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Beauty as control in the new Saigon:

Eviction, new urban zones, and atomized dissent in a Southeast Asian city

ABSTRACT

The eviction of residents to make way for a "new urban zone" in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, is legitimized by notions of building a beautiful, breathable, and orderly city. Although angry about their unfair treatment in the eviction process, residents ultimately support this discourse of beauty. They challenge eviction through individual squabbles over compensation rates, land measurements, and resettlement sites. In the process, dissent becomes atomized and residents reproduce a mode of valuing land based primarily on monetary value. In this context, notions of beauty, despite having counterhegemonic potential, reproduce rather than challenge core ideals legitimizing the project. [*Vietnam, Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City, urban anthropology, controlling processes, new urban zones*]

On a sweltering, exceedingly humid late October evening in 2010, my friend, whom I will call "Mr. Hùng,"[1] invited me for a ride on his motorbike along a section of Saigon's East–West highway,[2] which had opened to traffic just over a year earlier, on September 2, 2009. The road, which one newspaper called the city's "most beautiful," opened together with Saigon's most visible new project, the soaring Phú Mỹ suspension bridge, which spans the Saigon River and frames the growing city's southeastern horizon. The opening ceremonies coincided with Vietnam's National Day, and the road and bridge paid tribute to Hồ Chí Minh's 1945 Declaration of Independence, which encouraged the Vietnamese people to mobilize their mental and physical strength for nation building. The road itself would later be named after former prime minister Võ Văn Kiệt, a key figure in Vietnam's "open door" embrace of market economics (Mai Vọng 2009).

Hùng, who often complained about the money "wasted" on Hanoi's 1,000-year-anniversary celebrations earlier that month, was no big fan of state spectacle. Yet even he was proud of this new road. As we turned a corner at the end of the narrow streets that make up the old city, tight urban corridors opened out onto the broad lanes of the new highway. Hùng gave his motorbike a bit more gas and directed us onto the wide-open road, where gusts of wind and fresh air transformed the night. He breathed in deeply.

Hùng spoke into his hand, cupping it into a dish that reflected his voice over his shoulder to me, sitting on the back of the motorbike. "This is one of the few good projects the government has carried out," he said. Pointing across the highway and then farther across the Bến Nghé canal that ran beside it to the formerly working-class neighborhood of Khánh Hội, in District 4, he explained that we were riding through what had been one of the worst areas of the city, a den of "social evils" that had been cleared of all residents and residences to make way for this road. "Just feel the air," he said, speeding up. "It's cool here."

Hùng's enthusiasm for the road and his disparaging comments about District 4 took me by surprise. For the previous few days, we had been

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Figure 1. Announcing the plan. Billboards depicting the ambitious plans for the Thủ Thiêm New Urban Zone have been erected throughout the demolition zone. The listed phone numbers encourage residents to seek more information on the project, to ask for help with resettlement procedures, and to report any bad service by cadres or administrators and illegal practices in the compensation process. The master plan depicted was designed by Sasaki and Associates, and the artistic renderings were created by DeSo Architectes. An Lợi Đông ward, District 2, Ho Chi Minh City. Photo by Erik Harms, September 2010.

meeting to discuss his family's forced handover of his ancestral property in nearby Thủ Thiêm ward to Ho Chi Minh City authorities. Located to the south of Saigon's historical city center in District 2, immediately across the Saigon River, Thủ Thiêm was increasingly becoming a vast field of rubble, an expanse of crushed bricks, broken tiles, and other fragments of demolished homes. Since 2002, Ho Chi Minh City planners and developers had been slowly but systematically "razing [this area] to nothing" [*giải tỏa trắng*], preparing to aggressively engineer the area into a blank slate where they will eventually build a new urban zone (Đoan Trang 2005).

Proposals for what is now officially named the Thủ Thiêm New Urban Zone (Khu đô thị mới Thủ Thiêm) require evicting 14,600 households, completely razing all built construction, filling in marshes and streams, and then reconstructing 737 hectares of land to create office space, luxury high-rise apartment housing, new public squares, riverfront walks, and pedestrian promenades framed by commercial storefronts. Space will be defined by the voids formed between and around high-rise buildings ranging from ten to 40 stories (P.P.H. 2010). Planners expect the zone to accommodate 130,000 permanent residents and to service approximately one million people who will come and go each day to work and play in the area (Việt Hùng and Đ. Huân 2006). With several new bridges and an underground tunnel directly linking Thủ Thiêm with District 1, the project explicitly aims to shift Saigon's urban center of gravity. The Saigon River will no longer mark the edge of the city but will course through its heart. Saigon, a city once known as the "Pearl of the Orient" and the "Paris of the East," will finally have its Seine.[3] (See Figure 1.)

The very spot where Hùng had taken me was part of this larger plan. The road beneath our motorbike would soon connect this side of Saigon via a tunnel beneath the river with Hùng's own neighborhood in Thủ Thiêm.[4] The fates of Hùng, other people in Thủ Thiêm, and the people displaced from District 4 were clearly connected by larger processes of urban restructuring that included this road. Yet, as far as Hùng was concerned, they had nothing in common.

Whereas he liked the development projects he saw transforming District 4, Hùng was not happy with what was happening to him in Thủ Thiêm. He and his family were angry about what they considered inadequate levels of compensation, and he had spent the previous few days lamenting the general sense in which project authorities were denying the humanity and cultural vibrancy of people in Thủ Thiêm. Like many other people I interviewed, he said local authorities were deliberately mismeasuring residents' plots of land and pocketing the difference between the total amount of land that they claimed to be compensating for the project and what was officially paid out to individual households. Hùng complained that the low levels of compensation were causing bickering in his family and destroying his neighborhood by dispersing his friends all over the city. Like other neighborhoods standing in the way of the new urban zone, this part of Thủ Thiêm was being demolished, one house at a time, as households came to individualized agreements with project authorities. Every case was different. Some households had full and complete paperwork documenting their land-use rights; others did not. Most households could demonstrate long-term residence, but some were deemed illegal squatters. Some had more ambiguous histories, having arrived in Thủ Thiêm at different periods, sometimes officially and sometimes not. Some households had historical ties to the former Saigon regime; others were headed by heroes of the war against the Americans. Some were well-off, some poor. Some lived in homes built atop land reclaimed from canals, others on land classified as agricultural or on officially sanctioned "urban land." Although every household faced the threat of eviction, each unique circumstance demanded unique negotiations.

If every situation was unique, Hùng's discontent was not. Before Hùng took me on this ride, I had spent the previous month and a half working with Vietnamese anthropologists in Thủ Thiêm on a project in which we ultimately conducted over 120 unstructured, in-depth interviews about peoples' experiences there. Apart from a handful of residents who managed to profit from clever land transactions and investment opportunities made possible by the project, the vast majority of Thủ Thiêm residents expressed deep exasperation about their impending fate. Hùng was part of a network of close friends I developed during fieldwork in the rubble, all of whom expressed great resentment about their impending eviction.

But at this moment, while enjoying the fresh air along the East–West highway, which had recently cut its way through Khánh Hội, Hùng only mentioned the beauty of the finished project. He showed little sympathy for the residents there, who, under circumstances not unlike his own, had been forced to relocate. Khánh Hội, he said, had been a zone of "rats' nests" *(nhà ổ chuột)*. Removing the stilt houses and crowded neighborhoods that previously lined the banks of the Bến Nghé canal was, according to Hùng, the right thing to do. The results, he said, were beautiful.

Beauty as control

Hùng's comments merit sustained attention because this notion of building a beautiful city full of fresh air is precisely the same idea used to justify the displacement of Thủ Thiêm residents—people just like Hùng. Although Thủ Thiêm has been and continues to be a vibrant community full of life, culture, meandering canals, and expanses of fresh air (Tôn Nữ Quỳnh Trân 2010), the powerful idea of creating a modern city with grand buildings framing breathable and beautiful open spaces largely overshadows the plight of those who must give up their way of life to make this vision possible. Beauty and fresh air, as anthropologists, historians, and urbanists have noted elsewhere, are often used to legitimize the "spatial cleansing" of urban populations (Appaduari 2000; Davis 1992; Herzfeld 2006, 2010; Low 1997, 2001; Rademacher 2008; Waldrop 2004). Postcolonial planners and bureaucrats deploy urban programs very similar to the colonial improvement strategies that once dominated urban populations by enforcing hygiene, order, and beauty (Anderson 1995).

Critical urban studies have shown that discourses of beauty can and often do support the agendas of dominant elites. In this article, I focus on how beauty has come to operate as a mechanism of control. I argue that ideas of beautification can be transformed into modes of control precisely because they appear not to be top-down, because their meanings are highly fluid, and because they are coded as "positive" and resonate deeply with people at different stations in social life. They work because people believe in them. Ideas of urban beauty are neither simply top-down impositions nor unambiguously counterhegemonic; even if they reproduce visions of state simplification associated with elite assertions of power, they can signal hopes, desires, pleasures, and even alternative sets of values. Ideas of beautification can express agency because they allow people to feel like they have a stake in new urban projects that promise to improve the cities and nations they live in. But they can also be important parts of the legitimizing structures used to displace people from their land.

Alternative aesthetic possibilities need not always collapse into dichotomies of domination versus resistance. The same person might appreciate the clean lines of a modern boulevard and the beauty of ebullient street life. One might praise the beauty of a planned community designed by skilled professional architects and the humble vernacular of a traditional community hall *(đình)*. Thủ Thiêm residents expressed appreciation for such unquantifiable qualities as river breezes, familiar bends in meandering canals, and, in one case, the way the same bent coconut tree framed generations of family photographs taken at the same spot along a familiar crooked pathway. Like the Thủ Thiêm residents themselves, that coconut tree will not be included in the new urban zone. Yet even as they knew they would be displaced by the project, the family in the photos saw no contradiction in describing the designs of the project as beautiful too. The designs themselves are depicted on posters erected atop the rubble of the demolished homes of their former neighbors. The family can admire the bold lines and majestic sweeps in the architectural renderings of Thủ Thiêm's proposed pedestrian promenade. But they also describe the Thủ Thiêm they are about to lose as a space of tranquil wetlands, a site of nostalgia, and a place of close-knit sociality blessed by its unique proximity to both nature and the cosmopolitan center of the city.

Although residents hold complex ideas of beauty that cannot be reduced to the aesthetic vision of planners alone, they do not reject the view that the proposed new urban zone is beautiful. Instead, residents resist the specifics associated with their personal experience of eviction and displacement while expressing a general enthusiasm for urban development as a beautiful ideal. People are angry about being displaced from Thủ Thiêm, but they are, remarkably, not angry about the idea of building a new urban zone characterized by certain "modern" ideas of rational planning and order, which they, like project planners, see as beautiful. For Thủ Thiêm residents, the devil is in the details. Their anger and resistance is largely directed toward atomized, immediate concerns, in particular, toward individualized squabbles over compensation rates, land measurement, and resettlement.

As residents turn their attention to fights for just compensation, they begin to describe beauty differently. The more they fight over square meters and money, the more their ideas of beauty become flattened and aligned with those presented by the state. Alternative, highly subjective conceptions of beauty become subordinated to more "objective" debates about just compensation. In the process, beauty as a source of polyvalent, potentially counterhegemonic possibilities slips incrementally into beauty as control. There is a logic to this: Resisting unjust compensation requires speaking in a language of objective numbers and formal legal claims. Residents learn to fight the objectifying projects of the state with the seemingly objective language of enumeration, measurement, calculation, and legal documentation. In the process, as neighborhoods and residents become reduced to objectified case files, this very language

of objectivity colors the way they articulate visions of urban beauty.

This article moves through three parts to contextualize the way Thủ Thiêm residents align themselves with particular ideas of urban beautification at the same time that they struggle against eviction. First, I present ethnographic examples from my research in Thủ Thiêm that support what other scholars have noted in Vietnam more generally: Vietnamese citizens have, since the mid- to late 1990s, increasingly voiced their opposition to state-led eviction projects (Labbé 2011; Luong 2005; Nguyen Vu Hoang in press), most vociferously in northern rural contexts and more loosely in the south (Luong 2010:276). Thủ Thiêm residents are not passive but are actively engaged in many acts of everyday and overt resistance to top-down development projects (Scott 1985; Scott and Kerkvliet 1986; White 1986). Their persistent demands for higher compensation payments show a disdain for overt regulation that has been documented throughout Vietnam (Koh 2006; Leshkowich 2005; Thomas 2002). Thủ Thiêm residents do not simply acquiesce but engage in the kind of "everyday politics" and resistance that previously undermined Vietnamese collective agriculture (Kerkvliet 2005).

Their actions have not, however, fundamentally changed government policy toward urban development. Although compensation rates have risen marginally, the tactic of appropriating land to finance urban development (Du Huynh and Ngo 2010; Hsing 2010) has increased rather than decreased. Between 1995 and 2009, when "resistance" to eviction began to emerge most visibly, over 1,090 urban development projects were implemented in Ho Chi Minh City alone, affecting 165,000 households and evicting 61,000. Many projects have been impeded by difficult negotiations over compensation, but these troubles have not slowed down the creation of new development projects as a whole. City authorities plan to implement nearly 500 projects between 2011 and 2015, evicting and resettling around 83 thousand households (Phúc Huy 2010). If these figures are borne out, a third again as many people will be evicted in this five-year period as were evicted in the preceding 15 years.

In the second part of the article, I describe the pervasive ideology of beauty, fresh air, and order by focusing on the development discourse surrounding the Thủ Thiêm project. I show how this discourse of beautification, as in many colonial and postcolonial contexts, underscores a quest to impose order and render urban space governable and legible (Scott 1998) as well as to assert simplified conceptions of what counts as modern urban life (Ferguson 1997, 1999), narrowly conceived as something planned and governed by experts (Mitchell 2002). The discourse described in this section is largely an official one that conflates beauty with order and control. In the third part of the article, the words and actions of my informants reveal that, despite their very real anger about the ways displacement and resettlement programs are carried out and despite their ability to conceptualize their land in ways that do not conflate beauty with order and control, they do not directly challenge the discourse of building a beautiful, cool, and breathable city commonly associated with the top-down dreams of architects, planners, and city authorities. Although ideologies of beauty appear at first glance to be top-down discourses designed to legitimize dominant agendas, Thủ Thiêm residents ultimately agree with the concepts of beauty promoted by planners, architects, and state authorities.

Mr. Hùng's ambivalent relationship to city beautification reflects a larger ambivalence in contemporary Ho Chi Minh City. Great numbers of people both resent the disruptions of urbanization and applaud them. The desire to introduce beauty and order onto the urban landscape appears most clearly in the visions of planners and urban developers. But these sentiments also appear among many urban residents from all walks of life. This view even appeared in the reactions of young Vietnamese anthropology students who conducted interviews in Thủ Thiêm as part of an undergraduate project led by a Vietnamese colleague of mine. As they learned about the intimate details of lives upturned by the eviction process, the students added their own reflections to their interview transcripts. Nearly all of the students expressed sadness about the difficult circumstances faced by their fellow citizens in Thủ Thiêm. But they also expressed hopes that the project would improve urban life. The following student comment was typical: "I hope that . . . the Thủ Thiêm project will be completely fulfilled" and that it "will bring forth an aesthetic, fresh and beautiful face for the city" [*đem lại bộ mặt mĩ quan và tươi đẹp cho thành phố*] (Transcript 20110410_TT_TT_14).

This search for "an aesthetic, fresh and beautiful face for the city" exemplifies what Laura Nader (1997) calls a "controlling process." The controlling-processes approach seeks less to theorize power and control as abstract concepts than to focus attention on particular ethnographic, historical, and political contexts (Nader 1997). That Thủ Thiêm residents both challenge and reproduce structures of power shows how hegemony, ideology, and domination are always entwined with resistance and agency. Anthropologists do not need to choose between these terms and pick sides in a theoretical race to define the nature of consciousness or continually reinvent the concept of "power." Instead, the controlling-processes approach "allows the incorporation of the full panoply of key concepts—ideology, hegemony, social and cultural control—in the study of both invisible and visible aspects of power working vertically through ideas and institutions" (Nader 1997:712). The very meaning of beauty changes according to context, and ethnography is especially suited to track those subtle, contextual changes. In the case of Thủ Thiêm, the very act of fighting for just compensation leads people to align

themselves with the dominant conceptualization of beauty. Acts of resistance unwittingly support an ideology; agency reproduces a structure of hegemony. Like Nader's concept of "harmony ideology" (1990:291), "beauty" need not by nature be a form of control, and it has counterhegemonic potential. Explaining beauty as control requires elucidating the many "microprocesses" that allow us to study "how individuals and groups are persuaded to participate in their own domination or, alternatively, to resist it" (Nader 1997:712). The theory must come from the ethnography. In this case, the dispossessed of the new Saigon are dispossessed by beauty, suffocating in the quest for fresh air. Yet beauty and fresh air continue to rank high among the things they want to see more of.

Exasperation

The people living in the neighborhoods surrounding Hùng's house in Thủ Thiêm ward of District 2 are not happy. By the end of 2010 and throughout 2011, the area had become a vast zone of rubble and demolished homes, interspersed with the homes of those who had not yet agreed to relocate. Official reports indicate that close to 85 percent of the land had been cleared by early 2010 (P.P.H. 2010). Yet, by mid-2011, thousands of people continued to inhabit the rubble, amongst the debris and the detritus of urban demolition, attempting with great resilience to continue living as they had lived until the plan began. Cafés set up on top of the rubble were full of customers, and many of the families who had officially moved away had come back and set up temporary shelters directly on top of their demolished homes. In interview after interview, they described themselves as *bú'c xúc,* which I gloss as "exasperated." This term was most commonly used in contexts when anger welled up in the face of bureaucratic entanglements or injustices. A person might feel bú'c xúc after receiving a statement detailing compensation payments much lower than expected or after waiting months for a reply to a petition sent to the compensation authorities. The term plays on the double meaning of *bú'c* as both "force" and "oppressive"; the word *xúc* indicates a sense or a feeling. *Bú'c xúc* expresses something close to "feeling pressed by oppressive force into a sense of exasperated distress." Nearly everyone I met in Thủ Thiêm felt this distressed sense of oppressive exasperation. (See Figures 2 and 3.)

Why are they bú'c xúc? As these people explained, their exasperation stemmed from the low levels of compensation they were being offered or, for those who had already left the area, from being out of work and feeling alien in their new resettlement homes. Many of those who had already moved from the area continued to come back because it was the only way to make a living. Those who had moved to resettlement areas said there was no work there, and those who had managed to purchase property in new neighborhoods found it difficult to insert themselves into the existing

Figure 2. Residents continue to live in the rubble as eviction proceeds, house by individual house, in Thủ Thiêm. They also participate in the dismantling of their own homes. Thủ Thiêm ward, District 2, Ho Chi Minh City. Photo by Erik Harms, September 2010.

Figure 3. The view from Thủ Thiêm looking toward Saigon's District 1. The Saigon River separates the rubble fields of eviction in District 2 from the increasingly prosperous urban development in the city's oldest and most prosperous district. The 68-story Bitexco Financial Tower not only symbolizes the new direction Saigon real estate developers hope to lead the city but can also be seen looming above the rubble from any position in Thủ Thiêm. Thủ Thiêm ward, District 2, Ho Chi Minh City. Photo by Erik Harms, September 2010.

communities (Castiglioni et al. 2010). Oftentimes, displaced people arrive in a new neighborhood only to find that the market for their skills or services has already been filled. There is no space in a saturated market for another noodle vendor, motorbike repairman, barber, sundry shop, or sidewalk café. They will, at best, struggle to find customers and, at worst, suffer from violent reprisals from existing business owners not keen to compete with a new arrival. Many other long-time residents of Thủ Thiêm work across the river in Saigon, just a short, five-minute ferry ride away. Displaced to zones on the distant outskirts of the city, they now suffer from burdensome commutes that undermine what were once viable modes of existence. The schools in the new areas are lower quality than those in Thủ Thiêm, and

parents continue to carry their youngest children to and from the schools in their former neighborhoods. Older children must drive across the city to attend university or go to work. Infrastructure in many of the new sites remains rudimentary.

Many of the people who have moved are forced to live in areas not normally designed for human habitation and often possess extremely tenuous land rights. One family, for example, built a home on a plot carved out of a cemetery in Đồng Nai province, well beyond the city limits. With their low compensation, they could not find any affordable housing within the city and, with no formal land-use permit, were forced to settle for this distant piece of land surrounded by tombstones. They had been led to believe that they would be offered a small amount of additional compensation, reserved for those forced to move beyond the city's administrative limits. But because the paperwork for the cemetery land they purchased was not officially sanctioned, none of the local officials would agree to notarize the form verifying that they had moved to the new neighborhood. They ended up penniless, living with ghosts, and with no basis to claim the extra compensation (Field notes 2010.10.29_TT24).

Many displaced residents simply cannot survive with the terms they have been given. Given the current skyrocketing cost of land in all the areas surrounding the Thủ Thiêm project, as well as the rising value of the dollar and global gold prices against the Vietnamese *đồng,* they simply cannot find another affordable place to live with the level of compensation offered, despite increases in compensation rates over the course of the project. Even though inadequate compensation and subpar resettlement options leave them in desperate circumstances, many residents, nevertheless, want to believe the ambitious claims of project developers. A 45-year-old woman who moved to one of the resettlement apartment buildings in 2009 after living for 30 years in Thủ Thiêm said that, when she first heard details about the new urban zone project back in 2007, she believed it would improve her life. But things did not turn out as planned:

> At the beginning, when they would call the neighborhood group *(tổ dân phố)* into a meeting, the authorities would come down to all the places and persuade the people to move. They painted a picture of a beautiful future *(vẽ ra một viễn cảnh tốt đẹp)* with appropriate amounts of compensation, of going to new cool and spacious suburban residential zones *(khu dân cư vùng ven thoáng mát),* without traffic jams, and with cheap land prices and modern high-rise apartment buildings with many different price levels and apartment styles so that the people could choose according to their ability. At that time, even several large landowners from the resettlement areas as well as the owners of apartment buildings came. They pledged that any household that agreed to move and sign the papers would be able to retain the original price of land from that period, and that they would wait until the people completed the paperwork for handing over their land and home. So it was, but when the people agreed to move, the authorities dawdled with the procedures. When the people went to the ward *(phường)* they were sent to the district *(quận),* when they went to the district they were sent down to the ward. These superfluous procedures took more than a whole year. By the time the people had the compensation money in hand, land prices had risen dizzyingly *(chóng mặt).* Then the landowners in the resettlement areas and the apartment building owners calmly replied, "It's obvious that the land prices have gone up because it's been more than a year, and besides, everyone is worried about finding a place to buy, where is the land going to come from?" I and all the people were tired out by the procedures, and then there was this added news about the land prices rising, so we were all exasperated (bú'c xúc), worried while standing, worried while sitting *(lo đú'ng lo ngồi).*[5] My own family had to lay out close to another 100 million in order to have enough to buy an apartment in the apartment buildings. Every household had to face the burden of looking for new places. The procedures were superfluous and complex. The compensation was not appropriate. Land prices rose high. The people had to struggle in order to find shelter. At the beginning, a lot of people were overly bú'c xúc, they decided to just refuse to move *(ở'lì),* but then afterwards they were also forced to leave because the steamrollers and the backhoes would come boom booming, and then the next day the house would be tilted off the foundation, unlivable. My kids both work in District 1 and have to commute twice as far compared to when we lived in the old house. But we are forced to bear it, what else can one do! [Transcript 20110324_TT_CCB27_01]

What began as promises of a more beautiful future eventually turned into a charade of false promises, bungled bureaucratic procedures, and forced eviction. Despite the obvious frustration, in the above statement and countless others like it, residents do not critique the "picture of a beautiful future" originally described. Their anger is directed at the failure to deliver on that promise and, most directly, at the nitty-gritty details of the process—rising land prices, inappropriate compensation levels, and bureaucratic red tape.

The sense of exasperation is even more pronounced in areas where people have smaller plots of land and where the compensation will not provide them with enough to buy a spot in a new apartment building, much less purchase a new plot of land to rebuild a home. In a neighborhood originally built to house state employees of the railroad and the electricity companies, my research assistants and I spoke about the situation with three women in their fifties sitting at a sugarcane-juice stand. Noting the large swaths of rubble surrounding their nearby homes, we asked them why

they had chosen to remain when their neighbors had already left. Their answer was simple: "[There is] not enough money to buy anything. Where can we go? Where is the money to buy [a new place]?"

Then they started giving examples of how they had been offered absurdly low compensation rates for their homes because the authorities had deemed their land-use-right papers incomplete:

> I was only offered 7 million [about $350].
>
> I was only offered 15 million [about $750].
>
> Me, 25 million [$1,250].

With land prices exceeding 20 million đồng per square meter in surrounding areas, the total compensation offered for their homes would not be enough to purchase a single square meter.

A man sitting nearby jumped into our conversation, adding to the complaints. He said he had gone to serve the revolution *(đi cách mạng)* when he was 14 years old, in Bến Tre province. He paused for effect and then added with a whisper that forced me to lean in, "Had I known the government would be like this, I would never have joined the revolution."

But why, we asked, have some people already gone? He answered, "They have been fooled" [*Họ bị lừa*]. He then described how he was losing a 55-square-meter home but was only being offered compensation of 41 million (around $2,000). He had purchased his land in 1992 but had not built the house until 2001. The authorities claimed that he had come after the plan had been announced and would only give him minimal compensation.

"The compensation isn't even enough to buy a tomb," he said.

He was not going to leave. "I had to carry and shoot a gun when I was 14," he said. "Now I'm over 50. What do I have left to be afraid of?" The authorities, he said, were *gian ác* (dishonest and cruel). The people, he said, were bú'c xúc.

These low compensation rates do not represent all of the cases in Thủ Thiêm. The official policies entail complex calculations based on the size of the property in question, whether land is classified as urban or rural, whether it is classified as river or canal land, how many households are registered as living on the property, and how long a household has lived in a particular home.[6] Furthermore, compensation rates have changed over time, as the project has progressed through various stages. In 2002, when the compensation and eviction process began, the base land values used to calculate compensation for living land *(đất ở)* facing a roadway could not exceed 3,600,000 đồng or be less than 2,500,000 đồng per square meter. For land not facing roadways, the value would be reduced to 60 to 80 percent of that base value but not less than 2,000,000 đồng per square meter. Status as a revolutionary hero, heroic mother, or disabled veteran would entitle some to additional compensation, but residents who had illegally occupied or squatted on *(chiếm dụng)* land before 1993 would only receive 30 percent of the base rate, those who came between 1993 and 1998 would only receive 15 percent, and those who came after 1998 would receive nothing. People like the former revolutionary from Bến Tre, who came before 1992 but only built his home in 2001, were subject to the discretionary whims of the compensation authorities. Furthermore, land classified as agricultural land would only be compensated at 150,000–200,000 đồng per square meter.[7] All of these minute and systematically itemized calculations are issued to residents by the district people's committee in the form of statements formally detailing their compensation rights *(bảng chiết tính)*. In these statements, exhaustive calculations are accompanied by long lists of citations to the legal texts that form the basis for them. These detailed statements effectively direct people's attention to basic questions of calculation: "Why this much for a mango tree?" Why didn't they count that part of my property?" "How can they call this agricultural land, when I've lived here without farming anything for 30 years?"

In 2006, recognizing that few residents were accepting these terms, the authorities raised compensation rates significantly. Although land values were not adjusted, a new form of compensation—called "assistance money" *(tiền hỗ trợ)*—was added to the equation. In this new system, in addition to the base compensation rates established in 2002, households would receive an additional four million đồng per square meter. In 2009, with large numbers of residents still refusing to leave, the assistance money was raised to 16 million đồng per square meter, so that the total compensation levels amounted to an average of more than 18 million đồng per square meter of living land.[8] Rumors circulating in 2010 and 2011 indicated that many residents expected rates to soon rise, to totals around 20 million đồng (about $1,000) per square meter.

This process of increasing compensation rates, however, has itself been complicated by the economics of land and development in today's Ho Chi Minh City. The very zoning plans and development projects that displace people themselves contribute to land speculation and rising land values that almost immediately render the compensation inadequate. The destruction of existing housing jumpstarts a process of price escalation that itself transforms the way people relate to their land (Kim 2004). Even as compensation rates increase, the rise in surrounding land values continually makes them insufficient. At the same time that compensation rates rose to over 18 million đồng per square meter, land prices in surrounding areas rose to well over 20 million, not including the expense of building a home and rebuilding a life. Calculating loss simply in terms of monetary compensation for appropriated land and resettlement costs ignores longer-term losses in income

and income-generating social networks. It also ignores more complex, nonquantifiable values associated with place and home (Logan and Molotch 2007). Nevertheless, the very process of compensation and the context of rapidly rising land values in the city almost universally led residents to focus their attention on money and measurement, which always guided the core of their complaints. Even households receiving full compensation at the new rates could still legitimately complain: Where is the money to buy a new place? Residents less circumspect in their language were more direct, saying the people's land was being stolen *(cướp đất của dân)*.

Even the handful of residents who have made out well reveal how difficult it is for those who have been left with nothing. Mr. Du, a northerner in his early forties who once ran an electronics repair shop on Thủ Thiêm's main road, successfully relocated to District 2's densely populated and commercially active Bình Trưng Đông ward. A graduate of a Ho Chi Minh City technical college who always carried several different newspapers and enjoyed discussing world events, Du told me he made out well because he was "smart." He knew from his avid newspaper reading that land values around new urban zone projects always increased, and thus he bought land in Bình Trưng Đông immediately after hearing about the project there, while it was still cheap. Whereas the compensation payments his neighbors received were not enough to purchase resettlement land, Du's compensation was about ten times what he paid for his land. If Du was a happy exception to the myriad cases of people who felt cheated by insufficient compensation, he also proves the rule. The same rising land prices that so pleased him were bringing great misery to his neighbors.

Du was not exasperated. He had made out well. Yet the pleasure he felt highlights something important about the kind of anger expressed by those dissatisfied by the circumstances of evictions in Thủ Thiêm. Interview transcripts and field notes reveal that residents were not angry about the larger project per se. Instead, residents expressed anger about the effects the project had on their individual households. The focus on individual household compensation led primarily to a fragmentation of interests and little sense that residents had a shared plight. In this context of individualized, fragmented contestation, they still described the project itself as beautiful.

Beauty

In October of 2005, at a conference introducing the project to foreign consultants and potential investors, Trần Du Lịch, one of Vietnam's most influential economists and the head of the Ho Chi Minh City Economics Institute, called for pragmatic action on the Thủ Thiêm development. Describing the project, he explained, "It is very beautiful, very modern. But at this time the Thủ Thiêm New Urban Zone remains just a drawing on paper. What do we need to do in order to turn this drawing into reality?" (Đoan Trang 2005).

The challenge contemporary Vietnamese planners have set for themselves is precisely this: taking "very beautiful, very modern" ideas on paper and making them real. Paying close attention to the meaning and realization of beauty in the development of places like Thủ Thiêm helps explain why residents can feel angry about their experiences at the same time that they support the very government development projects displacing them. Urban beauty is a semantically slippery but positively valued trait that focuses on the anticipated future-oriented creation of orderliness while masking and distancing itself from historically, economically, and politically inflected displacements needed to achieve it. Ideas of beautification operate as modes of control precisely because they allow different people with different stakes in a project to feel they believe in them and understand them as "positive" concepts that resonate with their own interests, even when they do not. In contemporary Vietnamese "socialism with a market-orientation," beauty is "used as a masking device, a legitimizing strategy, or as a model of social life" (Nader 1994:8). It recalls what Li Zhang and Aihwa Ong have described in China as techniques of "neoliberal governmentality," in which authority depends on aligning individual desires with core ideologies. In such contexts, "the burgeoning private interests rooted in control over property, land, money, business, and labor power are involved in the radicalization of personal power over others and new norms of class and social privileges" (Zhang and Ong 2008:16). As seen in Zhang's (2010) work, the creation of an urban "paradise" not only enables a rising middle class to emerge through the displacement of less powerful individuals but also produces a new kind of social control largely depicted through the lens of positively charged terms such as *freedom, consumer choice,* and *harmony* (cf. Nader 1990). Similar techniques operate in Vietnam, where Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương (2008) has shown how state power depends both on coercion and the incitement to achieve pleasure through self-mastery. When neoliberalism and authoritarianism mingle, the production of beautiful urban spaces both masks and reinforces assertions of power.

At the same time that Thủ Thiêm residents claimed that they were often pressured *(ép)* through the use of forceful mobilization tactics such as propaganda campaigns and the constant threat of forced removal *(cưỡng chế),* newspaper announcements asserted that "beauty" inspired the search for the design of the public square in Thủ Thiêm. In 2008, the Investment and Construction Authority for the Thủ Thiêm New Urban Area held an international urban design contest with the goal of "searching for a beautiful face for Ho Chi Minh City's central area" and soliciting plans for Thủ Thiêm's main public square (An Nhiên and Nguyên Thảo 2007). The winning design, developed by Paris-based DeSo

Architectes, depicts an imagined future that explicitly combines commercial activity with highly ordered public space. With a meandering tributary of the Saigon River coursing through its center, DeSo's design forms a linear park laid down between rows of tall modern high-rises, all plastered with commercial advertisements. As the Thủ Thiêm website enthuses, "The interior docks and the platform above the basins have been articulated with programs and linked to the commercial facades of the Thủ Thiêm District." In this way, the void formed between the facades of commercial buildings becomes a site for the square itself. Between these buildings, the statement continues, "a large valley resituates a climatic environment defined by the dominant East-West winds and creates the conditions of a microclimate capable of reducing the ambient temperature" (Ban Quản lý Khu Thủ Thiêm 2009). Khương Văn Mười, the chairman of the Ho Chi Minh City Architects Association, expressed unreserved enthusiasm for the new project, citing the importance of public space in fostering civic life: "A large city very much needs an empty space, with low density in order to 'breathe'" (Hy Hiếu 2009).

The logic of an orderly, open, and breathable city that drives this plan seemed to infuse the pleasing deep breaths Hùng took as he drove me along the East–West highway on that sweltering October day. Building a beautiful city with open spaces in which to breathe drives urban development in the new Saigon and is ultimately tied to a larger sense of fostering urban order, a goal with a long history in Vietnamese cities (Drummond 1999, 2000; Leshkowich 2005) as well as other socialist and postsocialist cities (Siu 2007). Bringing about this beauty and order, however, requires both the massive displacement of people and the suppression of alternative aesthetic visions. It thus becomes the job of planners and managers to govern people through spatial design, and development authorities see themselves engaged, quite literally, in the art of governance. Walter Benjamin noted this conflation of art and power in his discussions of Baron Haussmann, whose vision of Paris "corresponded to the tendency which was noticeable again and again during the 19th century, to ennoble technical exigencies with artistic aims" (1968:86).

Like Haussmann's Parisian boulevards, the current Vietnamese vision of urban beauty is a technical exigency. This form of beauty depends on demolishing disorderly, unplanned urban buildings, displacing people, and bringing clean lines to the city. In August 2009, an architect named Nguyễn Trọng Huấn expressed this idea when he penned a critique of urban development in Ho Chi Minh City that appeared in the *Tuổi Trẻ (Youth)* newspaper: "Too many architectures hustle and compete with each other to rise up in the center which is each day becoming more cramped. Inspiration abounds, only beauty is lacking; the beauty of an urban space that has been organized, which has culture" (2009). These words not only reveal the quest for beauty but also purport to reveal beauty's essence, as something organized. This aesthetic theory of order is quite common in Vietnam.[9] Order, furthermore, is coupled with culture, which in Vietnam represents disciplinary comportment and ideological complicity with elite knowledge (Harms 2011:19–24; Ninh 2002). Beauty, in turn, is assigned meaning via circular links with associated terms, often adjectives lined up in a series: The city should be "green, clean, and beautiful" *(xanh, sạch, đẹp);* a beautiful city is orderly and has culture; culture is orderly and beautiful. The city is beautiful because it is modern.

In official depictions printed on billboards, posters, stickers, and investment brochures and in newspaper articles, the meaning of urban beauty is not so much defined as asserted through association. Planners refer to the hiring of French and Japanese American consulting architects for key design phases and constantly mobilize architectural renderings produced by these firms on billboards and in real-estate literature, image-rich websites, and videos. They also compare their efforts to those achieved in that other famous "Paris of the East," Shanghai, where the development of Pudong provides a frequently cited model and inspiration. A 2006 article in *Tuổi Trẻ* called Thủ Thiêm "a modern Pudong along the banks of the Saigon River," and Vũ Hùng Việt, the chief of the Thủ Thiêm New Urban Zone Investment and Construction Authority, enthusiastically claimed that the project will create "a modern, wide open central zone with the primary function of serving as a high end financial, commercial and service center for central Ho Chi Minh City" (Đoan Trang 2006). Ubiquitous in their use, terms like *modern* and *beautiful* blur into each other, assuming meaning through their association with each other and with concepts of rational order and economic development.

The comparisons with Pudong link building a beautiful city with creating what Saskia Sassen (1994:15–16) has identified as the core financial and service functions of the global city. Since instituting the *đổi mới* (renovation) reforms in the second half of the 1980s, and especially since the 1990s, Vietnam has aggressively positioned itself as a key site for the kinds of production-oriented activity associated with the geography of global capitalism, allotting significant land and tax breaks to industrial zones, export processing zones, and hi-tech districts (Malesky 2009). Such liberalizing economic moves, while often heralded as part of a larger democratization process, have mostly benefited entrenched political actors who parlay position into economic gain (Gainsborough 2010). The development of high-end new urban zones is both a symptom of and contributor to increased social stratification along spatial lines in Vietnamese cities (Douglass and Huang 2007; Waibel 2006; Wust et al. 2002). Thủ Thiêm itself signals a desire among Vietnamese leaders to move beyond production to capture economies of circulation, distribution, and consumption as

well (Zukin 2002). As in China, where the state has increasingly styled itself a "socialist land master" (Hsing 2010), the most effective Vietnamese "industry" for both asserting state power and capitalizing on investments is real estate (Kim 2008). "Beautiful" new urban developments in Vietnam are, like those in China, made possible by aggressive acts of "accumulation through dispossession" (Harvey 2005:178–179).

Beauty is also defined in opposition to "spontaneous unplanned urbanization" *(đô thị hóa tụ phát),* which is described as "ugly." In my interviews with them, architects, planners, developers, and real-estate agents associated the beauty of the Thủ Thiêm plan with the fact that it was "orderly," "unified," "synchronous," and "comprehensive." They valued the idea that there was a single master plan designed by a single firm with unified purpose, but they worried that divergent interests might undermine the singular vision by parceling up the land. In this context, planners and real-estate developers tended to see Thủ Thiêm residents largely as impediments, somewhat comparable to inhabitants of the so-called nail houses who refuse to leave eviction zones in China (Hess 2010). Planners often complain that the longer they wait, the more land values will rise (requiring higher compensation) and the more the project will lose on interest payments to bank loans taken to finance it (G.H. 2011). They say they will not be able to attract investors until all the land is cleared, which might undercut their ability to carry out the unified plan. Expenses rise with each passing day, which means they may have to parcel up the project to attract smaller investors, compromising the singular vision. But, more importantly, they fear that implementing the vision outlined in the master plan will be threatened by a proliferation of competing interests that might undermine the orderliness of the project. Beauty, in all of these examples, is defined in terms of achieving controlled order in the face of chaos. It acquires meaning through association (it is a singular plan) and dissociation (it is not unplanned). The official understanding of beauty amounts to reductionist syllogisms: Control brings order, order is beautiful, beauty is control. Even though such flattened conceptions of beauty do not capture the full complexity of aesthetic possibilities that Thủ Thiêm residents might express, it is striking how commonly residents themselves accept such conceptions of beauty when describing the new urban zone.

Resisting the details but still hoping for beauty

This link between conceptions of beauty as a kind of regularized, predictable form of order and the grand orderly ambitions of building a beautiful city with space to breathe recalls Hùng on his motorbike. It also recalls other residents in Thủ Thiêm. As he breathed in the fresh air, Hùng also noted how the problems of social disorder in District 4 had been solved by demolishing the unruly slums, paving them over with new roadways, and resettling the people who lived there. Hùng's comments showed that he had very little sense of solidarity with other city residents facing dilemmas similar to his. They also reveal a certain ambivalence, which is shared by many others grappling with the often-contradictory desire to participate in the construction of a new, more beautiful and breathable city while protecting their own interests. Hùng was angry about his own bad deal in the compensation process, but he was not angry about the larger agenda of reconstructing Ho Chi Minh City. On the one hand, most residents, like Hùng, express great resentment about the low compensation being offered, while, on the other hand, they affirm their support for the driving aesthetic of the project, which is, as they often state it explicitly, an attempt to build a better and more beautiful future.

This ambivalence is clearly reflected in the example of Duyên, a woman in her midfifties who works for the people's committee of one of the wards *(phường)* in the Thủ Thiêm resettlement zone. Her job is to mobilize residents to move, and yet she herself has not left because of lingering compensation disputes of her own. She complains that land surveyors inaccurately claim her family's land is encroaching on another property. They claim at times that her family home has been built on agricultural land (which is assessed at a very low value) and at times that the land is really a "stream" (which is not entitled to any compensation). Describing her predicament, she lamented the absurdities of the way land was classified. The authorities had arbitrarily changed the side of the stream where her house was supposedly located:

> It's not like my family picked up the original piece of land and the house and then flew over the stream to stick out over the agricultural land. So that's how it is, my family is stuck in this situation. Otherwise we would have gone long ago. . . . They try to convince us to go even earlier, because we've got two Party members in the house as well. . . . We even had to convince my father to move. They persuaded us to move, they called us to the district, but all they did was explain that they were also waiting for solutions from above, so they did not know yet. You see I have 5 siblings: 4 sisters and a brother's family. In total 12 people would have to move, all with that amount of compensation. When we first received the compensation paper with one hundred and seventy something meters, my family would not accept it, and then it was reduced to one hundred sixty something, and we still wouldn't accept it, and now just see how they attempt to measure it as only one hundred and nineteen meters on these land use-rights paper *(sổ đỏ)* they have given us. My father suffered immediately from stress *(bị stress luôn),* immediately got sick and had to go immediately to the

> doctor. I've only now begun to petition [my case], so now I am waiting for a decision and it's not like in the meantime we have some other house to live in. We have been living here since then [before 1975]. Even though now it's [classified as] a stream, all my labor, money, effort spent on it, it should be compensated. As long as they do not solve the problem satisfactorily, we are not going anywhere. They keep up their persuasion tactics, including with the little kids in our house. [Transcript TT3.58_59]

Duyên was angry about the details of her case, and it is clear that she and her father preferred not to leave their home. But it is important to note that she was not angry about the ultimate aims of the project itself. If the settlement terms had been reasonable, she said, "we would have gone long ago." As a long-active member of the local ward-level Women's Association, in fact, Duyên had the job of visiting holdout families and encouraging them to sign the terms of settlement and prepare to move out. She employed on others the very same "persuasion tactics" that she said were used on her. She did this with great enthusiasm, even though her own family remained engaged in a dispute over the measurements of their property, which she said did not accurately reflect the land they really owned. How could she ask other people to move when she herself refused? This was Duyên's major conflict. She agreed with the idea that people must leave. She also knew, intimately, why they could not leave. They could not leave because the compensation was not enough to meet their needs and because they loved Thủ Thiêm.

This love for Thủ Thiêm reveals an alternative aesthetic quite different from the logic of beauty used to legitimate the construction of the new urban zone. To explain why they loved Thủ Thiêm, Duyên and her father described how the area's riverside breezes act like a natural air conditioner:

> Duyên: There's one thing about this place, it's really interesting, it's cool. As if it's something natural. It's not like in the city where it's all stuffy. It's really interesting here; here it's like a natural electric fan. I like it, really like it.
>
> Father: It's really like an air conditioner, an air conditioner (laughing).
>
> D: Yeah, if a guy builds a house, all right, if a guy builds a house . . . then he designs it according to the wind . . . then he'll face it towards the wind on this side so it brings the wind inside. . . .
>
> F: Over in Saigon, say around Bảy Hiền, some of our relatives over there come down here to relax, and they come down here for the cool air, they find it satisfying in this way, and then they're sad when they have to leave. [Transcript TT3.62]

However, when discussing the Thủ Thiêm project itself, Duyên explained that one must also make a sacrifice for the future.

> Well naturally one feels like one has suffered a loss *(bị thiệt thòi),* suffered great losses already. But, enough! We'll sacrifice the previous generation *(đời cha ông)* in order to improve our children's and grandchildren's generation, so that hopefully after this our children and grandchildren in Thủ Thiêm will get things that are better and more beautiful *(những cái tốt đẹp hơn).* [Transcript TT3.67]

Duyên is caught between a very real belief that the project will build a better and more beautiful future and the fact that Thủ Thiêm already offers a beautiful present, full of cool air. In effect, she recognizes that she is exchanging one conception of beauty for another. What begins as ambivalence only turns to anger, however, when she questions the specifics of the mismeasurement of her land, which will directly lead to low compensation levels that will prevent her from ever relocating to a place as pleasant as the place she now lives.

The exchange of sentimental beauty for official conceptions of beauty coincides with discussions of obtaining just compensation. Another resident, a 57-year-old male who had been displaced from part of the East–West highway project running through Thủ Thiêm and was now living in the An Phú section of District 2, expressed very similar sentiments:

> Yeah, it was cool, you could go out by the river and catch the wind. But now if you want to find that youthful period again, well it ain't there at all. Yeah, that's the first thing, and then there's the period during the Tết holidays, the Spring days, and the holidays when we used to comfortably stand outside and watch the fireworks. Just step outside and there they are, step out and there they are. And then now. They're hidden, obscured. That's it. There's lots of memories of things that once were in the old days but now no longer are, you have to look here and there to find the youthful memories of the old days. [Transcript 20110412_TT_TT]

Like Duyên, this man waxed nostalgic about the things he loved in Thủ Thiêm—the wind, "that youthful period," standing outside, memories. However, also like Duyên, in the course of the conversation that followed, he proceeded to subordinate this sense of nostalgic loss to the notion that the project had brought "civilization" *(văn minh)* to the area. And he added that, despite feeling unhappy about many aspects of being moved, it was "policy." "How can a person contest government policy?" He further asserted that, despite obvious losses, "the policy" would make things collectively more beautiful:

> If we compare the new place with the old place then, speaking truthfully, well, my family, like everyone else, liked the old place better of course, because it's the place we buried and cut the umbilical cord, you know.[10] If you leave, it's quite simple that you're going to be sad, don't you agree? But, if it's because of the government policy that demands that one move, then, we're just the people. So how is it possible to complain? It's policy. And then, even more importantly, is that the policy will make the whole nation generally more beautiful.

In discussion after discussion, even though people were exceedingly angry about the conditions of their impending evictions, they consistently ended by aligning themselves with the ideals of beauty driving the project. Even in cases in which respondents began with alternative, potentially counterhegemonic, and often highly subjective aesthetic perspectives on Thủ Thiêm—such as celebrating its cool air, romanticizing its neighborly relationships, or remembering it as the place where one buried the umbilical cord—the conversation always shifted to more quantifiable and seemingly objective discussions of compensation. Whenever the conversation turned, as all conversations about eviction ultimately did, to objective and highly quantified discussions of land value or objective discussions about policy, the conceptualization of beauty also shifted to a more "formal" one that aligned perfectly with the way beauty is conflated with order in official discourse about urban development. In contexts in which they were discussing the monetary value of land and the size of their plots, residents articulated an aesthetic that mimicked official depictions of urban beauty. Instead of challenging the very aesthetic principles of what a beautiful city might look like, they highlighted their own inordinate suffering to fulfill the noble goals of the project. A motorcycle taxi driver, after complaining about the mismeasurement of his land, explained his predicament as follows:

> Naturally, when Thủ Thiêm is finished then it will be really great. The gain is a collective gain for this entire country, not just for our city. There is this thing [however] . . . I think that one has to do what one has to do, but before anything, one has to guarantee that our people come first. At the beginning—and I tell you this so you know—because I'm a *xe ôm* [motorbike taxi] driver, you know, I used to sit around a lot and have conversations in the cafes with the other xe ôm drivers around there. When I first heard that they would rebuild Thủ Thiêm, I was really happy, thinking that someday there would be a time when this side [of the Saigon River] would also be beautiful and rich. Maybe not like District 1, but it would still be as good as District 3 or District 5, or something like that. If it was more populated, then it would be easier to find work. But I didn't suspect that I'd get stuck in all this. If they had given satisfactory compensation, then I think everyone would have volunteered to go. But now, if you cross through Thủ Thiêm, there are still many houses where the people refuse to go, also because they see the compensation as unreasonable, that's all. [Transcript 20110420_TT_ALD_20_35]

As it was for so many of the residents in Thủ Thiêm, the idea of a beautiful and rich future envisioned by the project was not the object of this informant's anger. The problems were all in the details.

A 21-year-old college student who had been displaced from An Lợi Đông ward to resettlement housing in An Khánh ward expressed similar sentiments. On a personal level, she described how she missed the sociality of her former alleyway in Thủ Thiêm, and she also commented that the "structure" *(cấu trúc)* of the resettlement apartment blocks made it difficult for the residents to interact with each other. But she tempered any and all criticism with a much deeper desire to see the development of a modern, well-planned city comparable to international cities elsewhere:

> Come on, I've got an education. So I can understand these government policies. Remember the time when the District 7 area was still out-of-the-way? But now you see it's all crazy developed, right *(phát triển ghê hông)*. I also want this area to become like that. If a country wants to develop well, then it's necessary to implement a respectable urban plan, I mean not the way it's done now. Have you seen Seoul in Korea? It's been called the most beautifully planned [city] in the world. Look at the pictures, watch the films and you'll see it straightaway, it'll make your eyes crazy *(thấy đã con mắt ghê luôn)*.[11] I hope that sometime soon our Vietnam can also be like that. [Transcript 20110427_TT_AK]

Conclusion: Atomized dissent

For those who grew up there, the air had always been cool in Thủ Thiêm. Breathable. Life there was an open-air life, where people would spend much of their time outside, gathering in sidewalk cafes, sitting on leafy, covered platforms above the many waterways, engaging in social life and conversation. Not a single one of the hundreds of homes I visited in the entire displacement zone had, or had ever needed, air-conditioning. But, from the perspective of planners and city authorities, Thủ Thiêm is a blighted space of rudimentary homes and crowded living conditions, which, like District 4 before it, requires the intervention of a grand beautiful plan, with ambitious claims to bring order and a brand-new microclimate to the city. This discourse of bringing beauty to Saigon can, on one level, be read as a classic legitimizing strategy used to displace people from their lands. In the process, it creates the conditions for the kind of spatial segregation documented in so many of the luxury housing enclaves around the

developing world (Appaduari 2000; Caldeira 1999; Renfrew 2004; Waldrop 2004; Zhang 2010). It shares qualities with the gentrification of previously neglected urban areas in already industrialized nations (Davis 1992; Harvey 1989, 2006; Smith 1982), and it appears as another case in which dominant interests assert their rule via claims to expertise (Mitchell 2002). Furthermore, these essentially neoliberal justifications enable blatant land grabs very similar to those that have lined the pockets of real-estate developers, government officials, and speculators in neighboring Southeast Asian nations (Beng-Lan Goh 2002; Herzfeld 2006, 2010; Olds et al. 2002; Springer 2010).

Clearly, powerful interests have much to gain by displacing the people of Thủ Thiêm. Yet it is also impossible to ignore how key elements of the perspective from above hardly differ from the perspectives expressed by those below. In some very important respects, those who "see like a state" (Scott 1998) do not imagine the beauty of the future city in ways wholly different from those who seem to be victimized by state programs. Filip De Boeck, describing very similar top-down development projects that will disenfranchise many of the poorest Kinshasa residents, notes a similar process: "Kinshasa's residents and its leaders do not only share the same longing for a better city, but also, remarkably, often share the same dream of what that city should look like" (2011:278). Farmers facing relocation because of a grandiose urban development project told him, "Yes, we'll be the victims, but still it will be beautiful" (De Boeck 2011:278). Critical ethnographic attention to elite development projects cannot ignore the ways in which these developmental visions resonate with the very populations they seem to be violently displacing. State visions of beauty are not unlike those that Hùng himself expressed to me about District 4 when he took me searching for cool air and open spaces; in the end, he led me to a state-sponsored highway project. The quest to achieve urban beauty and a cool and breathable microclimate is not solely the ambition of architects, planners, and urban authorities. Thủ Thiêm residents also aspire to build a beautiful, orderly city with clean, fresh air for all. They just do not want to be forced from an already cool riverside landscape into fields of rubble or shunted to the dusty and distant factory districts and cemetery lands on the urban fringe to make these utopian urban visions possible.

The official plans and strategies for building the Thủ Thiêm New Urban Zone recall what Herbert Marcuse once described as a "comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom" that "prevails in advanced industrial civilization" (1964:1). More precisely in this case, we see a cool, refreshing, breathable vision that underwrites a massive program of eviction. Breathability and beauty become powerful mechanisms of control precisely because they resonate with those they appear to dispossess. But they lead directly to engagements that are anything but comfortable and smooth. After all, building the new refreshing microclimate requires first making Thủ Thiêm unbearable, reducing it to dusty sun-scorched rubble, and then rebuilding the razed landscape from the ground up. In addition to using agitation techniques and competitive emulation campaigns to mobilize people to tear down their own homes, one of the most powerful steps used to force people out came in late 2010, when workers cut down the rows of shade-bearing *cây bàng (Terminalia catappa)* trees that line the riverfront road. What was once a cool, shaded riverfront road has since been transformed into a blazingly hot and exceedingly dusty expanse of rubble and detritus. The sun now beats down on formerly cool areas with menacing heat. Snake-like tubes run from barges loaded with mountains of river sand dredged from the banks of rivers in the Mekong Delta. These tubes pump in thousands of cubic feet of fill that choke the meandering tributaries, transforming a cool network of canals shaded by water coconut palms into a dry, flat, stiflingly hot landscape ripe for a brand new plan.

Juxtaposed against the expanding fields of rubble, set against the widening wasteland of sun-scorched former waterways, billboards and images of the modern plan stand out like icons of impending beauty, promises of a future to come. Choking on the dust of demolition, no longer shielded from the sun, the residents are increasingly pressed into exasperation (bú'c xúc). As they search for a language to express their exasperation, however, they do not challenge the rhetoric of beauty or the promise of a cool and breathable future. Instead they focus on atomized details. How is the land to be classified? What is the price per square meter? How many square meters can they claim? And they make these claims as individuals, not as a group. Popular resistance is reduced to individualized squabbles over numbers. What looks, from the sky, to be a collective mass of thousands of households sharing a common fate becomes, from the vantage point of the rubble fields themselves, little more than a motley assortment of fragmented individual "case files."

Notes

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1. I have changed the names of all informants.

2. Saigon was formally renamed Ho Chi Minh City by the newly unified National Assembly of the newly named Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1976. Today, many city residents refer to the historical inner-city districts as "Saigon." Usage sometimes, but not always, expresses support or disdain for the Vietnamese Revolution. More often, "Saigon" conveys a sense of place, whereas "Ho Chi Minh City" refers to the city as a formal administrative unit. In this article, my use of "Saigon" and "the new Saigon" highlights common usage in the naming of new real estate developments (e.g., Saigon South, Saigon Pearl, etc.).

3. Christophe Robert notes that this "fantasy" of the river working like the Seine ignores the fact that "the islands in the middle of Paris were original settlements (early common era), and so were BOTH banks" (personal communication 2011). The Saigon River, like most rivers in Vietnamese cities, marks the edge of town instead of coursing through the center. Recent urban plans, in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, and even Danang, however, seem to mark a shift in the way rivers fit into urban landscapes.

4. The Thủ Thiêm tunnel officially opened to traffic on November 20, 2011.

5. This expression means that they were extremely worried.

6. Summary descriptions of the compensation criteria are available in a pamphlet distributed to residents, but detailed justifications require sifting through hundreds of legal pronouncements issued and amended by multiple governmental levels over a period of more than ten years (Ban Bồi Thường Giải Phóng Mặt Bằng Quận 2 [Committee for the Compensation and Liberation of Land Surface in District 2] ca. 2006).

7. These rates were formally set by Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee Decision 135 of 2002.

8. These rates were formally set by Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee Decision 123 of 2006 and Decision 06 of 2009.

9. The association of order and beauty pervades architectural discourse in Hanoi as well. Ngô Huy Giao, writing in an architectural magazine, complained sarcastically about Hanoi's "most beautiful" street being interrupted by too many intersections: "If this is the most beautiful then what is the ugliest like?" (2006:103).

10. Referring to the place where one "buried and cut the umbilical cord" is a nostalgic way of referring to one's birth home.

11. To "see something and make your eyes go crazy" is to be extremely satisfied by something.

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