Believing the Future: Credulity, Rhetoric, and the Fetish of Success in Vietnamese Urban Planning

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Abstract: This essay explores how belief in modernization continues to animate the making of cities in contemporary Vietnam. It argues that post-reform urbanization has not abandoned developmental conviction but has re-animated it through the rhetoric of planning. Drawing on the example of Hanoi's New Urban Areas—planned satellite districts designed to embody modernization and prosperity—the essay traces how planning language, policy discourse, and popular imagination converge to sustain a shared *credulity* toward *futurity*. Terms such as *order*, *modernity*, and *civility* do not merely describe development goals; they enact success ahead of time, translating ideological visions into administrative, spatial, and emotional realities. Yet, this credulity is also strained by the contradictions between rhetoric and materiality: the promise of coherence in planning often yields fragmented or suspended urban landscapes. The essay aims to reframe this tension not as irrationality or failure, but as an essential part of Vietnam's planning modernity, where "believing the future" becomes both the engine and the symptom of its rapid urban transformations.

Keywords: Vietnam; urban planning; credulity; New Urban Areas; planning discourse.

1. Introduction: An Ode to the Future

Where do we look to idealize and outline the future of cities? Congestion and growth have long been bemoaned as the scare words of our time (Kunstler 1993: 48). Megacities of the world, especially in the Global South, have been depicted as a dystopian, slum-poor, chaotic, out-of-control, and environmentally imperiled 'future' in Western movies and literature

(Zeiderman 2008).[1] *This* future, the ecumenopolis haunting the credibility of developmentalism, is a source of (modern) anxieties, and of a (postmodern) loss of "credulity toward narratives of social and

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[1] This is a vision of the Third World where "urban growth is so dramatic that it 'consistently outstrips even the most perspicacious planner's vision for it'. This is the narrative of the chaotic Third World mega-city that defies all planning controls and forecasts" (Roy 2009: 77). In an analysis of cultural politics, language, and power, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) shows how Western journalists, fiction writers, and scholars have contributed to creating a widespread and negative perception of Eastern cultures as being backward, stagnant, and second-rate.

economic development" in certain societies; the non-universal, "post-development era" mentioned by James Ferguson (2006: 182).[2] Modernization and rational large-scale planning—once heralded as instruments of order and rationality—are now more often viewed by Western thinkers as relics of an exhausted developmental imagination (Flyvbjerg et al. 2003; Forsyth 2021; Grant 2006).

From within the Global South, however, development and its promises are still taken seriously (and rightfully so), both individually and collectively. The vast number, along with the speed and fervor, of transformations in East and Southeast Asia, for instance, feed on a strain of belief that associates, by definition, development, growth, and modernism with better futures. This essay focuses on that counterpoint, and on the *re*location of two developmental aspects that previously animated postwar new town designs in the West: *futurity* and *credulity*. This emphasis starts from the most simplified of the generalizations, namely that "in both academic and popular imaginations, the future is not where it used to be" (Bunnell 2018: 9). It then explores more localist views in which Asian cities may have seized what Arjun Appadurai calls the "capacity to aspire" (2004).[3] Vietnam's post-reform urbanization—the wave of frenetic urban development that followed

the 1986 *Doi Moi* (renovation) market reforms—provides a revealing example of that belief in the promises of urbanization and modernization: rather than abandoning developmental faith, it has re-enchanted it through the rhetoric of planning. This essay uses the New Urban Areas (NUAs) of Vietnam—the country's planned satellite districts designed to foster modernization and prosperity—to show how the act of city-making is also propelled by parallel desires for future-making and nation-building undertakings. It asks how belief itself, rather than technical coherence, sustains the making of "successful" urban futures in Vietnam's hybrid planning system, where the socialist state, market forces, and civic aspirations intersect. Credulity, here, is not *naïveté* but a generative affect, exploring how believing the future is to make it administratively, economically, and emotionally real. The first section shows how the language that sustains this belief is where the work of planning truly begins.

2. Rhetoric of Futurity

Across Vietnam's official plans, the future is written into being through a small but powerful lexicon: the city being built will be *đồng bộ* (synchronous), *văn minh* (civilized), *hiện đại* (modern), *trật tự* (ordered), and, more recently, *bền vững* (sustainable). Fueled by waves of centrally-devised general masterplans (*quy hoạch chung*), as well as centrally-devised *Five-Year* or *Ten-Year Plans*, both policy texts and Vietnamese media demonstrate how cityscapes are entrusted with various ideological obligations (see Jacques 2024: chapters 2 and 4).[4] For instance, a 2009

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[2] Ferguson is pragmatic, comparing a "loss of credulity" to the "loss of credibility" of developmentalism and capitalist production. Architect Rem Koolhaas (1995: 1015) speaks of a "near universal pessimism about a makeable future". Other authors point to the linkage between (post)modernity and (dis)enchantment (Lechner 1993; McEwan 2008; Saler 2006).

[3] Although anthropologist Arjun Appadurai aims to reinsert culturalism, regionalism, and the local aspirations of the marginalized to counter globalist views of economic development (especially through public action), what he calls "the capacity to aspire" is also a replicable cultural ability to envision urban futures, giving credence to desires as they are laid-out by politics, local actors, and human cultural systems.

[4] This article adopts the methodological framework developed for my doctoral thesis (Jacques 2024), which combined documentary analysis, surveys, interviews, and

Decision by the Office of the Prime Minister on the orientation of Hanoi's development up to 2025, opened with such ideological targets: "The development masterplan of Vietnam's urban system aims to achieve the objectives of industrialization and *modernization*, working toward the people's prosperity in a strong country with an equal, democratic, and *civilized* society" (Vietnam's Office of the Prime Minister 2009) To do so, it says, the plan must ensure an "*appropriate* spatial organization" (and a "rational use" of space and resource), keeping up with the goals of:

Gradually establishing and improving Vietnam's urban systems […]; having *appropriate*, *synchronous*, and *modern* technical and social infrastructure; having a *good* urban environment and *quality* living standards; upholding *advanced* while *traditionally unique* urban architecture; reaching a *worthy* position […] in national, regional and international socio-economic development; and participating in the *effective* implementation of two strategic missions: the construction of socialism and the protection of the nation. (Vietnam's Office of the Prime Minister 2009; all emphases by author)[5]

The Decision conflates many elements of its ideological vocabulary in a hotchpotch of hazy semantics that avoids suggesting actual methods and strategies of planning. For example, to "synchronously build" means building with "appropriate and modern levels" (Vietnam's Office of the Prime Minister 2009); "urban design" shall be used to "improve spatial quality" (Vietnam's Office of the Prime Minister 2009); or "urban architecture" shall "create urban images equivalent to the stature of the country in a period of modernization and international integration" (Vietnam's Office of the Prime Minister 2009). The general tone, however, is consistent with the future-oriented and positive associations behind modernism and "urbanization-as-modernization." It is often expected, in Vietnam's policy documents, to find goals and ideologies that are elementary and axiomatic, yet treated sincerely and disseminated alongside universally emancipatory and utilitarian terminologies.

Yet, among the broad galvanizing language, "urban synchrony" (*đồng bộ đô thị*) emerges as both more practical and abstract. The expression appeared in the earliest policy texts regarding the planning and construction of NUAs as a functionalist ideal that the state believed could be achieved by building them in full, on time, on budget, and simultaneously and seamlessly with the surrounding city. "At the most basic level, this notion entails the compliance and compatibility of projects with official urban development plans. It also calls for the production of complete neighborhoods wherein housing areas are served by all the 'technical infrastructure' (roads, energy, and water provision networks) and 'social infrastructure'

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spatial mapping to examine urban development in Hanoi. The empirical base included over 330 press articles (2003–2023), 70 policy documents, two resident surveys (2016, 2022), a quantitative survey and mapping of 39 ghost urban areas (2016–2017), 59 interviews with planners, officials, and residents, and a review of 180 projects nationwide—70 of which were analyzed in depth for their planning and promotional materials, alongside profiles of five major developers. All interviews and resident surveys were conducted under ethics approval from the Comité plurifacultaire d'éthique de la recherche (CPER) and the Comité d'éthique de la recherche en arts et humanités (CERAH) at Université de Montréal, with renewals granted from 2013 through 2023.

[5] Official translations of Vietnamese laws in English sometimes exist, but they are often truncated, incomplete, or poor. Here, the word *phù hợp* is translated as "appropriate," but could also mean relevant or harmonized; *tiên tiến* is translated as "advanced," but is also used to mean developed or progressive; the very

often used and ubiquitous *tốt* simply means "good," while the official translation of this law also used it to mean "effective."

(schools, clinics, public spaces) needed 'to ensure a stable life and convenient living and working conditions for the people.'"[6] To vouch for *urban synchrony* is to worship an operational, almost military-like city-making.

Yet, a 2012 Resolution on "Building a Synchronous System" for the entire country offers glimpses of more all-encompassing expectations towards synchrony, which must rise as an essential component of nation-building, too. What begins as a managerial doctrine of efficiency thus expands into a political theology of order, by which spatial alignment mirrors administrative rigor which already mirrors ideological doctrine. In the text, so as to become a "modern-oriented industrial country by 2020", improvements had to be made in regards to synchrony in technical infrastructure (power grids, flood management), synchrony in transportation (roads, seaports, airports), synchrony in industrial parks and economic zones (import-export, market economy), synchrony in socio-economic infrastructure (state investments, land values, settlement policies, international integration), but also synchrony in the legal system (leadership organization, implementation structure) and synchrony in the management of decentralization (each branch, region, and locality).[7] It is with the latter two components that synchrony most closely

intertwines with socialist political frameworks. "Enforcing synchrony" should be understood as "mobilizing the participation of all political systems," or mobilizing all resources, in "advocacy activities as to manage all areas of social life," trickling down to the smallest and simplest actions of the people. Through such mantras of progress, futurity becomes self-performative: each reiteration of "synchrony" or "modernity" both affirms and confirms that development already works, and will work, because the nation is on the right path. It also suggests that planning's credibility precedes its success.

The rhetorical presentation above shows how developing nations may etch in their legal programs popular understandings of what *modernization* means, a definition linked with the production of urban space: "Urbanism" indistinctly stands in for "modernity," just as "urbanization" is an analog of "modernization" (McKinnon 2011: 71). 'Modernization' is also a more neutral term for Asia's otherwise brazen embrace of "Westernization" (Weiming 2014: 105). Thus, for civic leaders, as much as by local popular acceptance, modernism, modernity, and modernization strike as being both the *means* and the *ends* of urbanization, Westernization, and globalization.[8] Vital to understanding Asian modernity is an embrace of other conflations as well, by which city-making doubles as a region-making, nation-making, Asian-making, global-making, modern-making, and future-making endeavor (Jacques et al. 2017: 85; McKinnon 2011; Woodside 1998;

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[6] Program No. 07-CTr/TU (Hanoi City Party Committee 2011) cited in Jacques et al. (2017: 87). See additional legal precisions on synchrony in the same Program and in Vietnam's 2008 Building Code (Ministry of Construction).

[7] See Resolution 13-NQ/TW (Vietnam Central Committee 2012). Another example of the comprehensive role of synchrony can be read in Program No. 06-CTr/TU (Hanoi City Party Committee 2016). In such text, to synchronize is to modernize, two words used interchangeably. The prevalence of synchrony indeed builds on earlier legislation that specified that all components of city-making in Hanoi should be "modern": (The Standing Committee of the National Assembly 2000).

[8] For more on that over-simplification, read Tsing's answer to the question "Is globalization like modernization?" (2000a: 328). The focus on progress is also one of the reasons why globalization is often, including here, presented as an analog of neoliberalization. For Soja (2000: 216), neoliberalism is a new synthesis, or hybrid, that rationalizes, celebrates, and promotes the globalization process.

Yooil 2012). These terms serve "more of a narration of future than of past and present. [N]ot quite a celebration of achievement, but a yearning for a utopian moment with […] enthusiasm" (Bulag 2002: 225).

Thus, promotional and comparative modernity among nations may be realized by prowess in infrastructure, assigning developmental value either to technological networks or other "commodity fetishisms" of the modern era.[9] The ideal of growth itself takes on a "national cultural character that makes it marketable in order that its value in global circuits of capital is enhanced" (Raghuram et al. 2014: 126). It is also via growth that modernity becomes the pragmatic and unitary goal for nations,[10] imagined as the inevitable destination of civilizing processes where Asian nations historically have, are, and will solve poverty problems, raise their development level, and take their place alongside the West, as Japan, Singapore, or any of the *Four Tigers* did[11]. In short, modernity becomes both the means and the proof of development and, as with synchrony above, a tautological system where aspiration validates itself.

Figure 1: *An "uncivilized" sidewalk tea stall in front of weathered billboards promoting "A year in public order and urban civility," Nam Dong ward, Hanoi. 2017.*

(Photograph by author. The banners read: "The Party Committee and the people of Nam Dong ward are determined to implement the 'year of urban order and civilization' […] and promote the learning and following of Ho Chi Minh's moral code")

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[9] "Commodity fetishism," a term coined by Karl Marx, refers to the process by which the social relations involved in the production of commodities, such as labor, practices, actions, and actors, are obscured and depersonalized in favor of the commercial value of products (see Kaika and Swyngedouw 2000; see also "technological worlding" in Vietnam, Schwenkel 2018).

[10] Ferguson (2006: 178) calls this "modernity figured as a universal telos" in developmentalism.

[11] After Japan's own global success story, high economic potentials emerged from Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea: the so-called "Four Tigers" or "gang of four" (see Harvey 1989: 165; World Bank 1993).

Figure 2: *A billboard advertising the future Phung Khoang NUA, with the caption "Urban civility – intellectual community," Nam Tu Liem, Hanoi. 2019*

(Photograph by author)

3. Fetishizing the Modern

States also feed on (and cultivate) popular understanding of modernity as a "status" ladder, one that moves individuals upward and toward being recognized as developed. This destination, however abstract, resonates concretely across status groups and nations: the ruralites, the urban-poor, the middle class, the *arrivistes*, the wealthy, the ruling class, and nations themselves, all signaling their "developmental dream of entering the modern world" (Leaf 2015: 170; see also Rudnyckyj and Schwittay 2014). D. Asher Ghertner explains these desires as "normative" urban qualities, disseminated in "compelling visions of the future," and outlined by what he calls "world-class aesthetics criteria" (2011: 281). As a populist example of these visions of development, Ghertner mentions posters of fictional bungalows found in living quarters of slum areas around Delhi, India – framed as God-like figures, exposed and shared as desires for private property. Such posters

also appear in Vietnam (Figure 4). The aesthetic criteria behind these visions are, in fact, yardsticks for self-evaluation, assessing one's comparative standing on regional and global scoreboards. They range from the very tangible to more introspective forms of self-awareness: in "levels of development," and in wishes or claims to be poor/rich, traditional/modern, backward/civilized, late/advanced, ugly/beautiful, and ashamed/proud.[12] Similar self-positioning is performed by individuals and communities, as well as by nations, as a means of locating oneself in a rapidly changing climate (Ghertner 2011: 281).[13] It is the *Art of Being Global*, in which "worlding practices are constitutive, spatializing, and signifying gestures that variously conjure up worlds

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[12] For Ghertner, "world-class aesthetics" are aspirational. Yet, aesthetic symbolism can also be driven by sentiments of "backwardness" or, for Li Zhang, a fear of "lateness" (Zhang 2006: 462).

[13] See also the "real lives of urban fantasies" in Africa and the Global South (Bhan 2014). For a historical Western perspective, see the "aesthetics of social aspirations" in late twentieth-century Britain (Clarke 2001).

beyond current conditions of urban living" (Roy and Ong 2011: 13).

In Vietnam, the developers behind NUAs translate these dreams into actual marketing promises. Slogans find propulsive ways to advertise distinction by branding projects as gateways to futurity. Some of these are pretty straightforward, like the Duong Noi NUA that offers both "wings for the future," and a "modern city for a futuristic life."[14] That future, however, is projected as increasingly disconnected from a so-called "Vietnamese" or "Hanoian" cultural essence, offering instead an exclusive and at times simulated access to other Asian, European, or Western referents. The Ocean Park NUA, for instance, uses English to present its "*Ocean* district" as the "*New Hanoi*." That Hanoi, however, promises that the experience of residents will be like "traveling through the most expensive tourist destinations on the planet, like the lake at San Alfonso del Mar (Chile), the lake at Wynn Paradise Park (Las Vegas, USA), or the lake at The MBRC District One (Dubai)" (Vinhomes Real Estate n.d.).[15] At the Splendora NUA, promotional presentations also spell out how distinctive the NUA is from Hanoi, and how shoulder-to-shoulder it perceives itself to be beside other world-class urban referents: "At Splendora, you can find a development model on par with economic centers such as

New York, a center of fashion and culture as Paris, a center for tourism and recreation as in Dubai or Sydney; a symbol of global life. […] Our goal is to build a convenient new city for transportation with synchronous design; a distinction compared to the old-quarter, and the center of Hanoi" (Jacques et al. 2017: 89-90; citing the developer's website, as it was circa 2016; see Splendora n.d.).

Similar new town projects across Asia offer spaces where a form of urban self-consciousness could be enacted. The periphery of cities symbolized this destination as an urban and ideological development "frontier," a liminal space of desirability and attraction.[16] This convergence of subjectivity and political economy acknowledges the "phantasmagorical" role of new towns[17] and recalls former manifestations of imagining and building "the good life" within "suburban dreams" (Dickinson 2015). The periphery becomes an objectifiable milieu from which aspirations arise and help transform periurban lands into sites of a *neoliberal-developmental* metaphor: it is the potential accumulation of capital, on a clean slate, peripheral to city centers, and the production of private goods (here urban space) that enables the production of "new subjects" and the production of "new nations." Thus, "world-class aesthetics criteria" open the doors to a city where

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[14] The newer Anland Lakeview complex, within the Duong Noi NUA, uses the first slogan (*chắp cánh tương lai*), while one of its earliest sub-developments, sometimes separately called the Do Nghia NUA, and uses the second (*đô thị hiện đại cho cuộc sống tương lai*).

[15] Despite all these pompous references, Gia Lam, the easternmost district where Ocean Park is located, is a rural district with 85% of its population rural (out of a total population of 286,102, according to 2019's census; General Statistics Office 2020). The international "lakes" mentioned here are in fact artificial lagoons (Las Vegas, unbuilt) or pools (Chile), or built in highly exclusive resorts or new town projects (Mohammed Bin Rashid City of Dubai and its partially built Crystal Lagoon).

[16] These "frontiers" are conceptualized as the "new geographies of capitalist accumulation" – sites of relentless "negotiations, speculations, contestations, displacements, and dispossessions" (Bunnell et al. 2012; Gururani and Dasgupta 2018: 42). "But the frontier is also a discourse, implying newness and change. In this sense it is a place of hope, perhaps inevitability, and a source of worry and uncertainty; in many ways it is a metaphor for development" (see how Leaf 2016: 195, contextualizes Ho Chi Minh City's periurbanization as "reterritorialization in Southeast Asia").

[17] See Mazlish (2003) on *self* and *society* as settings for utopias.

modernity is also a product to be acquired. Being recognized as "world-class" then comes down to being recognized as "first-class" (Ferguson 2006: 187), adding luxury and exclusivity as yet more stand-ins for what modernity implicates.[18]

Although, in that logic, individual success is almost guaranteed for those who can afford it, the spatial dimensions of such "modernization" remain planning's most productive illusion. Studies investigating the spatial-economic reality of Chinese or Vietnamese so-called "ghost cities" prove that ideas of economic success and spatial success don't always correlate (Jacques 2024; Sorace and Hurst 2016; Ulfstjerne 2015, 2016).[19] In Hanoi, certainly not all houses or neighborhoods need to be inhabited to reap their destined short-term profits. Rows of "ghost" houses may even allow local governments to meet target ratios by adding unused square-meters to the city's total housing floorage, a metric used to address the housing crisis. Such an "ethic" of cherry-picking success ends up positioning corporations and nations at their most synchronized, not exactly ideologically, but in *spirit*. The following case shows how this disconnect between rhetoric/materiality materializes and unravels in Hanoi's built environment.

Figure 3: *A promotional image for the Ocean Park NUA advertising a "life according to the standards of Singapore."*

(Source: developers, date: n.d. Paper brochure)

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[18] It is a far cry from the Enlightenment. Fetishized modernity is exclusive rather than proletariat (public), individual rather than en masse.

[19] Research on the ghost cities of China showed how this potential (yet planned) inequity draws attention to the "speculative economies of not finishing construction; economies that play out between the imaginary and the real, but also to their financial fragility, open-endedness, and the challenges these pose for planning" (Ulfstjerne 2015: 20).

Figure 4: *A decal of a "villa scenery wall painting" in a room rented by migrant workers living in Dong Da district, Hanoi, 2023*

(Photographs by author)

"The houses are very modern, and the living environment so serene (*yên tĩnh*). We know we will never live there, but we are still so young. It makes my family dream." *(Interview with boarders, Hanoi, January 12, 2023).*

4. Assessing a Built "Future:" The Irony of Success

In such *spirit,* rather than measurable outputs, the evaluation of success in Vietnam rests on affective, rhetorical, and speculative performances. By most accounts in Hanoi, the Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh NUA has been hailed as a "complete" or "completed" project for almost 10 years, if not as a "successful" project, by both academics and parts of the press (e.g., Labbé and Boudreau 2011: 282; Tran Trung Hieu 2013). However, evaluating successes or even completion in NUAs can be challenging. For instance, the words of Dr. Hoang Huu Phe—the project's lead architect and chairman of the design and planning division of Vinaconex, the project's developer—are pretty telling, when he retroactively fixes very redeeming criteria for the "success" of Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh:

After ten years, what was expected and predicted for the Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh New Urban Area is no longer simply on paper and is no longer up for debate. In the

afternoon, crowds of children and older adults can be seen resting, playing, and doing rhythmic exercises jubilantly […]. At night, almost all the windows are lit. […] Only one thing is quite surprising: most successes in the Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh area, whether small or early, […] have never been discussed in a balanced manner in the mass media. Research papers also reach unanimous negative conclusions. However, the market keeps 'voting with its feet'[20] in favor of this urban area; buyers are constantly looking for accommodations here, not leaving a single vacant unit, even when prices are not-so-low or when the market is quiet. Could it be that research studies, while appearing objective and scientific, actually contain many biases and many methodological problems? (Phe 2013)

Dr. Phe's logic of "success" is tricky at best: overcrowded public spaces, ownership, and occupancy in such a central district are quasi-self-fulfilling metrics in a context where, since the late 1950s, urban housing supply has consistently lagged behind demand.[21] It is also tempting yet impressionistic for architects to draw on market triumphs as validation for their creative work, especially when the press, academics, *and* Dr. Phe himself all realistically portrayed early NUAs as vectors of "price-fixing" practices; an immutable and vigorous "seller market" that

keeps them well "beyond the reach of ordinary residents" (Phe 2011: 171). In other words, units do sell and resell easily, especially apartments in first-generation NUAs. The question is who can buy housing there, shifting the discussion to speculation, affordability, and the universality of housing supplies (Shin 2019).

Even in a popular (or populated) NUA, residents lament that some golden lands remain unused after over twenty years.[22] Ideals are suspended, too, as the press mourns the loss of living standards set during planning stages or by planning laws.[23] A look at the local press reveals how early planning ideals are often revised in a "circus" (*xiếc*) of adjustments favoring profitability over liveability (Jacques 2025: 105; Ngọc Mai 2016). In this process, Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh's roads got narrower, public spaces were turned into parking lots, and more high-rise apartment buildings replaced planned public amenities such as healthcare centers.[24] It is not surprising,

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[20] "Voting with its feet'" is an expression Dr. Phe surely borrows from Lenin, meaning a vote by action (rather than one by hand) by those at the bottom who are left-out of the system, as the Russians did when deserting the Tsar (see Wintringham 1935: 63; see also Scott 1998: 185).

[21] Hanoi is disreputable for very low averages of public space per capita (as low as 1.48m^2). Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh's public space has been thoroughly investigated as a multi-use, public-private space with unique user negotiation tactics to cope with the area's high density (Boudreau et al. 2015; Geertman et al. 2016). For more on supply and demand, see Pédelahore (2008: chapter on "*Architecture*s," section "*Les nouveaux quartiers socialistes*," paragraph 4).

[22] They decry, for instance, the fate of land plot "C2," a 2000 m^2 "golden land" slated for much-needed services and amenities—health facilities, cultural centers, and parking spaces for residents. C2 has been abandoned for more than 20 years. In the press, as a go-to glossary to describe such suspension, there are the usual mentions of "waste" (*lãng phí*), "abandonment" (*bỏ hoang*), and a combination of "wild grass" (*cỏ dại*, *cỏ hoang*) and "makeshift" (*tạm*) tenants overtaking the urban area, creating a sense of "sloppiness" (*nhếch nhác*) that calls into question the ideal urbanity promised by a "model" NUA (Dinh Phong 2020; Viet Anh 2020).

[23] A very elementary idea in early NUA policies states that NUAs should be built "according to the approved detailed planning, with synchronous urban infrastructure […] as well as facilities to ensure administrative activities, population safety [...], and to ensure that organizations and individuals have all the conditions to create a stable life, to live, work and communicate conveniently" (Hanoi People's Committee 2001: article 5). By 2018, at least 40% of NUA projects in Hanoi were found to violate the law, and therefore their planning, after inspections (Minh Duc 2018a).

[24] Trung Hoa–Nhan Chinh new urban area offers only 1.1 hectares of public space, or 0.7 m² per capita—below the legal 1 m²/person threshold (Nguyen Thi Dung 2015).

then, that Dr. Phe would defend high urban density as a positive, beneficial attribute,[25] perhaps in response to Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh being called "suffocating" (D.Anh and VEF 2014). After many "miscalculated planning adjustments," what was once hailed as the "most modern urban area"— even the "king" of NUAs—is now maligned as "overpopulated," "soiled," "old and disheveled," "rapidly deteriorating," and "slowly devaluating": roughly 30 high-rises were built instead of 16; construction density has increased more than 50%, and population has increased three or fourfold in 10 years (D.Anh 2014a; Minh Duc 2018b; Van Son 2021a). Apartments in its residential buildings are used as crowded office spaces or as sales and business agencies, forcing residents to wait half an hour for elevator rides, raising legitimate concerns about fire safety (D.Anh and VEF 2014).

Again, on a rhetorical level, elevating citizenry "above" the existing city, both literally and figuratively, had been a strategic part of the project's motto early on. By 2013, Dr. Phe wrote of a new "experiment on high-rise lifestyle" that promised to lift the "social status" of a new class of Vietnamese "yuppies"—young urban professionals familiarized with these novel vertical built forms from their travels to "many parts of the world" (Phe 2013, 2014).[26] Although not explicitly visible in the designs, exogenous and international charms played a role in commodifying lifestyles. Vinaconex was the first company to refer to homebuyers as "consumers" with "consumer tastes" while touting their real estate product as a new "Europe in the heart of Hanoi" (Tran and Yip 2019: 106; Vinaconex n.d.). Before long, however, yuppy tastes mingled with more speculation-inclined *nouveau riche* interests.[27] Many housing units were purchased as second properties and rented out at inflated prices, primarily to expatriate communities. This led to Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh becoming Hanoi's *de facto* Koreatown (Labbé and Boudreau 2015: 250) or, complicating its earlier European associations with Europe, a *miniature Seoul in the heart of Hanoi* (Minh Nguyen 2015).

This short portrait of Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh's recent evolution helps replace narratives of "success" (and failure) with measures of planning-building-living asynchronies of all types and scales, and with short and long-term moments of suspension.[28] The NUA's reality, however, also challenges the mid-century Western notion that the "planned way of life" of new towns result in "new town blues," in which

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Originally planned in 1998 with modest mid-rises, successive revisions from 2001 onward more than doubled the number of towers and raised heights from 9 to 34 floors. Additional high-rises were built beyond plan, while a proposed 18-floor mixed-use building on plot CN remains contested by residents (Cam Anh 2019; Dinh Phong 2020; Ninh Phan 2019).

[25] No need to "panic" over Hanoi's notoriously high population density (33,500 persons per km² in the Old Quarter), Phe argues, since it is lower than Dhaka's (45,000 persons per km²). Yet he omits the most important estimate: with a planned population of 15,000 persons in 32 hectares (despite much higher figures a decade later), Trung Hoa–Nhan Chinh reaches a local density of 46,875 persons per km² (Phe 2013). Safety, hygiene, and health issues linked to density in new urban areas in Hanoi, including Trung Hoa–Nhan Chinh, are well documented in the press (Tran Khang 2017; Van Son 2021b).

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[26] Dr. Phe himself trained in Kyiv, Bangkok, and London.
[27] The problematic nature of the *nouveau riche* ("new rich") as a conceptual and analytical category in Vietnam is debated by King et al. (2008); see also the discussion of the "new rich" of Asia in Pinches (2005). The press, however, does not hesitate to associate the west of Hanoi with a penultimate symbol of wealth for a class of "newly rich households" (*nhà giàu mới*; see D.Anh 2014b).
[28] Shortcomings in Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh have attracted considerable academic attention since its inception. The research sheds some light on less visible and more experiential uncertainties rising from Hanoi's large-scale transformations (Cerise 2009; Geertman et al. 2016; Labbé and Boudreau 2011, 2015; Tran 2014; Tran and Yip 2019).

dwellers lamented that a lack of congestion becomes an impediment to "true urbanity" (Time 1961). In the example above, asynchrony leads predominantly to happenstance and over-populated neighborhoods, alongside a series of undeveloped "golden lands." These contrasting conditions can coexist, sometimes jarringly, within the confines of a single project or emerge in different phases of development.

Figure 5: *Up until 2011, the 34T building (center), flanked by the twin towers 24T 1 and 2, stood as the tallest building in Hanoi (136 m). Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh, the NUA, was somewhat isolated, next to patches of green fields on the city's outskirts*

(Source: Tran Trung Hieu 2013)

Figure 6: *34T and the two orange-colored 24T towers (center-left) now intermingle with a sprawling urban fabric, neither their height nor their location considered liminal*

(Source: Luan Dung 2019)

To Dr. Phe's credit, rarely do Vietnamese architects come forward as the face of megaprojects, propel their work with crucial academic preparation (Phe and Wakely 2000), investigate new constructive options to support new urban possibilities (Phe 2014), and assess the profession's position in the broader political-economic landscape of Vietnam (Phe 2011). In that regard, in 2008, early criticism by architects toward the general direction of urban development, on the eve of Hanoi's millennial anniversary, also pointed to undue pressures placed on designers and planners of NUAs, who were forced to maximize housing supply, design fast, and reduce fees (Ly Truc Dung 2008). In that context, both the Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh NUA and its lead architect pushed for truly pioneering results.

However, it is only pragmatic to acknowledge how world-class aspirations risk crystallizing what Bourdieu (1998) terms a "neoliberal utopia," a global-centric regime where commercial values dominate the appraisal of urban spaces that are, nevertheless, disconnected from their planned ideals, and where a constant "cult of the winner" normalizes cynicism as the defining outcome of developmentalism. And it is this cynicism that risks eroding any defense of credulity as a propulsive belief, casting doubt on developmentalism's capacity to deliver the popular and national aspirations for a modern future. The shortcomings observed in Vietnam's most "successful" NUAs further challenge the assumption that corporations can, or aim to, seamlessly enact what otherwise remains as the rhetoric of modernity and civility, or that they are positioned to synchronize ideological principles of development with state planning. In this light, the pursuit of global status, while it sustains belief, puts credulity under pressure more than it guarantees progress. It exposes the contradictions between rhetoric and materiality in contemporary, rapid, and large-scale city-making.

5. Conclusion: The Rationality Behind Irrational Futures

The fact that some Western thinkers have moved on to new concepts "after" developmentalism and "post" modernism overlooks the fact that, elsewhere, development and modernism still carry positive associations linked to individual and societal emancipation.[29] Cities in the Global South are projected under a forward-looking, transformative, and at times romantic aura of modernity, or what Ferguson calls a "sort of nostalgia for the modern" (Ferguson 2006: 186). Credulity, in this sense, is not a blind faith. It is a proactive, open, and critical attitude, away from postmodern skepticism and toward the potential of urban development to improve lives. It trusts that future-making plans, desires, targets, goals, or even speculation—when adequately harnessed by economic frenzy, knowledge, reason, and expertise—invariably leads to newness, then newness to development, development to modernization, and modernization to individual and societal growth.

These convictions remain central to how Vietnam's planning elites continue to equate modernity with moral progress. Erik Harms

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[29] For more on post-developmentalism and criticism of the argument that development does not work, see Li (2007); Pieterse (2000); Rudnyckyj and Schwittay (2014). In the transcendental reflections of *The Image of the Future*, Fred Polak argued that "for the first time in the three thousand years of Western civilization there has been a massive loss of capacity, or even will, for renewal of images of the future" (Polak 1973: 14). Elise Boulding, Polak's translator, further examined this assumption in *Futuristics and the Imagining Capacity of the West* (Boulding 1978).

(2011: 234), for instance, explored the idea that modernism continues to cut across most ideological divides in a "conscious attempt to move *forward*":

The one thing that unites the previous form of Vietnamese socialism with the contemporary market-oriented socialism of today is a staunch belief in the possibility for rational human planning to pave the way to a better future. In short, today's socialism, like the socialism of the early Vietnamese Worker's Party, is modernist. In today's version of Vietnamese socialism, almost every critique of capitalism has been abandoned. The one key element that remains is the modernist commitment to forward-marching progress guided by a vanguard of experts.

Still, the reason credulity is brought up here, instead of the more propulsive *optimism* and *ambition*, is because modernism is not always a rational or realistic vision of the future. It can be utopian, misled, or misguided, influenced by economic interests and political agendas, and prone to failure or disillusionment. Credulity captures the openness and willingness to believe in modernist ideals, but also the potential pitfalls and risks of doing so. Developmentalism and rapid urbanization have also proven highly exploitable and asymmetrical: "The capacity to plot and navigate pathways to alternative futures—to realize forms of what Arjun Appadurai has termed 'thoughtful wishing' [as opposed to wishful thinking]—is highly unevenly distributed within and across urban Asias" (Appadurai 2004: 82; cited in Bunnell 2018: 11). Whether the various classes of citizens and grassroots movements also have (bottom-up) agency in their capacity to aspire, or not, lies at the core of Appadurai's theory. Between the lines, then, this essay on the idealized city—especially after years of researching ghost

cities and the shortcomings of idealization in Vietnam (Jacques 2024, 2025; Jacques et al. 2017)— should also read as a critique of the assumption that empowerment connotes capacity, even for the elites. Credulity toward futurity often deceives those in positions of power, and trickling down onto the various stages, actors, and practices of urban development.

The other issue with the above presentations of modernist logic—the tech-savvy, focused, mathematical, and reasoned version of it—is that it fails to account for the much more irrational side of speculation, investment, land monetization, and legislation. Financing may be success-oriented, but its performance is also staged as a spectacle that Anna Tsing calls the *Economy of Appearances* (2000b: 118). Here, speculative projections are "simultaneously economic performance and dramatic performance," a necessary dual feature in "the search for financial capital." In her peculiar analysis, corporate investors certainly act as speculators, but so are globe-making, nation-making, or region-making ventures where "dreams [are] linked to enunciate a distinctive economic program" (Tsing 2000b: 141).[30] To "speculate" means projecting futures that may or may not happen, in landscapes where both profit and loss are possible. It also means selling potentials first, not products, keeping the appearance of success that Tsing calls "spectacular accumulation." Here, the future may be more latent than it is possible; yet

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[30] Tsing (2000a, 2000b, 2003, 2005) investigates global "resource frontiers" and the "gold rush" of the mining industry, and how corporations secure deals for land by collaborating with officials, in rush periods when regulations are not yet too restricting. It is easy to see why her argument has been transferred into urban studies, seeing that real estate investors and developers operate in the same mode as mining enterprises, both of them as globalist speculators (Nam 2017; Sorace and Hurst 2016; Ulfstjerne 2016; Upadhya 2020).

what counts is potential. Anticipation is a registering of that potential, while speculation is an action-choice that assumes it as real (a projection, forward, without absolute knowledge; see Massumi 2002: 100-101).

So, this irrationality is not the opposite of planning reason: it acts as its activator. It allows Vietnam's planning modernity to appear simultaneously pragmatic and dreamlike, governed and dramatic—a theater that relies on suspension as much as execution. This essay has provided a glossary of Vietnamese words, formally used to describe visions of the future in Hanoi, which emphasized the utilitarian and phantasmagorical aspects of city-making in Vietnam. In the in-between time-space where (and when) those ideals have yet to materialize, however, there is another word that more effectively conveys how spaces retain their inherent potential of openness to better futures. In descriptions of shortcomings that clearly affected city life (like drinkable water), many dwellers seem to find resilience in holding on to the shared transitional condition of the people and the nation: "modernity, civility, order; currently, we don't have that yet [chưa có]. But collectively we understand that we are in a developing country, so it is normal not to have everything all at once" (interview, Van Canh NUA, December 28, 2022). The word *chưa*, or "not yet," a seemingly innocent particle in the language, inherently resists judgments of failure—a primary challenger of finality. In interviews with residents, architects, and urban professionals, the systematic use of *chưa* instilled in my analysis more respect and positivity toward grassroots actors, practices, and beliefs: "*Our city simply does not work that way yet.*"

Chưa also helps transform the city's radically planned margin into a "space of radical openness," where struggle could become resistance, foster strategic flexibility, and offer a response to modernity's Universalist project, to its assumptions about the power of progress and rationalization.[31] Around 2005 in the wards of My Dinh in the Tu Liem district, the main tower of Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh NUA rose among former rice fields as a bold experiment in large-scale planning (Figure 5 and 6). It sat surrounded by vast boulevards and roundabouts that anticipated a car-owning future. Yet, the infrastructure stood largely vacant at a moment when less than one percent of Hanoians lived in high-rises and car ownership hovered at two percent (JICA and Hanoi People's Committee 2007a: table 2.2 and section 2.16).[32] At first, in the absence of heavy traffic—one that would vindicate the scale of the infrastructure—youths from both the surrounding villages and the city would come on bicycles or motorcycles, squatting and gathering between car lanes, or right in the middle of colossal roundabouts more than a hundred meters in diameter. Within the large voids sprung the adlibbed urban/rural theater of the *not yet*: traditional kites were flown, coal-grilled corncobs or iced tea bought from traveling vendors, romances exchanged, all in an air of street

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[31] In reference to the chapter titled "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness" in bell hooks (1990), cited in Soja (1996: 96-97). See also Nelly Richard's (1987) *Postmodernism and Periphery*, and other influential essays collected in Thomas Docherty's *Postmodernism* (2016).

[32] By 2005, just over 80% of households lived in multigenerational shophouses, typically three-four floors high, with commerce on the first floor (JICA and Hanoi People's Committee 2007b: table 7.2.5). Without cars, 84% of Hanoian households, however, owned motorbikes, with 40% owning more than two (JICA and Hanoi People's Committee 2007b: 5, in section 7). As proof of this distant relationship with car traffic at the beginning of the 2000s, most residential buildings in Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh, were built with only one underground parking floor (Van Son 2021a).

fair (Figures 7 and 8).[33] Urbanization in Hanoi has a history of conflicting back-and-forths between self-organization, planned development, and spontaneous reappropriation of space. It creates slippages between *a priori* and *a posteriori* rapports to city-making and city-living, and between rational and irrational projections of the future.

The important lesson to be adopted from these back-and-forths is that the in-between state of *chưa* arises from both the speed and intensity at which urban changes are desired, proposed, planned, implemented, discarded, made obsolete, and banalized, but also lived; and from the overlaid and hybridized experiences of more than one of these time-spaces at once. Importantly, by maintaining growth as plausible, the state and developers expose the triviality of urban materiality, and that "it is possible to make a great deal of money out of speculation even if the product comes to nothing" (Tsing 2000b:

142). Focusing on more positive beliefs in planning only sharpens the contrast with an agency toward future-making that remains more commonly nurtured, usurped, and arrogated by developmental states, powerful technocrats, developers, planners, and political elites (Bunnell and Goh 2012: 2). Still, the fact that kites are still flown today in My Dinh shows that the chaos that city-making actors aspire to overcome is a chaos they take root in, a chaos they reproduce, and a chaos often best managed by informal empowerment. In that context, to credulously believe the future is not entirely irrational. It is a resilient recognition that Vietnam's urban modernity thrives in this suspension, where the success of planning lies not in its completion but in other, less formal perhaps, capacities to envision and enact futures nonetheless – futures that remain both suspended and, somehow, inevitable.

Figure 7 and Figure 8: *A traveling kite merchant (top), with youths and families gathering at My Dinh square across car lanes (bottom), Nam Tu Liem, Hanoi, 2010*

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[33] Articles from that period portray bustling scenes of youthful love, fun, and crime in the improvised nightlife offered by the new large roads of My Dinh (Kim Quy 2007; Kim Quy and Dinh Tuan 2007).

(Cited in Quang Hanh (2005, July 31). Images source: Nguyen Chi 2010, June 22)

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