

The ends of utopia: What can urban ruins tell us about Vietnamese modernisation?

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Abstract:

Protracted US bombing of northern Vietnam obliterated the small industrial city of Vinh. In response, an international group of East German and Vietnamese experts proposed to transform Vinh's Cold War ruins into a model socialist city through visionary planning. Caught between global utopian ambitions and local dystopic conditions, the rebuilt environment fell quickly into obsolescence and ruin. This talk examines the repurposing of architectural models and design practices that circulated between the global socialist North and the decolonizing South to produce an aspirational city of the future in Vinh. The radical rearrangement of space from previous forms of dwelling afforded tenants new sensory, social, and spatial experiences of the city, which were not always desired or welcomed. Residents responded by appropriating decaying modernist forms in ways that alarmed authorities and undermined strategies of urban governance. In the process, ruination emerged as a powerful tool in struggles over public space and the material conditions of urban life.

About the Lecturer:

Dr. Christina Schwenkel is an Associate Professor of Anthropology and Director of Southeast Asian Studies (SEATRiP) at the University of California, Riverside. Her research in Vietnam examines the material, technological, and cultural aftermaths of US imperial violence.