



Voids of Speculation

The uncanny ruins of failed urbanism



Fig. 1 : Nam Tu Son New Urban Area. Crédit Photo : Olivier Jacques.

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Abstract: This research is situated in the field of urban studies, exploring failed territorial transitions in Hanoi, Vietnam. More specifically, it explores the phenomenon of “ghost-cities,” i.e., large-scale real estate projects on the outskirts of Hanoi for which large tracts of agricultural lands have been forcefully appropriated but which yet remain unfinished and uninhabited for a prolonged period of economic uncertainty. Although they are largely studied in China, ghost-cities in Vietnam raise local questions about the impacts of speculative real estate practices on the urban territorial formation process. They also put forward the costs that these practices impose on pre-existing periurban people, dispossessed of their means of livelihood for failed urban development projects. The main question guiding this study is: What happens to urbanity when periurban land is appropriated and transformed mostly for speculative purposes, particularly during an economic downturn when this (problematic) objective fails to materialize? Its main challenge is to explore how ‘liveability’ (or rural and urban space practices) are transferred (or lost) through compulsory land appropriation for urban development. The focus is on the asynchronous urban transition that leads to “ghost-cities.”



Fig. 2 : Van Canh New Urban Area. Crédit Photo : Olivier Jacques.

Theory Problem	What happens to livability and to the urban condition when the habitat fails to materialize, produced mostly with speculation and profitability objectives? This will include, for instance, reflections on ideas of maximization, excess, the generic, the ruin, the ghostly, the faux-town, the uncanny, risks, isolation, abjection, occupation and transgression.
Practical Problem	Largely studied in China, ghost-cities in Vietnam raise local questions about the impacts of speculative real estate practices on the urban territorial formation process. They also put forward the costs that these practices impose on pre-existing periurban people, dispossessed of their means of livelihood for failed urban development projects.
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a social-spatial analysis of three ghost-city case-studies and of their socialist market economies. • Explore ghost-cities as the physical embodiment of failed economical policies, state-sanctioned privatization, and the ‘objectivization’ of the urban space through speculations on profitability • Allow for a representational reading of the ‘ghost-city life’; a transdisciplinary study on the theoretical value of such economic urban spheres, apprehended here through the language of urban aesthetics and “moods.”.

Theoretical Background: Delving in the literature of aesthetic theory and cultural criticism, the specificity of Vietnamese ghost-cities is included in a broader discourse about urbanization and the alienations of modernity (see Jacques, 2011). It is also helpful to understand Hanoi’s “ghost cities” as an insightful window unto Vietnam’s periurban/urban space production and land management practices (Boudreau & Labbé, 2011; Waibel, 2006) — a phenomenon located within what has been called the “Asian new towns” and “global cities” movements (Roy & Ong, 2011). The collapsing of Vietnam’s real



estate sector (since 2008 or so) and the growing number of “ghost-cities” raises important questions about the ways in which the “urbanization and modernization” project is conducted in Vietnam (Labbé, 2013). Urbanistically conceived as “satellite cities”, economically perceived as “demarcated laboratory spaces”, and promoted as “socially highly selective”, these developments can become problematic for what they generate of residential segregation, both a consequence and a cause of an increased social polarization (Waibel, 2006).

Methodology : This multidisciplinary project delves first in the fields of Theory of Architecture, with a heuristic analysis akin to researches in philosophy and aesthetics. But it is also backed by a practical methodology (three phases) of data collection and analysis. In Phase 1, a visual analysis is conducted: i) collection and cataloguing of promotional documents and master plans (visit of sales offices and promoters), and ii) a photographic survey of the selected case-study developments. In Phase 2, a territorial cartographic analysis is conducted. Satellite imagery is used to develop a GIS-based comparative analysis of projected master plans, versus the actual built (and unbuilt) projects. Finally, in Phase 3, a series of exploratory qualitative interviews is conducted, with individuals living and working in and around “ghost areas” on the periphery of Hanoi. During these interviews we explore how these areas are perceived as expressions (or not) of Vietnam’s urban future and development trajectory.

Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ghost-cities serve as the perfect manifest for the velocity of Asia's (or Vietnam's at least) urban growth, equally prodigious and decadent, excessive and pragmatic, partly innovative but mostly manufactured.• The mass-utopian ideology behind such project is to build a new civilized way of life, and to promise an isolated bubble of an "ideal lifestyle".• The few ghost-cities' residents point at a blatant asynchronism between private development and their connection to the city's infrastructures, with entire wannabe luxurious districts left isolated and impractical.• A lack of synchronized designs – coupled with the apathetic material leftovers of economic failure - grounds the ghost-city in capitalistic realism, closer to its mere built substance, a gravity harder to elevate of any proper urban mysticism.
Practical Implications	A better understanding of the underlying mechanisms (economic, political, social, urban, etc.) leading to ghost-cities highlights a recurrent asynchronicity between the promises of a liveable city and its actualization. The failed urbanism of ghost-cities has strong socio-spatial implications for periurban Hanoi: these developments can become problematic for what they generate of residential segregation, both a consequence and a cause of an increased social polarization. It disputes the modernistic optimism towards designing an idealized lifestyle in the context of rapid urbanization, when the environment is economic rather than cultural, speculative rather than social or even concerned with individuals.
Theoretical Implications	The uninhabited new urban area, while exacerbating the vulnerability of such modernistic optimisms, brings forward (post-modernistic) considerations for urban estrangements and anxieties. Marketed as isolated spheres of “new lifestyles”, liveability is challenged both aesthetically and socially, drawing new queries for the self/urbanity compound. These are also relevant themes when tackling the architecture of ghost-cities, in search for what they generate (or not) in terms of permanence and cultural values. Suppressing the usual time frame between the architecture and its ruined state, failed new urban areas re-question how the ‘ghostly’ shatters the limits of a past and present urbanity.



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