

Erik Harms. *Luxury and Rubble: Civility and Dispossession in the New Saigon.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016. 304 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-29251-2.

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Urbanization, redevelopment, and dispossession are a fact of life in many cities around the world, especially in rapidly expanding mega-cities in the Global South. The stories of metropolitan expansion are often told from above—by developers and city planners looking to design inclusive smart cities that raise living standards while accommodating population needs and demographic shifts—or sometimes from below—often as a David-and-Goliath critique of those developers that celebrates the resistance of displaced residents who refuse to quietly succumb to exclusive gentrification. Rarely, however, does one encounter a study that offers a nuanced and multiperspectival approach to the issues, incorporating a multiplicity of voices from across a spectrum of urbanization experiences. This is precisely what Erik Harms deftly achieves in his ethnography of new urban zones in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, by exploring the experiences of both those who are being displaced as well as those who are settling into the luxurious communities built on the rubble of those displaced households.

Luxury and Rubble begins with a thick description of crossing the Phu My Hung suspension bridge connecting Districts Two (Thu Thiem) and Seven (Phu My Hung), both of which are new urban zones built on former “wastelands”—agricultural and natural land once deemed too swampy

and far removed from the center of the city to be worth developing. Harms states that his “primary aim is to show how large-scale urban infrastructure projects become entangled with the lives and aspirations of people living in a rapidly growing city, and to show the role these projects play in the complex political and economic dramas taking place in an urban world increasingly driven by the market logics of real estate development” (p. 2). These market logics are important, because as Harms shows, given the limits on political expression in Vietnam’s one-party communist state, “agitation over land use rights and civility taking place in these two places operates as a surrogate for the kind of political life citizens in other countries normally enjoy” (p. 4). That is, for those who may be confused by the seeming apolitical orientation of a Vietnamese society that once pulled off a contentious political and social revolution, Harms reminds us that we need to go below the surface and listen carefully for where those critical perspectives may have been displaced.

The first half of the book deals with “Luxury,” as Harms inhabits the luxurious District 7 community of Phu My Hung. He spends mornings running with upper-class male professionals who see in the architectural order of planned communities the seeds for a new society where rule of law might prevail over crony connections and

corruption. He relates afternoon discussions with women who reflect on the merits of “civility” and by extension, civilization. He interacts with students who compare Phu My Hung’s modernity with regional urban development successes such as Singapore. Residents generally see in Phu My Hung “a triumph of the human will,” whereby order, hard work and intention can lead to a more developed civil society: “a way of imagining possibilities for new forms of social interaction” (p. 60). Space is perceived as a structure that breeds new forms of civic and individual consciousness. Phu My Hung becomes by extension a model for the rest of Vietnam, where “development” is still an aspiration rather than a lived reality.

The second half of the book deals with the other side of development: “Rubble.” Here, Harms talks with the displaced on the other side of the bridge, in the not-yet-built Thu Thiem district that has been designated to be the new center of Ho Chi Minh City. Here, displaced residents hold on to small parcels of land, literally living in a land of transitory rubble, seemingly without any affective nostalgia for the lifestyles they once practiced. Harms is interested throughout the book in the concept of “wasteland”—how people come to imagine a place, including the very one they live in, as a site devoid of any potential except to be destroyed and redeveloped altogether. It would be wonderful to see this discussion of visionary planning put into further conversation with other studies on so-called wastelands and capitalist development, for example the work on Fordlandia in the Brazilian Amazon by Greg Grandin (2009) and others. In the case of Thu Thiem, Harms finds a temporal waiting game of holding out for higher compensation, where the language of measurements and money becomes the primary mode of discourse among the informants he interacts with. Value, then, becomes transformed through the very lived experience of displacement and encounters with the state: “demolition actually produces an emergent notion of property value and property rights, which in turn frames notions of

justice and ‘rights’ more generally” (p. 187). It forces owners to “recalibrate their own language of affect and sentiment—of the poetic nature of space and place—in a way that allows them to speak in the language of economic value, of development and private property, that governs negotiations over eviction compensation” (p. 187).

Harms’s work tracing emergent forms of personhood, in which conceptions of self are newly linked to ideas of property, is a major contribution to the field of post-/late socialist studies. The 1993 land law that ostensibly (re)introduced the idea of property-owning subjects following the Cold War by allowing “people to buy and sell land use rights in earnest” (p. 5), seems insignificant at first glance, but for a socialist society transformed by revolution, including the very idea of land ownership and identity, it was a significant moment. It is one that has continued to evolve over the last twenty-five years and is at the heart of Vietnam’s current obsessions and tensions with accumulation and value, including the seeming paradox of living in a socialist country governed by a market orientation.

Vietnam’s citizens have had their social worlds overturned and transformed on a generational basis over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and the urban expansions and redevelopments that are happening in Ho Chi Minh City are no exception. Understanding the sociocultural impacts of such processes is no easy task, but Harms and his research team have taken it up with creative and deeply engaged spatial, social, and temporal inquiries.^[1] In the end, Harms’s book offers a remarkably insightful and well-rounded ethnography of emergent urban aspirations, discontents, and imaginaries. The book is well on its way to making a serious and lasting contribution to the social science fields of cultural and economic anthropology, urban sociology, geography, and postsocialist studies, among others.

Note

[1]. A number of Harms's interviews were conducted with Vietnamese research collaborators. He notes in an endnote that for "complex, essentially political, reasons" he is not able to name them due to the sensitivity of urban development in Ho Chi Minh City (p. 230n12).

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