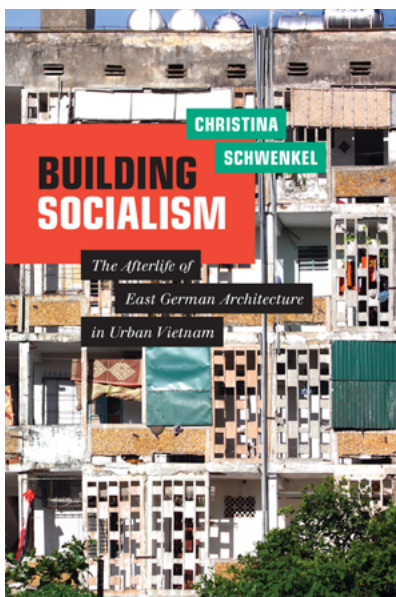


Building Socialism: A Conversation

Christina Schwenkel and Alessandro Rippa



Two editors of *Roadsides*, Christina Schwenkel and Alessandro Rippa, talk about Christina's new book *Building Socialism: The Afterlife of East German Architecture in Urban Vietnam* (Duke University Press, 2020). Drawing on archival and ethnographic research, *Building Socialism* examines how East German urban planners sought to transform the Vietnamese town of Vinh, destroyed by US bombing, into a model socialist city, and the unintended consequences of this particular vision and encounter that still reverberate today.

AR: *Building Socialism* is about the afterlife of utopian design, and as such it speaks to different temporalities. One way you approach the question of time is through ruins and processes of decay. How do you conceptualize ruins in your work?

CS: Ruins have emerged as a site of much fascination in anthropological studies of infrastructure. At the start of my study, I conceptualized ruins as a vehicle to examine the remains of the extractive and destructive histories of colonialism and imperialism, on the one hand – what Ann Stoler has called “imperial debris” – and the unraveling of modernist dreamworlds to “vanishing materiality,” in Svetlana Boym’s terms, on the other. Inspired by Benjamin, I thought about ruins as both object, or historical witness, and as process that disrupted the myth of rational progress which sustained utopian aspirations across time, space and political economies – both capitalist and socialist modernities in all their iterations. When I got to the field, I had to rethink this temporal and analytical approach: I immediately saw how the discourse of ruins was deployed as both metaphor and moral characterization to identify spaces, built structures and people deemed ‘derelict’. For capitalist triumphalists, the presence of a deteriorated built environment came to visually signify the failure of socialism and its vision of collective betterment, while for Vietnamese investors, ruins became a justification for ‘creative destruction’ and demolition in the interest of profit.

But residents, I quickly learned, did not necessarily see the urban landscape or the housing blocks in which they lived as ruined. Moreover, the literature on ruins did not adequately address ongoing forms of dwelling, that is, modernist ‘ruins’ not as static sites of a discarded or discredited past that ‘might have been,’ but as active,

Beautification and home-making among decay in collective housing in Vietnam, 2011.

Photo: Christina Schwenkel.



inhabited spaces of potentiality. So while I initially thought about the past as manifest in the present by positioning ruins and ruination in conversation with those grand modernist projects that once sought to radically remake the world, the people I lived with in crumbling collective housing were busy making new claims on the urban future through the remodeling and revaluing of their homes. This caused me to reconsider the temporal association of ruins with decline. My research then shifted to paying more attention to how decay catalyzed social action and formed the bedrock of new political subjectivities as people contested state neglect and the material conditions of urban life. This approach allowed me to reconceptualize ruination not simply as rupture with the past, but also as an opportunity for re-creation of material worlds in an effort to ‘make do’ and assume some control over the future.

AR: What brought you to study this very particular North–South connection, between the GDR and Vietnam, through an infrastructure lens?

CS: The decade-long mass bombing of northern Vietnam was nothing short of deliberate “defuturing,” to borrow Tony Fry’s term, through infrastructural warfare that targeted the very sociotechnical systems that were necessary to sustain modern life. It made sense then to focus on infrastructure reconstruction efforts as a means to explore decolonization and questions about how people overcame urban catastrophe to rebuild their social and material worlds, and which models of reconstruction – or re-futuring – were most appealing to postcolonial planners. Socialist planning at the time aspired to lift populations out of poverty through rapid industrial and infrastructural development to secure equitable access to public goods, while collectivizing the means of production and creating modern socialist citizens. The infrastructure lens let me examine the wide range of state and non-state actors – international, national and regional – involved in the remaking of the socialist city and its critical systems and institutions as a global solidarity project, and the power asymmetries that underpinned relations between these groups. This brought into focus the gendered division of infrastructural labor – between the visionaries and builders of socialism, as I call them in the book – the predominantly male architects and the mostly female construction workers, who were subsequently seen as facilitating infrastructure breakdown. This is important because little attention has been paid to the role of women and female agency in decolonization efforts, or to the relationship between critical infrastructure and gender.

AR: As an anthropologist you take a rather long-term perspective, and the book relies on numerous archives as well as visual testimonies from Vietnamese war photographers. How did you approach archival research, and what challenges did you face?

CS: I approached archives critically as both source and subject; that is, as a Foucauldian technology of state power to produce particular claims to historical truth and as a site of ethnographic observation of the exercise of that power. Anthropologists



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A- PHUONG HUONG QUY HOACH CONG RANH 15 NAM

I- VAI NHỆ VÀ ĐẶC ĐIỂM VÀ TÍNH TÍNH CƠ BẢN

IA- Tình hình về quy hoạch xây dựng thành phố

Chấp hành chủ trương xây dựng thành phố, Bộ Kiến trúc đã tiến hành lập quy hoạch xây dựng thành phố Vĩnh cho 15 năm và 5 năm đầu sau ngay chiến thắng đế quốc Mỹ và đã được duyệt.

1- Quy hoạch 15 năm

Trong 15 năm thành phố sẽ xây dựng với quy mô 100.000 dân.

a- Về công nghiệp : Có 2 khu chính

+ Khu Ba, gồm những loại công nghiệp như: xe lửa, sửa chữa ôtô, chế tạo cơ khí và các loại công nghiệp nhẹ như: hoa giấy, áo phông, thuốc lá v.v. . .

+ Khu Bốn thủy, gồm những loại công nghiệp như: Bông dệt sợi, dệt, gạch than xi, hoa quả, dệt, dược phẩm.

b- Về nhà ở Dự kiến phân bổ như sau :

+	Khu Gá :	20000	người
+	Khu Tân vịnh :	24000	-
+	Khu Bến thủy	18000	-
+	Các khu khác	38000	-

2- Quy hoạch 5 năm đầu

2- Quy hoạch 5 năm đầu
Trong 5 năm đầu sẽ xây dựng với quy mô 50.000 người

a- Công nghiệp

a- Công nghiệp
+ Khu Gã : dự kiến xây dựng : xe lửa, sửa chữa ôtô, chế tạo
ao nuôi v.v...
+ Khu Bùn thụt : dự kiến xây dựng : bê tông đúc sẵn, gạch than
xi, điện, đất v.v...
+ Các ngành khác như sau :

b- về nhà ở : dự kiến phân bố như sau :

+	Khu Ga	12.500	người
+	Khu Tân Vĩnh	14.500	-
+	Khu Bến Thủy	13.500	-
+	Các khu khác	10.000	-

+ Các khu khác

Ở đây một cơ điện trong việc xây dựng nhà ở trong một khu dân được nêu rõ và chủ yếu là do yêu cầu trong một thời gian ngắn, cần tạo được một bộ mặt cho thành phố nên việc xây dựng nhà ở cần được trình dân duyệt sơ phai kéo dài trên tuyến đường chính và qua Ga qua đường Quang Trung, Phan bội châu đến Công Viên Thuyết.

4) Công ty kiến trúc Vĩnh cho biết về khả năng thi công

Ngày 10 tháng 7 năm 1969

Tổ trưởng : Dương-thành-Phúc

Kiểm tra : Phạm-văn-Nhiếp

Chu trí : Trần-văn-Mô

Thí sĩ : Trần-văn-Mô

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Nguyễn-bình-Tâm

Deteriorating planning documents typed on rice paper during the air war, housed in the Nghê An Provincial Archives.

Photo: Christina Schwenkel.

unique textural and sensory qualities of documents as epistemic objects produced under particular historical conditions allowed me to think in new ways about their drafting and circulation, often under duress.

I remain surprised at how few anthropologists consider working in archives as part of their methodological toolkit. A good number of historians, on the other hand, too easily dismiss the postcolonial archive as inaccessible, owing to linguistic barriers and concerns about access. I actually found a lot of flexibility in how these spaces are administered and what documents one might receive on any given day. Like ethnographic work, access to archives takes time: time to learn the system, but also to build social relations. Beyond the posted formalities – the letter of introduction to verify intent – access to information is also about trust, which may allow for some bending of rules at times. It was through differential access to government documents that I grasped the arbitrariness of state power and its claims to national security: classified material in one archive was declassified in another. Beyond the arbitrary claim to control of records was an equally arbitrary claim to their ownership. Who owns the past? So I pondered on discovering how co-produced maps in Germany's Bundesarchiv that I could not circulate were also housed in the national archive in Hanoi, and found in personal collections. This became even more complicated with the copyright of photographs: socialist countries did not subscribe to liberal notions of individual authorship of images, unlike the legal tradition of the photographer 'owning' the work in the capitalist West. Rather, right claims focused on the subject of the photograph, not its creator, reminding me of the socially constructed nature of property.

AR: Do you think that your analysis can be broadened to other cities in the Global South?

CS: Absolutely. This is not an exceptional story of Cold War infrastructure development, though there are exceptional circumstances at work in my book that produced unique outcomes, experiences and material legacies. The transnational history of decolonization and modernization through technology and planning 'transfers' between the so-called Second and Third Worlds – in competition with other development initiatives in the capitalist West – continues to shape the urban fabric of the Global South today in ways that remain to be adequately studied. Even less explored are South–South connections, however.

AR: Your book focuses on Cold War-era connections which remain largely uninvestigated. How would more research into this topic help our understanding of the broader dynamics that inform the Global South today?

CS: These histories of interconnection have much to offer to our ethnographic understanding of what is new and emergent in the Global South, without resorting to a priori assumptions about an all-encompassing neoliberalism that is derivative

of the capitalist West. They allow us to develop a more critical approach to capitalist globalization by rethinking the diversity of social and economic forms, rather than their erasure. That is, to see certain material and cultural practices today as enduring and changing, but with deep roots in an anticolonial, non-capitalist past that continues to shape contemporary subjectivities and social life.

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Authors:



Christina Schwenkel is Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Riverside and co-editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* at University of California Press. She is the author of *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation* (Indiana University Press, 2009). Her current work examines decolonization and the transnational circulation of Cold War infrastructure technologies and design practices between Vietnam and East Germany. Her most recent book, *Building Socialism: The Afterlife of East German Architecture in Urban Vietnam*, was published in 2020 by Duke University Press. Christina is a co-editor of *Roadsides*.



Alessandro Rippa is Associate Professor of Chinese Studies at Tallinn University and "Freigeist" Fellow (2020–2025) at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, LMU Munich. He is the author of *Borderland Infrastructures: Trade, Development and Control in Western China* (Amsterdam University Press, 2020) and one of the editors of the *Routledge Handbook of Asian Borderlands* (2018). He is interested in issues surrounding infrastructure, transnationality, conservation and the environment, particularly in the context of the China–Burma borderlands and the Italian Alps. Alessandro has been part of the *Roadsides* editorial board since 2018.

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