly cleared dirt road toward NanThong, a shared relief at escaping the relentless drone of construction filled the vehicle. I had little idea what sort of village façade to expect after spending fifteen months tacking between various construction sites and the Lao, Khmu, and Hmong villages that surrounded them. We meandered up a stone path and crossed a wooden bridge over a pond to see ten ‘traditional’, nondescript bamboo and wood homes. They were surrounded by areas for tourists to eat, drink, and play games. The apartment sales team was also present, rehearsing their pitch on the village’s ‘authentic reconstruction’—this, I learned, was their first experience in such a place. They described the benefits of the

Lao environment: local culture and mountainous landscapes just a short drive from the bustling, economic center of the SEZ and the border with China.

Similar to China's cultural tourism sites that were promoted in the late 1990s as part of state-led development projects (Oakes 1998), so the Lao village has been turned into a simulacrum to be consumed. Haicheng has hired Lao people from Luang Namtha province to live in NanThong and demonstrate traditional crafts such as weaving and basket-making. The main attraction is a replica of the old salt factory with local production techniques on display. The original cracked concrete pumphouse stands next to a new open-air pavilion where drawings of elephants and idyllic, rural communities hang on the walls. The architecture here mimics infrastructure removed for SEZ construction in the early 2000s, making NanThong an exhibition space that represents notions of, yet is separate from, ongoing processes of local culture.

Like reproductions of Western architecture in China (Bosker 2013) or tourist yurts in Inner Mongolia (Evans and Humphrey 2012), design choices that imitate Southeast Asian aesthetics position Boten as a locally and culturally embedded city. While estranged from their original context, layers of meaning are revived through architecture and aesthetics to render the city-in-the-making investable. Architectural flourishes, replicas, and the juxtaposition of village and high-rise point to multiple imaginaries of Laos and notions of what is desired by potential investors, homebuyers, and tourists from China. Reading Boten as palimpsest of infrastructure and/as architecture tells us about past landscapes and future visions for the SEZ, underscoring the fact that new cities, even those advertised as built from scratch, are never constructed on untouched space but depend on and are layered with historical, cultural, and material artifacts.

Notes:

¹ Chinese posters use “Borten” (with an “r”) due to its pronunciation by Mandarin speakers. In this essay, I use the Lao spelling “Boten.”

² See Vellinga 2011 for a discussion on critical anthropological approaches to vernacular architecture.

References:

Bach, Jonathan. 2019. “What Kind of Model? Thinking about the Special Economic Zone and the Socialist City.” *Made in China Journal* 2: 72–77. Available at: <https://madeinchinajournal.com/2019/07/23/what-kind-of-model-thinking-about-the-special-economic-zone-and-the-socialist-city/>

Bosker, Bianca. 2013. *Original Copies: Architectural Mimicry in Contemporary China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Bräutigam, Deborah and Tang Xiaoyang. 2011. "African Shenzhen: China's Special Economic Zones in Africa." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 49 (1): 27–54. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X10000649>

Cartier, Carolyn. 2002. "Transnational Urbanism in the Reform-Era Chinese City: Landscapes from Shenzhen." *Urban Studies* 39 (9): 1513–32.

Corboz, André. 1983. "The Land as Palimpsest." *Diogenes* 31 (121): 12–34.

Evans, Christopher and Caroline Humphrey. 2002. "After-Lives of the Mongolian Yurt: The 'Archaeology' of a Chinese Tourist Camp." *Journal of Material Culture* 7 (2): 189–210. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183502007002639>.

Ghertner, Asher. 2015. *Rule by Aesthetics: World-Class City Making in Delhi*. Oxford University Press.

Harvey, Penny and Hannah Knox. 2012. "The Enchantments of Infrastructure." *Mobilities* 7 (4): 521–536. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2012.718935>

Larkin, Brian. 2008. *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Northern Nigeria*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

Larkin, Brian. 2013. "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure." *Annual Review of Anthropology* (42): 327–43. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155522>

Laungaramsri, Pinkaew. 2019. "China in Laos: Enclave Spaces and the Transformation of Borders in the Mekong Region." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 30 (2): 195–211. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.12319>

Lees, Loretta. 2001. "Towards a Critical Geography of Architecture: The Case of an Ersatz Colosseum." *Ecumene* 8 (1): 51–86. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/096746080100800103>

Nyíri, Pál. 2012. "Enclaves of Improvement: Sovereignty and Developmentalism in the Special Zones of the China–Lao Borderlands." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54 (3): 533–62. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417512000229>

Oakes, Timothy. 1998. *Tourism and Modernity in China*. London and New York: Routledge.

Oakes, Timothy. 2019. "China's Urban Ideology: New Towns, Creation Cities, and Contested Landscapes of Memory." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 60 (4): 400–42. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2019.1668815>

O'Donnell, Mary Ann, Winnie Wong and Jonathan Bach (eds). 2017. *Learning from Shenzhen: China's Post-Mao Experiment from Special Zone to Model City*. London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Su Xiaobo. 2011. "Heritage Production and Urban Locational Policy in Lijiang, China." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35 (6): 1118–32.

Tan, Danielle. 2017. "Chinese Enclaves in the Borderlands." In *Chinese Encounters in Southeast Asia: How People, Money, and Ideas from Chinese are Changing a Region*, edited by Pál Nyíri and Danielle Tan, 136–56. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Vellinga, Marcel. 2011. "The End of the Vernacular: Anthropology and the Architecture of the Other." *Etnofoor* 23 (1): 171–92.

Yueng, Yue-man, Joanna Lee, and Gordon Kee. 2009. "China's Special Economic Zones at 30." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 50 (2): 222–40. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2747/1539-7216.50.2.222>

Cite as: DiCarlo, Jessica. 2020. "Development as Palimpsest: Infrastructures Revived in Boten's Architecture." *Roadsides* 4: 15–23. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26034/roadsides-202000403>

Author:



Jessica DiCarlo is a doctoral candidate in geography at the University of Colorado Boulder. She situates her research in critical development studies, political ecology, and infrastructure studies. Her regional expertise is centered in China, where she has worked in Yunnan, Liaoning, Tibetan regions, as well as Beijing and Shanghai. Her interest in Chinese borderlands led her to research in Nepal, India, and Laos. Her dissertation draws on fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Laos and examines the construction and planning of the Laos–China Railway and economic zones to ground 'global China' in complex host contexts and histories. She is interested in connecting the large-scale infrastructures and their (geo)politics with the environments and lives that sustain them.

Roadsides is an open access journal designated to be a forum devoted to exploring the social, cultural and political life of infrastructure.



Visit us at: **roadsides.net**

E-Mail: **editor@roadsides.net**

Twitter: **@road_sides**

Editorial Team:

Julie Chu (University of Chicago)

Tina Harris (University of Amsterdam)

Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi (University of Zurich)

Madlen Kobi (Academy of Architecture, Mendrisio)

Nadine Plachta (University of Colorado Boulder)

Galen Murton (James Madison University, Harrisonburg)

Matthäus Rest (Max-Planck-Institute for the Science of Human History, Jena)

Alessandro Rippa (LMU Munich and Tallinn University)

Martin Saxer (LMU Munich)

Christina Schwenkel (University of California, Riverside)

Max D. Woodworth (The Ohio State University)

Collection no. 004 was edited by: **Madlen Kobi** and **Nadine Plachta**

Managing editor: **Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi**

Copyediting: **David Hawkins**

Layout: **Chantal Hinni** and **Antoni Kwiatkowski**

ISSN 2624-9081

Creative Commons License

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

