

ERIK HARMS

Luxury and Rubble: Civility and Dispossession in the New Saigon.

Oakland: University of California Press, 2016. 304 pages.

MINH T. N. NGUYEN

Waste and Wealth: An Ethnography of Labor, Value, and Morality in a Vietnamese Recycling Economy.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 232 pages.

CHRISTINA SCHWENKEL

Building Socialism: The Afterlife of East German Architecture in Urban Vietnam.

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020. 432 pages.

In Vietnam, urbanization is redefining landscapes. Bridges and tunnels now connect once-distant locales. New urban zones transform the city's outskirts. Socialist housing blocs, once celebrated, are declared obsolete. Cities are defined not just by what is new but also by what is discarded. In three remarkable books, anthropologists examine how the rubble from demolition, the ruins of socialist housing, and even discarded junk are not just the detritus of urban life but vital materiality that make visible more significant questions of citizenship and belonging (Schwenkel, *Building Socialism*, 215).

Collectively, these three books address themes familiar to students of Vietnam. Conceptions of inside and outside domains continue to structure sociospatial layouts of households and to reproduce the hierarchical arrangements of the city and the countryside. Yet cities are themselves built

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out of transnational and translocal processes, blurring the boundaries of these domains. Modernist architecture cannot be separated from the lingering impact of US militarism and nationalist narratives of developing wastelands. Rural migrants, through networks cultivated since colonial times, carry new ideals of family life to the countryside. Even state-led reforms such as the revised 1992 Land Law paved the way for a booming real estate market but also created processes for eviction and demolition, exposing how land use goes hand in hand with dispossession. What becomes clear in these three books is how regulating waste, or matter of out of place, is closely entwined with regulating new forms of civility.

Waste is a conceptual category located within specific historical and ideological formations, which is why it is so compelling for ethnographic inquiry. In *Waste and Wealth*, Minh T.N. Nguyen followed migrant traders who collected, sorted, and then sold the discarded goods of Hanoians. These migrants transformed waste into wealth, but this process also generated anxieties. Because their occupation depended on their mobility, they faced dilemmas of how to fulfill their other roles as parents, caregivers, and community members. Ultimately, in remaking waste, these migrants also remade their social relations and moral frameworks of personhood. Waste was the means by which these migrants attained respectability denied them in the city.

Waste for Christina Schwenkel and Erik Harms is understood in terms of both its temporal and spatial dimensions. Schwenkel traces a chronological arc of a socialist housing bloc in Vinh from its celebrated beginnings in the late 1970s to its “unplanned obsolescence.” Harms, by contrast, is concerned with post-renovation housing, spurred by the revised 1992 Land Law and the subsequent profitable real estate market in Hồ Chí Minh City. In *Luxury and Rubble*, he juxtaposes two new urban zones of Hồ Chí Minh City—Phú Mỹ Hưng, a high-end planned community that residents praised as a model of new consciousness, and Thủ Thiêm, a demolition site that exposes the politics of dispossession. Each begins with how these modernist housing projects were built atop “wastelands.” For Harms, wastelands is a discourse deployed by national leaders, urban planners, and even schoolchildren. Ultimately, the category of wastelands betrays what Harms calls “seeing without seeing,” as agricultural lands and vernacular urbanization

were represented as uninhabited and thus ripe for development. In *Building Socialism*, Schwenkel tells a different story of wasteland, one that indicts US militarism for its “techno-fanatic” vision that saw Vinh only in terms of infrastructure targets, not human inhabitants. Images of the flattened city moved East Germans, who recalled the bombing of Dresden during World War II. Through these resonant histories, East Germans cooperated with Vietnamese to design and construct a mass housing project, Quang Trung, in the name of “solidarity.” Despite differences in how they conceptualize “wastelands,” each author convincingly shows how architecture aimed to produce a new kind of citizen. Today, however, the success of Quang Trung and Thủ Thiêm remains uncertain: the socialist housing complex in Vinh has fallen into disrepair, and conflicts over how the state calculated compensation threaten the civilized, beautiful city in Thủ Thiêm envisioned by urban planners.

In contrast to the grand visions promoted by urban planners, engineers, and architects, anthropologists focus on everyday embodied spatial practices. Nguyen, Harms, and Schwenkel are no exception. Each spent extended periods living with, listening to, and learning from ordinary people. Nguyen grew up not far from what she calls “Green Spring,” the home village of many waste collectors, but they were puzzled by her interest in their occupation. By documenting the translocal lives of the migrants, Nguyen understands how wealth engendered anxieties over practices of caring at the heart of their sense of moral personhood. Parents, for example, entrusted their children to indulgent grandparents, while wives left their husbands to mind the house. Once in the city, these migrants were overlooked and marginalized, but they would return to their village with middle-class aspirations, a new ideal of “civilized family life” (87) where they engaged in “contingent conspicuousness,” or an urbanity in their home village they could not realize in Hà Nội.

In *Luxury and Rubble*, Harms lived in Phú Mỹ Hưng, a luxury housing complex located in District 7, and he crossed the bridge almost daily to interview residents about their experiences with eviction in Thủ Thiêm, a new urban zone under construction in District 2. Residents in Phú Mỹ Hưng praised their community as engendering a new form of consciousness and respect for the rule of law. They pointed to the absence of litter

and heralded drivers who obeyed traffic signals. Harms, however, notes exceptions. Employees would curl up on the floors of cafés to sleep at night, and middle-aged men mourned the absence of streetside drinking and bantering. Former residents of Thủ Thiêm, while supportive of the vision of a beautiful city, took issue with the compensation provided by the state. Like rural migrants, they experienced anxiety over the remaking of land into wealth, fearing not just their forced relocation but their exclusion from gains in Hồ Chí Minh City's booming real estate market. Harms contrasts perspectives from residents in both places to reflect on the limits of academic critique. How relevant was critical urbanism to residents who had lived in a socialist regime and now faced eviction yet still supported master plans to create a civilized, beautiful city? He suggests that rights were double-edged: the very mechanism for bringing about a new form of consciousness among these residents also contributed to their dispossession.

For nearly a year, Schwenkel lived in an apartment unit in Quang Trung. While her focus is on the social history of architecture, her analysis is complemented by her first-hand experiences of negotiating repairs with neighbors and disposing of trash, providing texture and depth to her claim that the original architecture failed to account for the spatial practices of residents. The German-style units designed to reinforce nuclear families were ill-suited for familiar Vietnamese forms of sociality, so residents instead reinscribed corridors and stairwells with collective meanings. Over time, residents even rebuilt their units to conform to the ideal "Vietnamese house" (265) by relocating toilets to the back of the apartment and building overhangs or "tiger cages." The ground-level storage units became surplus housing and shops for entrepreneurial activities. Through such "counter-practices" residents were not bricoleurs but designers who marked their class distinctions and upward mobility (264).

These books ascribe waste, as matter out of place, to people as well. Itinerant traders, rural women in socialist housing, and displaced residents have all been targeted for transformation into proper subjects. For this reason, gender is a key category in these three books. In *Waste and Wealth*, Nguyen describes how these traders drew on ideal gendered distinctions: women collected waste, husbands and wives established fixed trash depots,

and men trucked the waste out of the city. But in their home village, these ideals had to be remade to accommodate their mobility. In Vinh, by contrast, the distinction between urban and rural livelihoods was never as pronounced as it has been in Hà Nội or Hồ Chí Minh City. People maintained close ties to the countryside because they had forged their identities around collective experiences of urban destruction. In the 1970s, people reluctantly resided on the upper floors of the socialist housing, but they did not enjoy the promises of modern architecture. Until the 1990s, they still had to fetch water from outside locations at designated times because of the faulty plumbing system. Especially moving is Schwenkel's analysis of how rural women were essential to the construction of the housing. These same women were then blamed when the units fell into disrepair, in spite of the rushed construction by East German engineers and the deferred maintenance by the Vietnamese state. In Phú Mỹ Hưng, Harms finds an ironic inversion of the dynamics structuring gender relations; women credited the spatial regulations for disciplining men, thus allowing the women more freedom of movement. Women described their liberation from gossip in the alleyway, while retired men exercised in the green spaces and retreated to debate politics in their private living rooms.

Given the emphasis on rights, citizenship, and belonging, what role do these anthropologists assign to the state? The luxurious Phú Mỹ Hưng is regulated by a Taiwanese-Vietnamese corporation, a buffer between residents and the Vietnamese state. Residents of Quang Trung, however, believed themselves the rightful owners of their units. They criticized local authorities for failing to maintain the units and lauded East German technical know-how and design. The units were plagued by leaking plumbing and crumbling walls, but the structures withstood typhoons. Yet when changes in the Land Law obligated residents to purchase their apartments, people countered with claims of how housing symbolized a social debt binding the state to its citizens. For the rural migrants collecting and selling discarded junk, their status was liminal, just as waste is neither commodity nor trash. Many sought to compensate for their vulnerability through transactional relations with officials, a practice of "making law" [*làm luật*], by paying state agents to look the other way. Once these migrants returned to Green Spring, the state became visible through solicitations for collective

projects, a dynamic Nguyen describes as no longer socialism but socialization, a blending of privatization with authoritarianism (10). Through their donations and spending, people participated in new forms of exemplary behavior, including constructing elaborate villas, which earned the commune the mantle of “New Countryside” in recognition of new ways of fashioning rurality, though many villas stood vacant. Collecting waste was more sustainable than agriculture, so these migrants eventually returned to the city.

These depictions of the state should give pause to how we characterize new forms of citizenship. On the one hand, we can see elements of a liberal tradition of citizenship, defined as subjects who consent to the rule of law in exchange for state protection over their property. But that tradition does not reckon with how rights became a mechanism of eviction in Thủ Thiêm, where the state determined compensation for houses, including some that had been held for generations. Thus the very rights granted to residents also facilitated their eviction. Because residents were individuated or “atomized,” they were only visible to the state on a case-by-case basis, not through collective representation. Ironically, it was in the countryside and in socialist housing blocs where collective action still prevailed. Nguyen describes, for example, how the wealth from remaking waste depended on already socialized networks and the right knowledge cultivated since colonial times. The networks connecting Green Spring to Hà Nội were dense, and migrants could return home to fulfill their moral obligations, while those networks extending to Hồ Chí Minh City were stretched thin, exposing traders to more fraud. Given these dilemmas, people invested their wealth in Green Spring, a vernacular form of citizenship in which residents demonstrated their worthiness by caring for their own families and expressing their sense of belonging through charitable donations and mutual support. In Quang Trung, residents had to purchase their apartments, often drawing on pooled family resources and the occasional bank loan. Older residents contested the process, whereas the newcomers were generally more willing to be relocated. Women who had moved into the blocs in their youth were especially vocal in their dissent. They believed themselves the rightful owners, that the units were a gift from East Germany and compensation for their sacrifices for the revolution. They also emphasized the transactional

nature with the state: they had paid their rent and maintained their units, and so deserved to be recognized as owners.

These three anthropologists examine how modernist architecture, recycling, and urban planning are new modalities for regulating citizenship and civility. Each one also described the highly specific conditions of these modalities, and by doing so, critiqued prevailing academic perspectives. Schwenkel, for example, reluctantly invokes “utopia,” a term often used with regard to socialist infrastructure. She instead highlights the Vietnamese phrase that translates to “that which is unimaginable” to acknowledge how socialist housing was built on wartime ruins. Skeptical of the claims of solidarity between East German and Vietnamese architects and engineers, she provides ample evidence from the archives and interviews to show how the very design of mass housing reinstated hierarchical arrangements, including the gifting of used equipment that allowed East German factories to purchase new equipment. Harms rejects the findings of critical urbanism and instead adopts a methodology of “open conversation” (13) that amplifies the multiple and contradictory viewpoints espoused by residents. He reserves his skepticism for popular academic terms like “neoliberalism,” drawing on the Vietnamese term *tân tự do*, or “new freedom.” Similarly, Nguyen describes the tension between two ideals—*thành người* and *làm người*. While the former emphasizes the framework of moral personhood, the latter addresses the actual work in producing a moral person. Handling waste makes that realization of moral personhood viable.

These three ethnographic studies demonstrate that Vietnam’s rapid transformation has left traces in the form of waste, ruins, and rubble. Ironically, it is in the countryside and in socialist housing where people have maintained a sense of sociality and have resisted the process of individuation fostered in new urban zones. In Vinh, residents purchased land rights to their individual units, sometimes going into debt, but they successfully rejected the state’s offer to relocate because a majority refused to do so. Yet we see how homeownership as an expression of civility and citizenship is not confined to cities and new urban zones. In Green Spring, newly constructed villas stood vacant; the waste generated by cities has kept these migrants on the move in the hope that they eventually attain respectability.

In sum, these three studies emphasize how regulating civility is a discourse of citizenship in Vietnam. But how civility is regulated still needs to be enframed by particular histories. Rural migration patterns were established during French colonial times, and Nguyen describes how people still spoke admiringly of one woman who made her fortune during that time. Harms examines a series of maps of Thủ Thiêm that had depicted the peninsula as a blank slate for modernist designs since the 1950s, providing a bridge between the master plans of the Republic of Vietnam and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Schwenkel challenges the compelling story of socialist solidarity even as she acknowledges how the project addressed an imminent human need: to house those residents left homeless from US firepower. While these studies resonate with each other, they underscore the complex facets of urbanization that cannot be disentangled from trans-local networks, modernist visions, and US militarism. Together they show why we should approach Vietnamese cities not from the glint of skyscrapers, but from what is seen as obsolete and out of order.

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