Traveling Architecture
East German Urban Designs in Vietnam

Christina Schwenkel

Abstract

Scholars have long been interested in architecture and urban planning as a cultural battleground during the Cold War. What is less known, however, is how the ideological conflict over urban practices played out beyond the frontlines of Europe on other battlefields abroad. This paper transcends entrenched East/West binaries to examine socialist architectural forms and principles of urban planning that traveled overseas to create experimental cities with new urban morphologies. Based on long-term research in Vietnam and Germany, I focus on the city of Vinh in north central Vietnam, rebuilt after its destruction by US air raids as a "model" socialist city with the assistance of East Germany. My goal is twofold: to examine how GDR utopian designs were applied transnationally to build new urban futures in other geographies, and to examine how local cultural understandings of the city served to reconfigure GDR housing typologies and ideas of "socialist modernity".

Keywords: Vietnam, East Germany, architecture, war, global socialism

In recent years, Vietnam has become a major travel destination for international tourists, particularly from Europe and North America. Yet few of these visitors journey to the historical city of Vinh, provincial capital of Nghệ An in the north central region. Vinh is known as one of the country's least attractive cities: rows of "Soviet-style" block housing line the main strip, and a deteriorating façade contrasts sharply with the more affluent and modernised metropolises of Ho Chi Minh City or Đà Nẵng. For most people, Vinh is but a brief stopover on Highway 1 between the more popular destinations of Huế and Hanoi. Yet, unbeknownst to most passers-through, until recently Vinh had been a model of urban socialist moder-

nity, owing not to Soviet intervention, but to East German reconstruction after the end of the air war with the United States.

In this essay, I address this circulation of architectural forms and urban planning expertise between Vietnam and East Germany (GDR) – what I refer to as "traveling architecture". Socialist modernity was a worlding project that endeavoured to produce modern, global citizens – an international proletariat – using, in this case, a rational, scientific approach to urban design and housing. Contrary to tourist observations of Vinh, the importation of urban designs associated with socialist modernisation did not simply mimic the standardised architectural forms found across the urban socialist world (the uniform "Soviet" blocks). Rather, they generated diverse buildings and dwellings with their own unique flair, as local experts redrew urban blueprints and residents modified their allotted apartments to produce a more culturally suitable style of "civilised" (*văn minh*) urban living.

Scholars have long been interested in architecture and urban planning as cultural and technological battlegrounds during the Cold War, from the kitchen debate between Russia and the United States,[1] to competing designs for human settlements shaped by dreamworlds of modernity.[2] As Greg Castillo has shown, the battle over design styles and planning practices played out between the rivals through applied pedagogical strategies, with West German architects traveling to the United States and East German planners traveling to Moscow for professional training.[3] With some exceptions,[4] scholarship on the international exchange of architectural and urban planning practices has focused on East-West transfers. Less known, however, is the ideological conflict over urban styles that took shape beyond the frontlines of Europe, on more violent battlefields abroad. As I demonstrate, an analysis of Cold War architecture in so-called Third World cities cannot be separated from the widespread urban destruction that took place in countries such as Korea and Vietnam. Focusing on East German urban designs, I transcend entrenched East-West binaries by examining socialist architectural forms and planning techniques that traveled to Vietnam, where they generated experimental, post-conflict cities with radically different urban morphologies.

My goal is twofold: first, to examine how GDR utopian designs were applied transnationally to build urban socialist futures in non-European geographies. The dissemination of ideas about socialist modernity through the circulation of planning practices was as much about the techno-architectural engineering of urban space as it was about the social engineering of a global humanity. As Todorov reminds us, socialist modernity involved

"political utopian projects for radical change in [both] the nature of the human being and the construction of the world it inhabits".[5] City building and housing construction, in particular, have long stood at the center of socialist biopolitical strategies for regulating populations.[6] How this transpired transnationally, across national and cultural boundaries, motivated the research that underlies this essay.

It would be a mistake, however, to consider traveling architecture as the imposition of a "foreign" ideology of materiality and spatiality. This is not another case of imperial urbanisation, where Vietnamese cities became loci for colonial rule and expansion.[7] As Stephen V. Ward points out, "under colonialism, there was never any doubt that imperial authorities were the most powerful player".[8] By contrast, relationships on the ground between Vietnamese and East German experts and residents were ambiguous, and urban plans subject to negotiation. Without losing sight of the hierarchy and dependency that underpinned such cooperation, the second goal of this article is to examine how traveling architectural forms integrated into the local Vietnamese cultural context, reconfiguring GDR housing typologies and hegemonic ideas of socialist modernisation. Encounters between a rational, scientific GDR approach to urban housing and everyday Vietnamese practices produced what I call, drawing from Svetlana Boym,[9] "off-modern" dwellings. Such habitations challenge assumptions of socialist architectural uniformity and the dominance of Western modernity.

The Architecture(s) of Socialist Modernity

We are surrounded by the anonymous buildings of our common modernity.
– Svetlana Boym[10]

Cities have long been at the center of state modernising projects. Irrespective of geography or political economy, "the urban" has become the yardstick against which the "non-modern" is often measured. Yet as Raymond Williams has argued, dualisms that emphasise rural-urban difference – uncivilised-civilised, nature-culture, purity-contamination – are cultural and historical constructs that deny critical webs of interconnection between the country and the city.[11] It is precisely this condition of ambiguity and its related threat of blurred boundaries that has been the object of state intervention and a target of urban planning. Socialist urban planners, for example, pointed to the chaos and disorder of "capitalist cities", arguing

that unchecked growth and unregulated planning lowered the standard of living for all but the wealthiest residents.[12] On the other hand, observers of socialist urbanisation tend to reduce it to a simplistic set of formulations and certainties. Thus, as noted above, foreigners identify an urban housing complex in Vinh as "Soviet", a term that suggests architectural drabness and uniformity, in contrast to the presumed creativity of capitalist forms.[13] Yet recent work has revealed architecture under socialist regimes to be more heterogeneous and experimental than is commonly acknowledged.[14] Even communal dormitories in Russia were designed as "futuristic experimental prototypes",[15] and surely we cannot dismiss the Russian embassy in Havana – dubbed "the robot" – from the catalogue of modern architectural wonders (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Russian Embassy in Havana, Cuba designed by Aleksandr Rochegov (photo by the author)

A close look at Vietnam's architecture of this period reveals variations in form and meaning, and a social experience of urban living that claims authorship of Boym's "anonymous buildings". By decentering Europe (and its ideological "curtain"), we see the *similarities* in architectural design and techniques of dwelling between the Cold War adversaries, caught up in the broader project of *Western* modernity. As Buck-Morss suggests, such urban national developments were "variations of a common theme, the utopian dream [of] industrial modernity".[16] In Vietnam, a target of recurrent inter-

national intervention, a duality has long existed between *national* and *foreign* technologies, urban forms, and styles of living: from colonial French villas to socialist block housing. By analysing the East-West barrier outside of Europe, we can reposition geopolitical divides and rethink the relationship between socialist modernity, urbanisation, and housing design in more globally interconnected, less Eurocentric ways.

Shifting the conversation away from Europe also enables us to move beyond the problematic evaluation of socialism as backwards and un-modern – which posits capitalism as the pinnacle of modernity – and to see the lived experience of socialist modernity as a transformative project of rebuilding society and its populations. Under socialism, cities in particular became sites of a "full-scale makeover of the state, society, material culture, and citizens alike".[17] The design of urban space was no less than a project to socially engineer humanity: architects and urban planners saw the built environment as an instrument to shape the moral values and practices of the populace. Moreover, new socialist imaginaries could be conveyed to the urban masses through the built environment. Images of verticality – cranes, smokestacks, high-rises – stood as visual signifiers of a prosperous utopian future (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Picturing progress: urban utopic imaginaries in the GDR. Poster on display in the Stasimuseum, Berlin (photo by the author)

As cities were the ideal spaces in which socialist modernity could take shape, the devastated urban landscapes of postwar Europe provided fertile ground for architectural and spatial experiments to design the optimal socialist cityscape. The GDR's Principles of Urban Development from 1950 called for a harmonious balance between work, home life, culture, and leisure. Architects and planners approached the city as a scientific problem to be solved with technical interventions. As experts who emphasised science-based knowledge over artistic expression, they regarded the city as a dynamic system that could be optimised through rational methodologies.[18] As has been well documented, the extensive bombing of East German cities during WWII devastated the country's urban industry and infrastructure. With the rapid reindustrialisation of society underway, urban planners turned their attention to two critical issues: the transformation of demolished city centers into cultural hubs for a new socialist society,[19] and the construction of community-oriented worker dwellings to solve the *Wohnungsproblem* – the problem of housing.

In the postwar years of urban reconstruction, the *Wohnungsproblem* (and, by extension, homelessness) was closely tied to the political and ideological legitimacy of socialist regimes. As Paul Betts has argued, the provision of adequate accommodation for the masses not only augmented the credibility of the GDR state, it signified socialist prosperity and the material benefits of a centrally planned economy.[20] Through the everyday intimacy of dwelling, urban citizens could experience – materially and affectively – the utopian promises of a new socialist modernity. Just as scientific functionalism undergirded the study of cities, the housing question (*Wohnungsfrage*) demanded a sociological approach with technical solutions. Diagrams, charts, graphs, and statistics reduced the development of housing to a set of standardised calculations regarding per capita living space, hygiene needs, traffic concerns, environmental health, and green spaces. Combined with quantitative indicators of physical, emotional, and cultural needs, these housing techniques became critical components in a utilitarian architectural practice that demanded a "recalibration of the relationship between creative processes and technological determinism".[21]

The science of urban architecture had a utilitarian imperative: to deliver the maximum number of modern accommodations to the greatest number of workers quickly and efficiently. This imperative resulted in a number of experimental housing typologies and construction techniques. This was, of course, the era of prefabricated, standardised mass housing,[22] and postwar homelessness made the *Wohnungsfrage* all the more urgent. This is not to

say that aesthetics were abandoned in urban planning practice; East German architectural circles also debated the "*künstlerischer Charakter der sozialistischen Architektur*" – the artistic character of socialist architecture. However, utilitarian models took precedence.[23] In the GDR, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, a new utopian vision found its form in the housing estate or *Wohngebiet*, a system of centralising living with services and amenities in close proximity.[24] A delimited urban space encircled by major streets, the *Wohngebiet* embodied the principles of socialist urban planning in rows of uniform block housing; these offered private family apartments for the physical, spiritual, and social reproduction of the work force.[25] The state's social engineering of living space thus focused on the intimate materialities of dwelling to produce new moral and urban socialist citizens.[26]

Yet architecture was not only central to the production of a *domestic* socialist modernity; it was also exported. Traveling architecture circulated European principles of modernisation transnationally, through East German urban designs that aspired to build – ideologically and materially – a global socialism. From North Korea[27] to Tanzania,[28] to Vietnam, postcolonial and post-conflict cities provided grounds for novel utopian experiments under the principles of "international solidarity" and "mutual cooperation".

Exporting Socialist Modernity: Rebuilding Postwar Vietnam

In the United States, military air power has long been considered the instrument of swift victory.[29] Strategic bombing, it is assumed, has both material and affective impacts: it can destroy capability as well as resolve.[30] During the war in Vietnam, US leaders believed that mass, strategic bombing could defeat Hanoi and "win the war", as in World War II and Korea. Between 1964 and 1973, the United States carried out indiscriminate, fierce, and sustained air attacks across the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, or "North Vietnam") – in what the Vietnamese called America's "War of Destruction" (*Chiến tranh Phá hoại*). The primary objective of the air attacks was to disrupt enemy lines of communication and transportation, and thus the ability of northern troops to carry out sustained military operations in the south. The port city of Vinh, an industrial center located midway between Hanoi and the Vietnamese Demilitarized Zone (DMZ),[31] occupied a strategic node in the DRV's complex transportation network, facilitating the flow of troops and supplies to southern battlefields. Located

on a major branch of the "Ho Chi Minh Trail" – a series of small roads that wound through the jungles of Laos into southern Vietnam – Vinh became a major target of protracted carpet-bombing. Between August 1964 and January 1973, the city was subjected to almost five thousand air strikes, during which an estimated two hundred and fifty thousand tons of ordnance were dropped[32] – one hundred times the amount released on Dresden – leaving the region decimated and uninhabitable.

The US military presumption that precision-guided bombs would reduce civilian casualties and damage to non-targeted property proved a fallacy in the case of Vinh (and elsewhere in northern Vietnam). When the bombing finally ended in 1973, hundreds had been killed and few structures were left standing on a pockmarked landscape. Although the US did not officially target cultural heritage in its air campaigns, as Robert Bevan has argued, deliberate attacks on architecture and historical monuments have long been a strategy of warfare.[33] As in Europe, air raids in Vinh demolished the cultural, economic, and historical landscape, including pagodas, colonial churches, sacred temples, and the ancient citadel, as well as public buildings, markets, hospitals, schools, and dwellings. Older residents describe their leveled city as "completely ravaged", with streets reduced to "piles of rubble and ash". They remember the thick, blinding smoke as they attempted to evacuate Vinh. "The Americans dropped bombs until no home was left intact", one elderly woman recollected. Photographs of the widespread destruction do exist, but East German filmmakers were key to documenting the ruin. Their images and stories came to constitute an important social imaginary of Vinh and its intrepid residents for East Germans, whose fraternal assistance (*brüderliche Hilfe*) would eventually help rebuild the demolished city.

The socialist world had supported Vietnam in what was considered a revolutionary struggle against the pernicious forces of imperialism, so it was perhaps no surprise that after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973 (which ended the bombing and US involvement in the war), Communist Bloc nations pledged to assist Vietnam in its national reconstruction and economic recovery. Under the banner of "international socialist solidarity", much of this assistance focused on public works and the techno-scientific reconstruction of cities and industry. Importantly, agreements between Vietnam and "fraternal" socialist countries were seen as pacts of *mutual cooperation* based on sovereign requests from Hanoi, and not as foreign imposition. They were distinct from colonial urban development projects that mainly served French interests and French inhabitants of Vietnam.[34] However, there is no denying the political gains to socialist

countries that practiced such "anti-colonial solidarity". A crucial objective of both US and Communist Bloc aid was to strengthen international alliances, and to embed cityscapes within a particular materiality of modernity, aligned with either capitalism or socialism. Destroyed cities became the architectural battlegrounds of Cold War politics; as Łukasz Stanek has argued, city edifices stood as "visible proof of geopolitical alliances".[35] Still, rehabilitation programs were intended to benefit local populations (another strategy of winning hearts and minds) and, in the case of Vietnam, helped dismantle racialised colonial urban landscapes by bringing public works and infrastructure to the Vietnamese masses.

The GDR's extensive experience with urban destruction and reconstruction was well known in the DRV. In interviews, both Vietnamese and East German architects intimated a degree of historical similitude between Dresden and Vinh: both postwar urban landscapes had come to symbolise the nation in ruin (at the hand of "American imperialists"), as well as its rapid recovery.[36] Some even claimed that Dresden's rapid transformation from rubble to industrial renewal had prompted Hanoi to request Berlin's help reconstructing its sacred "red city" – the homeland of Hồ Chí Minh and the site of the Soviet Nghệ Tĩnh uprising in 1930-1931. And indeed, on 19 May 1973, Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng sent a letter to the Chairman of the Council of Ministers in the GDR requesting assistance with rebuilding Vinh. The East German government swiftly agreed to take on what would become the largest and most transformative urban reconstruction project in Vietnam.

During the Cold War, architectural knowledge and urban planning practices that traveled among friendly socialist countries, particularly in the Eastern Bloc and the Third World, disseminated a particular utopian vision of urban modernity. This promised industrial productivity and a modern standard of living. As material resources, technologies, technical experts, and urban planning expertise traveled from East Germany to Vietnam, this international assistance, or *Hilfe*, also practiced an ethos of state-promoted "anti-imperialist solidarity". The insistence that *Hilfe* was *assistance*, and not *aid*, reflected the socialist position that the former comprised non-hierarchical collaboration and enablement, and the latter a paternalistic politics of pity, akin to development efforts in the West.[37] Solidarity as a guiding political philosophy and practice thus provided the Vietnamese with more power and opportunity to rethink traveling architecture and its associated modes of planning.

As in North Korea two decades earlier, East Germany's paramount project in Vietnam was to reconstruct an industrial city that had been demol-

Figure 3: Quang Trung Housing Estate, central Vinh, 1978 (courtesy of the Nghệ An Provincial Museum)

ished by US air strikes. Both postwar projects were carried out under the banner of *fraternal* socialist internationalism[38] – kinship terminology that suggested a level playing field and *mutual* beneficence. In Vietnam, the immense seven-year effort referred to as "Assistance in the Construction and Design of Vinh City" (*Hilfe beim Aufbau und bei der Projektierung der Stadt Vinh*) aimed to transform the devastated and impoverished provincial capital into a modern, industrialised city. As were urban centres across Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, Vinh was to become a municipal center for "civilising" its citizenry, transforming rural migrants into a productive urban workforce. Not unlike GDR projects in Tanzania and North Korea, this would be accomplished through the construction and allocation of high-rise public housing with modern indoor facilities (a first in Vinh) that would likewise showcase East German scientific and technical ingenuity (see figure 3). In the "Conceptual Design for the Construction of the Housing Estate of Quang Trung" – named after an eighteenth-century emperor and military hero from the province of Nghệ An – an aesthetic utilitarianism emphasised a balance between tradition and modernity, urban internationalism and Vietnamese national identity:

> All high-rises should combine modern socialist architecture with a national motif. They should have colorful accents. In the residential area of Quang Trung there should be possibilities to incorporate artistic works, flower gardens, and water fountains. [...] The destroyed cinema and Diệc pagoda should be restored in their original locations.[39]

As I discuss in the next section, this concern with *balance*, and with the *Geist* of international solidarity as *co-production*, allowed Vietnamese actors to reconfigure the rational project of socialist modernity. In doing so, they created off-modern housing informed by Vietnamese urban logics and established cultural practices.

The Off-Modern: Remaking GDR Housing in Vietnam

In his provocative work, *Spaces of Hope*, geographer David Harvey identifies the creative work of twentieth-century architects and urban planners, whose utopian futurity conjoined "an intense imaginary of some alternative world (both physical and social) with a practical concern for engineering and re-engineering urban and regional spaces according to radically new designs".[40] In Vinh, the dream of a model socialist city found material expression in the ambitious creation of the *Wohnkomplex* of Quang Trung. Designed as a self-contained residential area with apartment blocks and on-site public services, the *Wohnkomplex* was a modality of transnational urban planning and social-spatial engineering that traveled to Vinh via both East German experts and Vietnamese architects who had studied in Eastern Europe. The original design called for thirty-six five-story buildings that could house more than fifteen thousand preferential residents (revolutionary cadres and workers).[41] Private family apartments with modern amenities, such as indoor kitchens and plumbing, marked a shift away from communal living in cramped spaces with shared, outdoor facilities. The sudden appearance across Vinh of strong, able-bodied East German men, as well as imported East German mechanised technology – bulldozers, lorries, cranes, cars, hoists, excavators, pumps, pipes, steel –reinforced an optimistic belief in socialism as the path to modernity and socioeconomic well-being.

Citizens of the Eastern Bloc, including architects and urban planners, tended to be ambivalent about the standardised *Wohnkomplex* and its emphasis on function over form. As Kimberly Zarecor has argued, Czechoslovakians saw such planning techniques as Soviet impositions.[42] For Viet-

namese, socialist urban forms, like their colonial predecessors, were the latest in a historical trajectory of non-indigenous architectures and foreign styles of dwelling. Though many contemporary residents nostalgically re-collect Quang Trung as having once been the pride of the city and a symbol of postwar recovery, they also express ambivalence about the site. Travelers passing through Vinh, as noted at the start of this essay, often mistake the housing blocks as standardised Soviet constructions. And yet in the interior of the complex, which comprises the intimate spaces of everyday living, residents demonstrate a surprising diversity in the creative remaking of their dwellings, including the now-retired engineers and construction workers who still live there. These off-modern dwellings are far from uniform and anonymous – they are in fact the "lateral potentialities of the project of critical modernity".[43] As Boym dared her readers to do, by looking closely we can see that "no window, balcony, or whitewall is alike. People in these anonymous dwelling places develop the most nuanced language of minor variations".[44] Examining such off-modern recreations thus shifts us away from understanding socialist modernity as dominant and homogeneous – and recognises the agency of Vietnamese actors and their creative refashioning of the cityscape.

Architectural Re-Designs in the Planning Process

Socialist circulations of urban design and planning knowledge raise important questions about the imposition of foreign ideas and their local adaptation. As Stephen Ward asks of postcolonial flows of urban planning practices, where *does* the locus of power and control reside?[45] In interviews, GDR architects reflected on the idea of solidarity that had been central to their political passions and identities, as well as the larger mission in Vietnam. As an applied politics, "solidarity" allowed GDR experts to circumvent racial, cultural, and national difference by positioning their work in Vietnam as a *co-production* within a cohesive moral community of common interest. They stressed that East Germans and Vietnamese shared and developed ideas together, and that they undertook joint work and action. According to one chief architect, "Urban planning was entirely in the hands of the Vietnamese. They had the ultimate say in the design. We were only there to support and advise them."[46] This "empowerment" of the Vietnamese team distinguished socialist solidarity work from what some GDR experts saw as hierarchical, paternalistic development projects carried out by the capitalist West.

Vietnamese architects and urban planners also framed urban reconstruction as a productive collaboration, at least initially, suggesting harmonious and equal contributions from all sides. However, over the course of my research interviews, a more complex politics of negotiations began to emerge, whose narrative recounted subtle shifts in power from GDR to Vietnamese experts. Many of these negotiations centered on the spatial design of apartment units, which pitted "foreign" and "Vietnamese" ideas about the organisation of living space against one another. While the East Germans took a rational, functionalist approach – for example, calculating the greatest number of families that could be housed with the lowest output of resources – the Vietnamese considered a cultural logic of spatiality, and also sought to house more people than East German calculations of maximum safe occupancy permitted.

In Vietnamese architecture, housing is typically divided into a "service area" (*bộ phận phục vụ*) that includes a kitchen, toilet, and washing facilities, and a "living area" (*bộ phận ở*) that includes rooms for receiving guests and sleeping. Traditionally, these areas were kept at a distance, with the service area often located outside, behind the home. This was common to both rural and urban dwellings. Western-style apartment buildings with self-contained units, such as those built by the GDR in Vinh, positioned these two incongruent areas in close proximity. Of particular concern in the Quang Trung housing blocks was the linear layout of the toilet, washroom, and kitchen opposite a large communal living room. East German experts had carefully calculated this design to take the seasonal winds into account, which would cool the flat and blow kitchen smoke from burning embers out the back balcony, rather than through the house.

Vietnamese experts did not reject this utilitarian approach. In fact, they praised the layout of the *Wohnkomplex* and the diagonal positioning of the housing blocks to the sun and wind, which provided light and ventilation. The spatial design of the estate as a whole fit neatly with Vietnamese metaphysical concerns with *phong thủy*, or *feng shui*. However, the design of individual units was at odds with *phong thủy* principles of proper spatiality in human-environment relations, for healthy, harmonious living. The ideal solution would have been to lay out the apartment with the service area to the back of the dwelling. Yet, in the East German design, one encountered the toilet immediately upon entering the unit. This was a source of great discomfort for Vietnamese inhabitants.

Plans for adjacent service and living areas remained in place through much of the *Wohnkomplex* construction. This design can be seen today in

blocks A5 and A6; B1 through B6; and C2 through C6 – which shared a master plan, though with subtle differences in style. However, during one of the last phases of the project (construction of blocks C7 through C9), Vietnamese officials demanded a remodel (*cải thiện*). Upon entering these flats, one encounters the service area with the kitchen across from the toilet and washroom. Beyond are two living spaces of equal size, to either side of the hallway.

While this disaggregation of living and service areas seems more aligned with Vietnamese architectural practices than the East German design, as one Vietnamese architect recollected, the redesign was not done out of a concern for proper *phong thủy* or to improve standards of living. Rather, it was carried out to cut costs (*tiết kiệm*). The goal was to accommodate as many residents as possible – ideally, two families per unit, one family per room. The East Germans adamantly disagreed. They stressed that the units were designed for one household only, and that overcrowding would hasten decay of the buildings. It would also undermine the ideological project of producing modern and prosperous socialist families. In the end, Vietnamese officials prevailed, and today several of the apartments in C8 are still – thirty-five years later – occupied by two families. These are the poorest residents of the *Wohnkomplex* and their building has, as GDR experts predicted, deteriorated; elderly pensioners and their families live today in exceedingly precarious conditions.

Residential Re-Creations

Vietnamese architects and planners were not the only ones to challenge East German urban designs. Residents did as well. Although many were initially optimistic about the reduced domestic burden offered by the modern amenities of the *Wohnkomplex*, they also expressed concern about their lack of familiarity with "European" modes of dwelling – namely, living in self-contained apartments detached from land. Like the architects and urban planners, residents commended the angled design of the *Wohnkomplex*, which facilitated the flow of air and natural light through the apartments. This had been especially important in the postwar years when electricity was scarce and erratic. Yet residents were deeply concerned that the apartment design violated a key principle of *phong thuỷ*: the entrances to the living space and bathroom faced one another. This positioned the ancestral altar (*bàn thờ tổ tiên*) directly across from the

indecent space of the washroom. As one male resident explained, "*Không kín đáo*": it was not discreet or dignified.

As did other residents, this man renovated his apartment. First, he sealed the door to the washroom and made it accessible only via the kitchen, where he made an opening in the connecting wall. This also made it easier for women to access water, as there were no water lines to the kitchen (though many residents renovated this when water became available on a regular basis in the 1990s). He then sealed off the front entrance to the living room and built a new doorway through the kitchen. This way, the altar faced a solid wall from its position in a ventilated corner of the living room (see figure 4). Such techniques of unregulated reconstruction, which I observed in the majority of Quang Trung units – each innovation distinct from the next – reveal how the off-modern was not about rejecting modernity for so-called traditional design practices. Rather, off-modern re-assemblages drew upon Vietnamese ontologies and cultural practices to reconfigure the materiality of socialist modernity to better fit residents' material, spiritual, and economic needs.

Other Vietnamese recreations were more utilitarian. In the postwar years of scarcity and rationing, Quang Trung residents modified their

Figure 4: Ancestral altar in Quang Trung housing positioned according to phong thủy (photo by the author)

apartments in a desperate attempt to provide for their families. To the dismay of GDR experts, tenants began to raise small farm animals, such as ducks, chickens, and pigs, in the apartments and the "*gầm*" – storage units under the buildings meant for bicycles and equipment. Residents also enclosed balconies and built small extensions to create additional living space for families and livestock.[47] GDR specialists condemned such practices – animals had not been calculated into the civil engineering of the housing blocks – though they were sympathetic to the need for live-stock, as well as for the gardens that residents planted in the parks and playgrounds, given the dire poverty at the time.

Beyond concern for the structural integrity of the buildings was a press-ing ideological issue: the "ruralisation" of a modernising city (*nông thôn hóa đô thị*). Socialist urbanisation emphasised "new and civilized ways of living" to create urban citizens out of rural workers. Livestock and gardens appeared unruly and rustic within an urban architectural vision firmly fixed on industrial futurity. They also undermined a new regime of urban hygiene, made possible by modern plumbing facilities. I asked one Vietna-mese architect, who himself had raised chickens on his balcony, how GDR engineers reacted when they found out that people housed pigs in their wash rooms. He laughed: "They were not happy! They said, *không được! Không hợp vệ sinh, sẽ làm nhà hỏng*!" [Not allowed! It's unhygienic and will destroy the buildings!].[48] Under pressure from the East German team, Vietnamese officials prohibited such practices, although they did not en-force compliance. They, too, raised animals in their units to survive the postwar years.

Conclusion: De-Modernising Socialism in Quang Trung *Wohnkomplex*

The golden era of socialist architectural experimentation may be over, but the materiality of this history remains visible – at least for the moment. Vinh's decaying housing blocks, which foreign development experts today identify as "ruins", once exemplified the city's advance toward modernity and prosperity. And despite their uniform outward appearance, the build-ings were once recognised for their artistic flair and design heterogeneity (especially in the early years of construction). Quang Trung, in other words, had been celebrated for its aesthetic *and* technical achievements: its water fountains, soccer field, cinema, trade center, schools, daycares, and multi-story buildings. As one resident nostalgically recollected, "At that time it

was the best available housing in the city". Yet as I have demonstrated, Vietnamese residents did not unconditionally accept the GDR's architectural model of socialist modernity; they made their own interventions in its living spaces. This was not a rejection of urban modernity, but rather a modification and resignification in culturally meaningful and economically beneficial ways.

Modernity is often treated as an ephemeral condition, as a status or affective state that a nation or population can achieve, and then suddenly lose. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the widespread political and socioeconomic transformations to what we now call "post-socialism" seemed to affirm modernity as a temporary state. During that period, the non-socialist world refigured socialist modernist achievements as *regres*sive rather than *pro*gressive. Such was the case with Quang Trung. By the mid-1990s, after a decade of economic reforms, the *Wohnkomplex* had gone from being a symbol of Vinh's progress to one of its underdevelopment and decay. In a short period, the housing blocks had shifted from modern to un-modern, their residents from priority cadres and workers to disadvantaged urban poor.[49] The experimental *Wohnkomplex* – the material manifestation of international solidarity and global socialism – was recast as the antithesis of modern urbanisation, just as socialism was aligned with backwardness in the non-socialist West.

Today, neoliberal urban redevelopment has fundamentally altered the landscape of Vinh and the lives of its residents. Building C2, for example, has been demolished and replaced by private condominiums. Yet, those who remain precarious dwellers in Quang Trung, awaiting the order to evacuate, continue to recreate their apartments. Whereas "unsightly", "disorderly", and unsafe socialist architecture in Eastern Europe is demolished, in Vinh, residents maintain affective attachments to the buildings. As capitalist redevelopment threatens a return to the spatialisation of urban inequality, the off-modern persists. A new modernity demands entrepreneurship, and residents continue to illegally expand their balconies for income-generating activities; today this is teaching English, choosing auspicious dates, or storing market goods (see figure 5). By so doing, their lived space becomes another point of intervention in a new, global capitalist modernity.

Figure 5: Residential redesigns and expansions in Quang Trung, 2011

(*photo by the author*)

Notes

1. Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann, eds., *Cold War Kitchen: Americanization, Technology, and European Users* (Boston: MIT Press, 2008).
2. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Boston: MIT Press, 2002).
3. Greg Castillo, "Design Pedagogy Enters the Cold War: The Reeducation of Eleven West German Architects," *Journal of Architectural Education* 57 (2004): 10-18.
4. See the special issue by Łukasz Stanek and Tom Avermaete, eds., "Cold War Transfer: Architecture and Planning from Socialist Countries in the Third World," *The Journal of Architecture* 17(3) (2012).
5. Vladislav Todorov. *Red Square, Black Square: Organon for Revolutionary Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 51.
6. Stephen J. Collier, *Post-Soviet Social: Neoliberalism, Social Modernity, Biopolitics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).
7. Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
8. Stephen V. Ward, "Transnational Planners in a Postcolonial World" in *Crossing Borders: International Exchange and Planning Practices*, eds. Patsy Healey and Robert Upton (London: Routledge, 2010), 63.
9. Svetlana Boym, *Architecture of the Off-Modern* (New York: Architectural Press, 2008).
10. Boym, *Architecture of the Off-Modern*, 76.
11. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

12. Deutsche Bauakademie, "Thesen zur 1. Theoretischen Konferenz der Deutschen Bauakademie," *Deutsche Architektur* 9 (10) (1960). Supplement.

13. Christina Schwenkel, "Civilizing the City: Socialist Ruins and Urban Renewal in Central Vietnam," *positions: asia critique* 20 (2012): 442-443. On the grayness associated with socialism, see Krisztina Fehérváry, *Politics in Color and Concrete: Socialist Materialities and the Middle Class in Hungary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

14. For example, see Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko, eds., *Socialist Realism Without Shores*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

15. Caroline Humphrey, "Ideology in Infrastructure: Architecture in Soviet Imagination," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11 (2005): 44.

16. Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld,* xiii- xiv.

17. Katherine Pence and Paul Betts, "Introduction," in *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics*, eds. Katherine Pence and Paul Betts (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 8.

18. Elke Beyer, "Planning for Mobility: Designing City Centers and New Towns in the USSR and the GDR in the 1960s," in *The Socialist Car: Automobility in the Eastern Bloc*, ed. Louis Siegelbaum (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 85.

19. Deutsche Bauakademie, "Grundsätze der Planung und Gestaltung sozialistischer Stadtzentren," *Deutsche Architektur* 9(8) (1960). Supplement.

20. Paul Betts, "Building Socialism at Home: The Case of East German Interiors," in *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics*, eds. Katherine Pence and Paul Betts (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 97-99.

21. Kimberly Elman Zarecor, *Manufacturing a Socialist Modernity: Housing in Czechoslovakia, 1945-1960* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 5.

22. Steven Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street: Mass Housing and Everyday Life Under Stalin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 277-278.

23. See Bruno Flierl, *Gebaute DDR*: *Über Stadtplaner, Architekten und die Macht. Kritische Reflexionen 1990-1997* (Berlin: Verlag für Bauwesen, 1998).

24. In the GDR's Principles of Urban Development from 1950, this included cultural, social, and care facilities that offered daycare and schooling, and served daily provisional needs.

25. Institut für Städtebau und Architektur, *Wohngebiete: Grundsätze und Kennziffern zur Erarbeitung von Bebauungskonzeptionen* (Berlin, 1972) 7.

26. Humphrey, "Ideology in Infrastructure," 39-40.

27. See Charles K. Armstrong, "'Fraternal Socialism': The International Reconstruction of North Korea, 1953-62," *Cold War History* 5 (2005): 161-187; and Frank Rüdiger, *Die DDR und Nordkorea: Der Wiederaufbau der Stadt Hamhùng von 1954-1962* (Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 1996).

28. Ludger Wimmelbücker, "Architecture and City Planning Projects of the German Democratic Republic in Zanzibar," *Journal of Architecture* 17 (2012): 407-432; Garth Meyers, "Making the Socialist City of Zanzibar," *Geographical Review* 84 (1994): 451-464.

29. Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), xiii.

30. Ibid., 2.

31. The DMZ marked the temporary border between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Republic of Vietnam ("South Vietnam"). Given that the DRV did not recognise this border, the common narrative of a northern "invasion" of the south made little sense from the perspective of Hanoi.

32. Phạm Xuân Cần and Bùi Đình Sâm, *Lịch sử thành phố Vinh, 1945-1975* [*History of Vinh City, 1945-1975*] (Vinh: Nghệ An, 2003) 217.

33. Robert Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006).

34. On the racialised politics of urban infrastructure development in Hanoi that benefitted the French quarter only, see Michael Vann, "Of Rats, Rice and Race: The Great Hanoi Rat Massacre, an Episode in French Colonial History," *French Colonial History* 4 (2003): 191-204.

35. Łukasz Stanek, "Introduction: The 'Second World's' Architecture and Planning in the 'Third World'," *The Journal of Architecture* 17 (2012): 300.

36. Schwenkel, "Civilizing the City," 446.

37. On solidarity as distinct from a politics of pity, see Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 78-79. On the GDR's differentiation between capitalist aid and socialist assistance, see Jude Howell, "The End of an Era: The Rise and Fall of GDR Aid," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 32 (1994): 305-328.

38. See also Armstrong, "'Fraternal Socialism'".

39. *Konzeption für die Bebauung Quang Trung* [*Conceptual Design for the Construction of Quang Trung*], 15 May 1974, Bundesarchiv Deutschland, File DH1 28549.

40. David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 164.

41. By the end of the project in 1980, however, engineers had completed only 22 of the 36 blocks, which provided housing for nearly nine thousand residents in 1,800 units.

42. Zarecor, *Manufacturing a Socialist Modernity*.

43. Boym, *Architecture of the Off-Modern*, 4.

44. Ibid., 77.

45. Ward, "Transitional Planners," 63.

46. Interview with East German chief architect, Berlin, August 21, 2012, Berlin.

47. Christina Schwenkel, "Post/Socialist Affect: Ruination and Reconstruction of the Nation in Urban Vietnam," *Cultural Anthropology* 28 (2013): 264.

48. Interview with Vietnamese architect, Vinh City, 27 April 2010.

49. Schwenkel, "Civilizing the City," 438.

About the Author

`**Christina Schwenkel** is associate professor of anthropology at the University of California Riverside and author of the book, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation*, published by Indiana University Press (2009). E-mail: cschwenk@ucr.edu