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Reclaiming rights to the socialist city: bureaucratic artefacts and the affective appeal of petitions*

Christina Schwenkel

Abstract: A long history of war and revolution in the industrial city of Vinh has perpetuated cycles of mass destruction followed by urban renewal. This paper examines citizen responses to the shift from post-war socialist urbanization that sought to eradicate inequality to post-reform city planning that advocates private property. It asks: how do urban residents at risk of relocation articulate their rights to the post-socialist city? Tracing the use and circulation of bureaucratic artefacts between citizens, developers and the state, it shows how government documents, far from being mere tools of state regulation, are productive of active, participatory subjectivities and a growing sense of moral-political agency. This agency manifests itself in the collective act of petitioning through which residents contest urban redevelopment and the withdrawal of the state by employing the language of *tình cảm* (sentiment) as an affective tool and logic of bureaucratic rationality.

Keywords: urbanization; bureaucracy; materiality; affect; socialism; Vietnam

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On not having consensus

The Nghê An PetroVietnam Building looms large in the urban landscape of Vinh City. Standing at an impressive 85 metres, the twin towers, each with 25 storeys, replaced the once celebrated Tecco condominium high-rises just down the road, with 18 storeys, as the tallest structure in the city (Figure 1). The foreboding presence of the monumental towers owes as much to the building's clean, modernist facade of steel and glass as it does to its daunting stillness and emptiness, an ominous cultural sign in Vietnam, as vacant lots risk attracting wandering spirits. One January morning in 2011, officials ceremoniously cut the red ribbon to inaugurate the building. Several months later, as the hot summer months approached, the still-empty towers remained eerily dark and sinister against the night sky, though real estate agents maintained that more than two-thirds of the units had already been sold.

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Figure 1. Nghệ An PetroVietnam building, a multifunctional complex with offices in the left tower and residences in the right, 2011. Photo by the author.

The towers' ghostly aura, the space devoid of the vibrant daily activities that unfold in the streets throughout the city, was but one reason why residents in adjacent Quang Trung social housing rejected the building's architectural style and the modern urban lifestyle it promoted.¹ The terms of compensation offered

¹ Quang Trung microdistrict was built with the financial support and technical assistance of East Germany between 1974 and 1980 after US air raids decimated the city during the war. It currently consists of 19 housing blocks in three Areas: A, B and C, each of which is planned for demolition and reconstruction. There are nine neighbourhood wards (*khối*) that comprise the microdistrict, each with 2–3 buildings. The warden or leader of each *khối* is called a *khối trưởng*.

to residents by PetroVietnam, whose next project was to demolish and redevelop Area A of Quang Trung, was another looming spectre. In-kind compensation, in the form of space in a new residential unit in the redeveloped complex, would avoid a lengthy relocation process to a remote area of the city. Residents would instead remain in the city centre where they had lived for 40 years since the end of the war. Yet the rate of settlement offered – 1:1.3, or one square metre in current housing compensated at 1.3 square metres in the new complex – meant that residents would be granted only a portion of a new and larger unit, and would be expected to pay for any additional space at a below-market rate.² For state pensioners living on \$80 a month, who had spent much of their lives working and fighting for the revolution, these terms of settlement seemed absurd and violated the basic tenets of the socialist contract that promised essential social protections and services in recognition of their *công*, or contribution to the nation-state. Residents unanimously rejected the proposed settlement and the project of redevelopment – *chưa đồng thuận*, ‘no consensus’, they resolutely declared – irrespective of the condition of their decaying block housing that had once been an emblem of urban modernity and their own social prestige.

To allay anxieties about reconstruction, municipal authorities and PetroVietnam representatives organized tours of the soaring towers for residents of Ward 2 to



Figure 2. Model for redevelopment of Quang Trung Area A by PetroVietnam, 2011. Photo by the author.

² For example, residents in a 30-square-metre apartment would receive 39 square metres towards a new unit. Footage over this amount would be sold at a reduced market rate of 13.5 million Vietnam *đồng* (VNĐ), or US\$675 per square metre. Given that the smallest units for purchase would be 60 square metres, residents would still be expected to pay for at least 21 square metres, or approximately \$14,000.

introduce them to the benefits of urban redevelopment. A typical tour moved from the lower levels of office and shopping space to higher storeys with upscale (*cao cấp*) apartments in four different floor plans from 93 to 102 square metres, and ended with an expansive view of the city from one of the penthouses. While tour participants were intrigued by the modern facilities and spacious layouts of the units (several times the size of their current living space), they remained sceptical of this new style of urban living, even when shown a proposed model for the redevelopment of Area A with a separate housing block that offered smaller units for resettled residents among the high-end, multi-storey buildings (Figure 2).

When I spoke about the tour to one of the neighbourhood wardens, a former colonel who had fought in Điện Biên Phủ and Saigon, he claimed he was not very impressed with the towers: '*Không hợp lý* [not suitable]!' This was not the first time I had heard this critique from older residents. Pointing to the crumbling facade of his building, A6, he explained: 'Most of us want new housing and a more beautiful city, but we do not want to live in a high-rise'. The design was of particular concern. The apartments were stuffy (*bí*) and not well ventilated (*không thoáng*), he pointed out, comparing the horizontal 'row' (*dãy*) design of Quang Trung and its *external* corridor that enabled the flow of air and natural light through the apartments with the enclosed, vertical layout of the tower and its *interior* hallway that conjoined facing apartments (Figure 3). In order to have privacy, he surmised, the door would have to remain closed, an uncommon practice in Quang Trung when occupants are at home. The lack of ventilation would also necessitate the use of air conditioning, which would mean costly utility bills. Moreover, there were no balconies to dry clothes or conduct morning exercises. 'Perhaps such a lifestyle fits with Europe, but not with Vietnam,' he remarked, unaware that such 'modern' ways of living were sold as distinctly 'urban Asian' in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.³

Despite such reservations, an important objective of the tour was achieved: older residents, the civil servants and workers allocated post-war housing in Quang Trung in reciprocity for their service to the state, became more open to the possibility of resettlement. But much ambivalence remained. The towers sold a particular lifestyle that they could not afford (dryers and air conditioners) and that many rejected outright: modern living entailed new spatial relations associated with the privatization and internalization of everyday life in stark contrast to daily practices in social housing and other urban spaces (Drummond, 2000; Yan, 2003; Harms, 2009). Many older residents have remained emotionally connected to Quang Trung on account of its symbolic historical meaning and the intensely social environment ('and village-like relations', according to one resident) that the design inspired (Schwenkel, 2013). Despite attempts to internalize daily practices (for example, through indoor plumbing), the lines between outside and inside were less rigid in Quang Trung, and much of life unfolded in its corridors, stairways and communal spaces rather than behind closed doors. This was not only because of cramped living spaces, as Drummond (2000, p 2383) has argued in the case of Hanoi, where housing space per person was much less than in Quang Trung, but also because of culturally and historically specific forms of sociality that emerged

³ For example, in a newspaper advertisement for the Sunrise City condominium complex in Ho Chi Minh City, the former Vietnamese ambassador to Korea, in an effort to sell the idea of multi-storey living, claimed that 70% of urban Koreans preferred to live in high-rise apartment buildings.



Figure 3. Open row design of Quang Trung to facilitate natural lighting and air flow (contrast with interior-oriented design in Figure 1), 2010. Photo by the author.

in response to infrastructure breakdown.⁴ For the older generation who have suffered tremendous hardship and loss during and after decades of war, such sociability – from washing clothes together at the well (despite having water and a wash-room in their homes) to sharing a cup of tea at a local kiosk – remains crucial to their quality of life and sense of social well-being. The spatial design of the towers – with their vertical enclosures that inhibited easy movement between public and private space – was believed to stifle these forms of desired sociability.

To impede the dispersal of the community, the warden had come up with a solution: ‘Quang Trung is *đất vàng* (golden land). Why not leave it for the rich people?’ So he sent his idea in the form of a proposal to the Provincial People’s Committee: PetroVietnam should buy a large piece of land out by the airport on Lenin Road, and replicate Quang Trung – all the buildings in the same architectural design. This way, low-income retirees would not have to live among the wealthy (and pay high monthly fees), unless they chose to do so. The replica would still have five storeys, but with larger floor plans and an elevator to accommodate the elderly. Ideally, Quang Trung residents could then keep their sense of community and cultural practices intact. In keeping with the promises of the socialist state, new apartments would be swapped for the old, rather than in-kind compensation combined with payment. The fact that residents would be relegated

⁴ While most families in Quang Trung were allotted an average of four square metres of living space per person in a *khép kín*, or self-contained apartment (with private kitchen and bath), the majority of state employees in Hanoi lived in collective housing with shared facilities with 2–3 square metres per person, as did non-priority workers in Vinh. Vietnam National Archives III, Văn phòng Phủ Thủ Tướng 1954–1985, File 5660.

to the margins of the city, beyond the economic centre that sustains the livelihood of many small-scale, mostly female traders, was not addressed. Although provincial authorities rejected his proposal, the warden was not dissuaded and continued to work with neighbouring tenants and other Quang Trung leaders to petition the government to redress their grievances. The affects generated by the government's response – anger and yet resolve – made him even more determined to be an effective representative who could persuasively convey the neighbourhood's collective demands to investors and city officials.

Conversing through documents

I begin with this story to introduce a number of critical issues in contemporary Vietnamese urbanization extending back to the wars with France and the USA that decimated the country's cities and industry. After the end of the air war in 1973, fraternal socialist countries (such as China, the Soviet Union, East Germany, Cuba and others) assisted northern Vietnam with national reconstruction, including new public housing and infrastructure projects in war-ravaged cities struggling with post-war shortages and rampant population growth. Today, these socialist-era housing estates – referred to as *nhà chung cư* – are in dire need of upgrading and repair, if not demolition, given their critical assessment as 'structurally dangerous'. In Hanoi alone, all 23 *nhà chung cư* have been identified as requiring urgent '*cải tạo, xây dựng lại*', or renovation and reconstruction (Hải Yến, 2006, p 10). But how can new sources of capital be mobilized for large-scale public projects when municipal governments in poor provincial cities such as Vinh do not have the resources to underwrite redevelopment? To encourage investments in low-income housing (as opposed to the oversaturated market in luxury properties), local governments have increasingly turned to private business to finance public infrastructure projects, an arrangement that Annette Kim (2008) refers to as 'fiscal socialism', in which both partners – the state and the enterprise – stand to benefit, usually at the expense of displaced populations.⁵

Such was the case in Quang Trung, where three joint stock corporations (in which the government has controlling stakes) proposed the razing and redevelopment of Areas A, B and C. As in other urban enclaves undergoing rapid growth, payment of just compensation to land and property owners has become a political hot topic, or *điểm nóng* (Kim, 2011; DiGregorio, 2011; Harms, 2012). At issue in Vinh, however, was not only insufficient in-kind compensation that residents felt was an affront to their social and political contributions to socialist nation-building, but also the concurrent process of privatization of state property. As witnessed during fieldwork in the housing blocks in 2010–2011, residents were obliged to purchase their state-allocated apartments as per Decree 61/CP from 1994, transforming *user rights (quyền sử dụng)* into *bona fide ownership (sở hữu)*,⁶ an idea they supported in concept, but not in *how* it was carried out and what it entailed: namely, the exchange of capital, rather than the *gratis* transfer of property. These parallel processes meant that residents were subjected to a practice of dispossession

⁵ As the Vice-Director of a real estate company in Ho Chi Minh City lamented in the daily *Đất Việt*: 'The construction of social housing is the responsibility of the State, but has fallen increasingly onto the shoulders of private business' (Đình Sơn, 2011, p 11).

⁶ This ownership refers to physical structures – the apartment – only. Land, which belongs to 'the people' and is administered by the state, remains restricted to user rights only.

after accumulation: they reluctantly paid for their apartments only to have them slated for demolition. While their newfound ownership did give them increased bargaining power, it did not grant them the right to stop reconstruction entirely. Residents could – and did – however, contest the terms of the agreement. In recent years there have been a number of grievances filed across the city of Vinh linked to land and property claims that resulted in a number of public acts of civic engagement that I witnessed during my fieldwork. Citizens protested at the Provincial People's Committee. They attended public meetings. They refused to move out of their homes. They told their stories to the press. And they filed formal appeals and complaints. Through these political acts, they laid claim to the city, decrying the adverse effects that privatization and the retreat of the state had on their communities.

Scholars have argued that such civic acts are a form of resistance or 'talking back to the state' (Kim, 2011) for citizens involved in land and property disputes, particularly in urban areas where new political spaces have emerged (Wells-Dang, 2010). In the case of Quang Trung, to avoid pitting an abstract 'local government' against an all-encompassing 'the people', I have found it more useful to think in terms of dynamic assemblages formed through interactions rather than opposing sides. Inspired by the work of scholars such as Bennett (2010), Latour (2005) and McFarlane (2011), I am interested in the diverse alignments and realignments of (uneven and unequal) forces that connect persons to one another as well as to things – the various actors and artefacts that make up the assemblage – to understand better how bureaucratic and material practices intersect with residents, developers and government officials to enable particular alliances, forms of agency and imaginations of the city. For example, in July 2011, I met Thành, who was living on the edge of Quang Trung in a small concrete structure between two development projects. Thành was ill and had recently been released from the hospital. Although the developers demanded that he should vacate the property so they could demolish his home (and video business), Thành refused and wrote an imploring letter to the local authorities explaining that he was poor and sickly and had nowhere to go with his wife and young son. A local official intervened on his behalf owing to feelings of *thông cảm*, or sympathy for Thành's situation, and the developers eventually shelved their request. During my last contact with Thành in 2013, he and his family were still in their home, now sandwiched between a new memorial park and a multistorey cinema complex. 'My case is still not settled,' he told me with a laugh of disbelief, though his family had been able to profit from their precarious existence by turning the front of their dwelling into a popular breakfast venue, reaffirming the potential of urban assemblages to generate alternative possibilities as shifting components realign themselves to reconstitute the agency of the interactive whole (McFarlane, 2011, pp 652–653).

Yet cases such as Thành's are more the exception than they are the norm.⁷ State bureaucracy increasingly serves corporate interests and their investments in urban development, rather than protecting and providing for the needs of citizens, marking a significant ideological shift from socialist to emergent market forms of urbanism.

⁷ Thành had no apparent social networks that could explain the intervention and display of *thông cảm*. In fact, his *lý lịch*, or autobiographical account of his background, was very unlike that of exemplary cadres who might have been able to work their connections: he had lived abroad in (East) Germany and Russia unlawfully for a number of years, involved in illicit trade activities, and then returned to Vinh in 1998 to set up a small business dubbing music cassettes, and later CDs. As of January 2015, Thành and his family were still in the same dwelling.

Thành's case does reveal, however, a critical facet of urban governance worth exploring here: that Vietnamese state bureaucracy does not govern society exclusively through the rule of reason and the rational application of lawful regulation. It also governs populations through the 'distribution of sentiment' that produces altruistic, and yet potentially risky, political effects and affects (Stoler, 2004, p 5). Scholars of Vietnam have long noted the role of empathy and compassion in the flexible application of the law at lower levels of administration (Malarney, 1997; Koh, 2006; Endres, 2014) – what I refer to here as *rule by sentiment*. As Malarney observed in a rural commune, effective political leaders are those considered to be 'rich in sentiment', who express solidarity with the population through virtuous acts that may bend the rules to avoid inflicting hardship (1997, p 912; see also Koh, 2006, pp 19–20), even as such acts may transform potentially corrupt 'exceptions' into legitimate, moral practice (Endres, 2014, p 619). This helps to explain the anger and scepticism that surfaced among Quang Trung residents in response to proposals for redevelopment and the state's apparent indifference to their plight. The affective power of bureaucratic artefacts, such as blueprints, master plans and state decrees, and their ability to generate and transmit intense emotion, shows how governmentality and its socio-technical practices for managing populations is itself affectively charged, as Navaro-Yashin has argued (2007, p 97).

Rule by sentiment, or what Gupta (2012, p 24) has called a 'politics of care' is arbitrary and inconsistent in its effects. It also operates more frequently at the lower tiers of public administration where affective bonds between constituencies and their leaders tend to be stronger and more immediate. In many instances, the lines between state and citizen are blurred, as bureaucrats in one context are also subjects of the state in another, serving as mediators of state–society relations (Koh, 2006, pp 8–9). The *khối trưởng*, for example, is at once a state representative and a resident of Quang Trung; thus his passion for representing his ward in negotiations over urban development was motivated by benefits for tenants, which included himself and his family. In the context of a smaller city such as Vinh, it is important to note the broadly shared experiences of an air war that demolished the city and left the majority of the population homeless. As the first housing project built on the post-war urban landscape, Quang Trung provided modern apartments and basic urban infrastructure to thousands of 'priority' (*ưu tiên*) workers, veterans and cadres. Today it is a neighbourhood known for its concentration of 'policy families' (*gia đình chính sách*), including victims of Agent Orange, wives and children of martyrs, war invalids, etc – families that tend to be among the city's poorest. Consequently, rule by sentiment, rather than replacing formalized practices of bureaucratic rationality, at times became the *raison d'être* of rational legal thinking. Thus, officials overlooked innocuous policy violations in Quang Trung, such as animal husbandry in the apartments, out of *thông cảm* for residents' struggle with endemic poverty – a situation to which they could also relate (Schwenkel, 2014, p 170).

So it was not with casual indifference that bureaucrats carried out plans for urban redevelopment. At the district-level People's Committee, several officials expressed a genuine concern for the living conditions of residents and the desire to improve their lives – beyond that of the higher-level Municipal People's Committee where more rational–technical modes of governance underpinned institutional practices. Yet as Gupta (2012, p 23) has pointed out with regard to poverty reduc-

tion programmes in India, regardless of well-intentioned bureaucrats and their humanist ideals, the bureaucratic–legal apparatus itself stands in the way of real change. Likewise in Quang Trung, the very procedures of bureaucracy served to upend practices of compassionate rule and, in turn, expectations of state benevolence and care.

In what follows, I trace this bureaucracy and its technocratic practices through the circulation of documents that inform and contest urban development. I take my cue from scholars such as Hull (2012), Riles (2006) and Navaro-Yashin (2007) to examine how graphic artefacts become active agents imbued with affective powers that mediate communication and transform the relations between state and non-state actors. As ‘affectively loaded phenomena’ (Navaro-Yashin, 2007, p 81), documents act and provoke not as singular forces, but through dynamic interactions that are constitutive of broader associations (Hull, 2012, p 18). Thinking about documents as a connecting node in a wider bureaucratic assemblage allows for a more productive approach to understanding how documentary practices, from petitions to government decrees, are constitutive of a *conversation* (ongoing and responsive) between citizens and state, rather than a *confrontation* (transitory and reactive). Conversing through documents is not always effective – citizens often dismiss government regulations, and petitions seldom attain their objective. But it is highly *affective*; and yet, regardless of the ambivalence, anger or distress, individual and collective groups of citizens continue to appeal to government to resolve their grievances. Older residents in Quang Trung take seriously state discourses of ‘socialist democracy’, compelling them towards particular forms of political participation and to claiming certain rights to the city they feel they have earned through years of wartime and post-war service to the state.

In the next sections, I analyse this conversation as a form of bureaucratic communication that unfolded through a repertoire of political acts and the artefacts they spawned. Using bureaucratic objects to tell the entwined story of urban governance and attempts to thwart redevelopment, the ethnographic subject becomes bureaucratic practice itself, along with the impassioned public responses it engendered (Feldman, 2008; Riles, 2006; Hull, 2012; Gupta, 2012). To undertake this analysis, I focus on documents at two stages in the technocratic process of denationalization and the transfer of property rights to the lawful inhabitants of the housing blocks. In the first instance, I examine how citizens encountered the state through the circulation of official documents, including government decisions and decrees, which, in Foucauldian-like operations of power, interpellated Quang Trung residents as bureaucratized subjects of the state (Reed, 2006, p 158). Yet government documents were not simply tools of coercion and control; they were also productive of particular affects that inspired new collectivities and forms of political subjectivity. As Leshkovich (2014, p 145) has argued, socialist technologies of documentation in Vietnam may ‘constitute reality, but they can also inscribe new forms of agency as they travel’ across time and space, and between individuals, developers and officials.

In the second instance, I focus on how residents responded to and engaged the state by enacting – if not mimicking – bureaucratic practices through the collective work of petitioning. As Hull (2012, p 93) has observed in Islamabad, in Quang Trung, ‘the material production of petitions [became] part of the enactment of political subjectivity’ as residents demanded recognition of their entitlements as

citizens with ‘outstanding achievements’ (*thành tích xuất sắc*). In so doing, they appealed to, and employed the language of *tình cảm* (sentiment) as an affective tool and logic of bureaucratic rationality. Together, the circulation of graphic documents – government decrees and the petitions they elicited – facilitated a cycle of ‘affective interaction’ (Navaro-Yashin, 2007) that was generative of political action and yet highly gendered, a point that is often left out of the literature. For women, bureaucratic artefacts provoked sentiments of apathy and indifference, as if they had lost hope in the efficacy of socialist governmentality. Men, on the other hand, exhibited more intense emotional responses, and at times even a glimmer of cautious optimism. Such gendered differences, though not absolute, reveal some of the varied affects that are transmitted through bureaucratic documents when held, read, stored, written and debated.

Encountering the state

One of the more dynamic places to meet and briefly converse with neighbours in Quang Trung is at the base of the stairways by the *bảng thông báo*, or noticeboards (Figure 4). For the ethnographer, there is no better place to grasp the pulse of the neighbourhood. From health advice and posted maintenance fees to announcements of national holidays and Fatherland Front meetings, the boards remind occupants of their duties and responsibilities as citizens and community members in grass-roots efforts towards socialist nation-building. ‘One hundred percent of the households will hang the flag for Hùng Kings Day!’ the chalk-written message on the blackboard in my stairway instructed one day (though only 50% complied, it was noted several days later). The *thông báo* boards are an integral part of everyday life in Quang Trung. As material artefacts of statecraft that assist in the biopolitical project of population management, they hail residents as moral subjects and beneficiaries of state protections while regulating social conduct and daily activities. The boards constitute the main bureaucratic object through which occupants regularly encounter the paternal state – informing them when electricity bills are due and when monthly pensions are available for collection. Through the logic of bureaucratic transparency (combined with the coercive threat of social shaming), they enforce the performance of good citizenship, for example, by posting figures on donations made by individual households to support disadvantaged families on Agent Orange Memorial Day or the tsunami fund for the displaced in Japan. Equally important, the boards help to sustain affective bonds to place and community through appeals to collective work (such as cleaning the common areas) and announcements of festivities (for example, mid-autumn festival) and even ‘*tin buồn*’, or death notices.

Though simple in design, *thông báo* boards are an important technology of governance that can be found in administrative neighbourhoods throughout Vietnam. In Quang Trung, the boards consistently inform residents of new regulations from national to local levels of jurisdiction. Simple and yet powerful in their affirmation of state authority, they mark a sanctified, bureaucratic space off-limits to all but select government representatives – namely, the wardens and building leaders who are mediators of state and party messages.⁸ If a government decree was

⁸ Though the market was slowly making its presence felt by people who hung ads without permission (which were later removed).

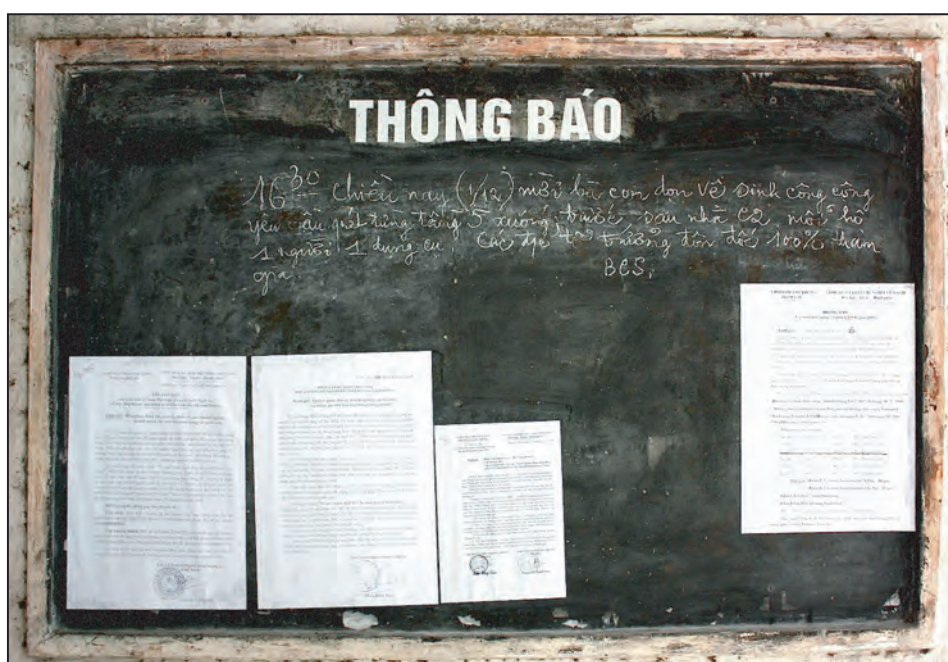


Figure 4. *Thông báo* (noticeboard), Quang Trung housing, 2011.
Photo by the author.

important, they posted it. If it was posted, residents paid attention. As a state artefact that facilitated communication between government and citizens, the boards placed residents into an active subject position that many rejected outright: ‘Tonight is a meeting: EVERYONE is expected to attend’ (though few showed up, prompting the building leader to knock on doors to gather residents). Official documents, on the other hand, were less intrusive and yielded more affective power and emotional responses from residents, who were spurred to action or debate after their posting. With their red-stamped seals, monotonous script in large black type, uniform letterheads and lack of authorship, posted documents projected an authoritative image of the efficacy and legitimacy of government institutions, and yet engendered much ambivalence, anxiety and uncertainty among those who complied with them. Although written in clear prose free of legal jargon, for many residents, the meaning and implications of new regulations were far from transparent.

My daily routine in Quang Trung included making the rounds of *thông báo* boards across the housing estate – rotating between Areas A, B and C and photographing their multimedia content, from chalk inscriptions to photocopies of official documents. The chance meetings I had with residents at these locations allowed me to meet new neighbours or see old acquaintances, and inquire about new decrees and regulations. One day, after visiting friends in Ward 9, I spotted a new provincial government announcement taped to the board, informing residents about impending relocation. Concerned, I secured a copy and ascended to the fourth floor of building C9 to the apartment of Bà Hương, who worked in the market selling home-made foodstuffs. I found Hương sitting on the floor cutting thin

pieces of bamboo to make ties for *bánh chưng* rice cakes she would sell that afternoon. I showed her the announcement. She looked briefly, and dismissed it with a wave of the hand. ‘Aren’t you worried?’ I asked. She shook her head, no: ‘It’s like this. Yes I am concerned about having to relocate. But they have been talking about this for five years now. That’s Vietnam. All talk and no action. I’ll worry when it happens.’ Soon her husband, Ông Minh, an injured war veteran, joined us. She told him about the announcement and, with a chuckle, explained how it had alarmed me. Minh walked over to a cabinet, took out a small plastic bag – commonly used to store important documents and protect them from the humidity – and removed Decision 553, entitled ‘On compensation, support, and resettlement during land clearance and reconstruction of Quang Trung’ from several months earlier, dated 5 November 2010. He pointed to Chapter 2 and explained:

‘Your announcement belongs to this Decision. Look here. It says that we’ll receive compensation of 1.3 square meters in a new apartment for every square meter we now live in. But that is not enough! *Dân không nhất trí!* [The people do not agree!] We demand a compensation rate of at least 1.5, or even up to 2. What they are doing is illegal! They need to confer with the people, and the people need to agree!’

Minh’s impassioned outburst took me by surprise, and yet signalled the differential affectivities experienced by handlers of documents embroiled in dynamic socio-political assemblages. On the one hand, the announcement generated affects of indifference in Hương, who refused to engage with or even handle the document. On the other hand, in Minh’s grip, it elicited an affectively charged and angry response that culminated in irate allegations of unlawful activity. For others, the deep and infuriating sense of betrayal conveyed through the documents took a toll on their personal health. One renowned doctor who had spent the war struggling to save lives in evacuated zones while lacking sufficient medicine or equipment, explained that he was afflicted by illness after the circulation of 61/CP and Decision 553: ‘I am so exhausted from the stress of the situation that it has made me ill. I can barely talk about it anymore. It has given me high blood pressure. After all I have done for the state. *Mệt thôi* [I am so tired].’ These examples demonstrate the broad range of affective interactions that residents have in their transactions with official documents, and likewise, the uneven agency that such bureaucratic artefacts possess to act upon and provoke others to act (Riles, 2006, p 21). As Navaro-Yashin (2007, p 81) has argued, documents are ‘capable of carrying, containing, or inciting affective energies when transacted or put to use in specific webs of social relations’. Documents, in other words, are not docile objects; nor are they simply a ‘top-down exercise in governmentality’, as Leshkovich (2014, p 145) has argued of the social work case file in Vietnam. Minh’s response is of particular interest here, for it shows how such affectivities – the rush of anger and frustration he felt when handling and discussing the documents – can form the basis of a new political subjectivity that is generative of collective action based on a belief in the collective rights of residents to negotiate and reach a consensus with investors and the state.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the remaking of urban space under neoliberal reforms and increasing socioeconomic stratification have intensified around

the globe, especially in late and post-socialist countries with emerging middle classes. Yet even the new urban poor – those who once possessed social prestige under socialist regimes like residents in Quang Trung – are themselves seduced by images of urban growth and the promise of progress and betterment (Laszczkowski, 2011). Because new cityscapes rekindle hope and desire for a more prosperous future, they may also rouse the political consciousness of disgruntled and marginalized residents, as seen with Minh's outraged rejection of the ordinance on property compensation. This expression of agency is not simply reactive; it is not in response to bureaucratic directives on redevelopment alone. As scholars have argued, objects do not act or provoke independently; their 'actancy' becomes manifest in ever-evolving assemblages that are reconstituted through the introduction and regrouping of new elements. In other words, assemblages – and the agential force they wield – are never stable. The urban assemblage that hinged on the cycle of bureaucratic communication in Vinh was likewise transformed in 2011 and 2012 with the introduction of a new and powerful form of documentation: the *bia đỏ*, or 'red certificate' that legally affirms property ownership. As a highly desired bureaucratic artefact (counter to the dreaded decree), *bia đỏ* had a quasi-sacred, almost talismanic quality to them: they were imagined as powerful (and empowering) state objects with transformative properties that could act and affect significant change when in the possession of the legal inhabitants of Quang Trung.

The privatization of state property in accordance with 61/CP was the first step in a larger process of urban spatial restructuring of social housing. In accordance with Vietnamese law, land clearance and resettlement could not proceed until the transfer of ownership from the state to the citizen, as confirmed by the *bia đỏ*, had taken place. The *bia đỏ* conferred certain rights and status on residents in the housing blocks, such as the right to negotiate with investors and the right to refuse their proposals. 'You must have the ownership certificate in order to negotiate,' the *khối trưởng* of Ward 3 explained, 'only then can a dialogue begin'. A war veteran in C7, removing his *bia đỏ* from a plastic bag and placing it gently on the table, told me with hopeful pride: 'This certificate gives me certain rights, fundamental rights (*quyền cơ sở*) that I did not have before. They cannot deceive me anymore.' Legally, investors could not begin demolition until they had attained a two-thirds majority voter approval. Those in the minority would be obliged to follow the community as per the collective decision-making process. Yet a consensus had been reached: residents had agreed *not* to agree with the proposed terms of compensation and resettlement. In the next section, I trace the resulting techniques of political engagement that transpired in response to government decrees, and how they changed over time as residents experimented with grass-roots practices of what Hull (2012, p 256) calls 'participatory bureaucracy'. As a collective response to one of the greatest disruptions in their lives since the end of the war, Quang Trung residents – the older men in particular – organized to become strategic political actors who engaged with and held the state, with its rhetoric of rights and gratitude, accountable by mimicking bureaucratic language and style in the collective act of petitioning.

Engaging the state

While the *thông báo* boards facilitated chance interactions between neighbours and passing remarks about posted information, Bà Xuân's tea stall outside B5 was

a gathering place for longer and more heated conversations. It is where I spent many of my mornings talking to residents and listening to their concerns about 61/CP and other neighbourhood issues over cups of hot tea. One spring morning in 2011, the discussion turned to the matter of apartment prices, which had been posted that week on boards across Quang Trung. There had been much anxiety over the past months leading up to this moment. After the numbers were released, residents approached the boards with much anticipation, paper and pencil in hand to write down the figures for their units. Many walked away silent; others be-moaned errors, such as the recorded square metreage of the apartment. Some ended up at Xuân's kiosk.

On this particular morning, I was visiting Bà Mai, head of the local Women's Union, and Bà Mỹ, who often complained about government corruption, as Xuân was preparing the tea. The women were comparing the amount of money they each owed to the state to transfer ownership of their apartments: Xuân, who lived on the fourth floor, owed 30 million VNĐ (US\$1,500); Mai on the fifth floor, 29 million VNĐ (US\$1,450), and Mỹ on the first floor – the most expensive – 61 million VNĐ (US\$3,050). Xuân and Mai were extremely distressed ('*Bị bức xúc nhiều!*');⁹ both lived on retirement salaries of less than US\$100 per month and had no way to pay what for them was an exorbitant price. Mỹ announced that her son in Germany had promised to send her the money. A few moments later, Ông Tuấn from the neighbouring block stopped by and reported that his apartment would cost him 58 million VNĐ (US\$2,900).¹⁰ He also was unsure how he would secure that kind of money.

The residents felt duped. They had initially liked the idea of 61/CP, until they saw the amount they were obliged to pay and the meagre deductions they would receive based on years of service to the state. They demanded to know how retirees could be expected to pay for apartments they had lived in for more than 30 years, allocated to them on account of their labour and service to the country. One warden, for instance, had served in the army's special command forces for 45 years. Xuân, on the other hand, had spent 25 years varnishing wood at a state wood-working factory. It was commonly suggested that the apartments should be gifted (*tặng*) to people in reciprocity for their loyalty and sacrifice for the nation. After all, they reminded me, Quang Trung had been a post-war solidarity 'gift' from East Germany. And the state could not in good conscience sell what had been gifted to others, one resident surmised, echoing a classic Maussian observation that a gift should not enter into the exchange economy as a commodity.

The topic at Xuân's tea stall turned to the deductions that the state offered per year of state employment: 100,000 VNĐ, or US\$5. Mai criticized this amount as ridiculously low, indicating that the figures were based on a decree issued in 1998: '100,000 VNĐ does not buy much these days. In 1998, you could purchase many kilos of rice for that amount. Not today. They should adjust the rate to 300,000–400,000 VNĐ to reflect current prices.' 'And increase the [resettlement]

⁹ On *bức xúc* as exasperation in response to bureaucratic actions perceived to be unjust, see Harms, 2012.

¹⁰ Price per square metre was calculated according to floor level and condition of the building. Average price per square metre for the first floor was 1.5 million VNĐ (US\$75); 1.14 million VNĐ (US\$57) for the second floor; 960,000 VNĐ for the third floor (US\$48); 800,000 VNĐ (US\$40) for the fourth floor; and 600,000 VNĐ (US\$30) for the fifth floor, usually the most dilapidated.

compensation rate to 1.5,' Xuân chimed in. Apartment prices and rates of in-kind compensation – these were two ubiquitous concerns that never failed to spark heated debate. Tuấn stood up suddenly to depart and told me to wait. A few minutes later he reappeared with a set of papers in hand – two petitions that the *khối trưởng* had sent to local officials at the District, Municipal and Provincial People's Committees, dated October 2010 and April 2011. Only the second appeal had been answered, though their demands for lower apartment prices and higher rates of in-kind compensation – which would have fulfilled the socialist state's promise of free housing – had not been met. 'Lừa đảo! [Such deception!]' Mỹ declared as the petitions, and the response from the state, were passed around the table.

Over the following months, as I listened to similar dialogues unfold in homes and communal spaces across Quang Trung, I came to see petitions, submitted by all nine wardens, as an important bureaucratic device with which residents engaged the state and state policy, and in the process crafted – and refined – their own political subjectivities. Petitions did not seek to undermine local government or even the project of urban redevelopment. On the contrary, their efficacy – not in terms of results achieved (which were few), but in politicizing and organizing the occupants of social housing – was demonstrated precisely because petitions worked within rather than against the system of socialist governance to demand more transparency and a louder voice in urbanizing processes. In other words, petitions were expressions of dissatisfaction but also loyalty, and ultimately reaffirmed the authority of the state as residents sought to claim certain rights to the city through negotiation rather than confrontation. As Harvey (2012, p 3) has argued, drawing on Lefebvre, to claim such rights is to assert 'power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and remade ...'. And while the sense of empowerment and agency enabled by the collective drafting, signing, circulation and dissemination of petitions was at best ephemeral, such actions did succeed in projecting an image to local government of an organized citizenry with the ability to articulate and assert its collective interests. Petitions thus emerged as the performative embodiment of political subjecthood-in-the-making. I say 'in-the-making' to bring attention to the temporal dimensions involved in the process of becoming effective political and bureaucratic actors, as seen in a comparative analysis of two successive periods of petitioning that took place during fieldwork: autumn 2010 and spring 2011.

From a purely visual perspective, at first glance there is little to differentiate the petition from a government order, as it replicates a set of graphic conventions typically found in official forms of documentation (Figure 5). Aesthetically, the style of presentation is analogous, and both convey a sense of officialdom and rational-legal authority, for example, in the bold, block-letter heading centred towards the top of the page, which announces the document's categorical purpose. The format and arrangement of text are likewise standardized across both types of documents, with the petition adopting the national motto found in the upper right-hand corner of government papers – 'Socialist Republic of Vietnam: Independence, Freedom and Happiness' – to position the appeal squarely within the bureaucratic system of state socialism. The official red seal that affirms government approval and passage of the paper through proper bureaucratic channels – an emblem of statecraft absent from petitions – serves as an administrative marker to delineate the origins and status of documents and the direction of their circulation (top-down versus bottom-up).

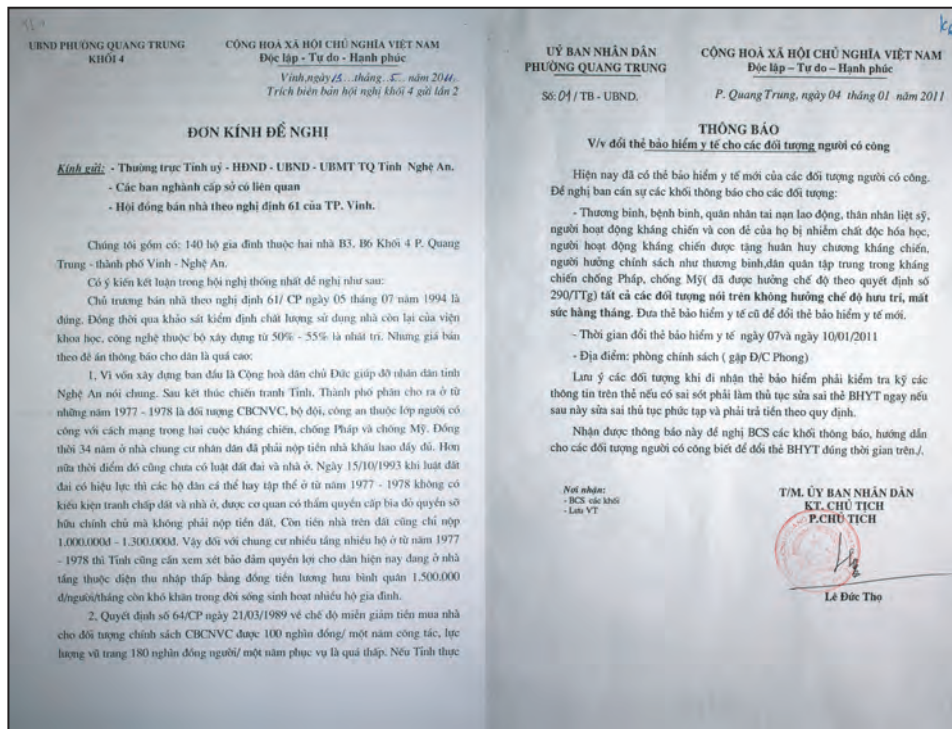


Figure 5. Mimicking bureaucratic conventions of documentation: Ward 4 petition (left) and government announcement by the District People’s Committee (right), 2011.

Linguistically, the petition mimics the bureaucratic rationality of the developmental state, and includes an appeal to sentiment as a basis for its arguments. The language is typically deferential and patriotic, as Hull (2012, p 93) also notes in the case of Islamabad: for example, the cordial term *kính* (respectfully) is used to reaffirm the hierarchical order (wardens being lower-ranked than district, municipal and provincial authorities) and maintain the boundaries between citizen and government.¹¹ Petition organizers make no claims to individual authorship, but instead emphasize collective representation using party–state discourse such as *nhân dân* to invoke the moral figure of ‘the people’. There are usually multiple signatories on a petition who are themselves both residents *and* state bureaucrats, including ward leaders, secretaries, and representatives of the Fatherland Front. On a few occasions, residents also signed petitions as a common interest group, allowing individual names and apartment units to be linked to anonymous ‘*cư dân*’, or residents (Figure 6). To emphasize petitioning as *collective* action, the appeals are typically presented as a summary of public discussions that have taken place during local neighbourhood meetings.

Petitions were most effective in appropriating state language to appeal to sentiment and to evoke the rule of law through the use of both sympathy and technical–legal rationality, often in tandem with one another. A typical strategy employed across petitions was to remind officials that the poorest workers and

¹¹ Such as *kính gửi* (respectfully addressed to) and *kính mong* (respectfully desire).

cadres, the ones who fought in two resistance wars to ‘liberate the country, build socialism, and defend the Party and democratic state rule,’ as one petition read, were most adversely affected by urban redevelopment. The logic of science – from calculations of inflation to measures of the remaining ‘use quality’ (*chất lượng sử dụng*) of the housing blocks – motivated urgent requests to lower the price of the units in order to ‘reduce the hardships’ (*giảm bớt khó khăn*) experienced by impoverished residents.¹² Over time, petitioners became more skilled at holding local government accountable by referring to conflicting regulations and the inconsistent application, if not violation of law.

Round 1

The first group of petitions was organized in August 2010 and forwarded to all higher urban administrative divisions at the level of the District, Municipal and Provincial People’s Committees. The petitions came in the aftermath of neighbourhood meetings that took place around Quang Trung in response to the release of information about the developers awarded government contracts. Redevelopment was to move forward. At this early stage, the petitions showed a lack of collaboration across the nine wards: the requests were inconsistent and at times even whimsical. Each petition raised different grievances and concerns, some based on anecdotal rumour. For example, residents in Ward 8 heard that social housing units in Hanoi had been either bequeathed by the municipal government to occupants (not true) or sold at much lower rates (true, though transfer of ownership had taken place in 1998). Ward 3 expressed concern that apartments on the first floor (where most *khối trưởng* lived) were more costly. Ward 4 came across as angry, if not slightly cocky, asking: ‘Why do non-priority citizens have preferential treatment over us?’ referring to workers and civil servants without exemplary service who were allocated land rather than an apartment, and are now better off than residents in Quang Trung (Schwenkel, 2013, pp 268–269). Like the *khối trưởng* in Ward 2 with his idea to build a replica of the housing estate, the petitions at times offered alternatives to demolition, such as turning the area into an official heritage site in order to ‘preserve the positive material accomplishments of socialism and the international friendship between Vietnam and Germany’. These first appeals went unanswered, causing many to doubt the efficacy of this form of political participation.

Round 2

Over the next six months, neighbourhood leaders intensified their methods of organization and began to work more collaboratively, drafting and circulating letters among concerned residents and lower-level bureaucrats. After Decree 469 was issued in March 2011 outlining the next steps in the transfer of ownership, ward-level meetings were held again and the next series of petitions soon followed, this time sent concurrently to present to the state a broader and better organized coalition of citizens. Sweeping changes to these revised documents focused on a more careful approach to language and a better-articulated legal rationale that continued to appeal to *tình cảm* by adhering to the dominant logic of

¹² Many of the blocks are calculated to have less than 40% of their original structural capacity, according to the Department of Construction.

urban governance. Rather than proffering a critique, the amended petitions endorsed, and even embraced, the state's developmental agenda. In the first round, petitions had been less nuanced in declaring residents' 'deep discontent' with redevelopment (*dân rất bất bình*). In the second round, a strategy was adopted, first to reaffirm concurrence with plans for urban renewal (including support for 61/CP), before raising the dissatisfaction that residents felt about the price of the units and the proposed compensation. Petitions collectively suggested that the apartments should in due course be transferred to preferential residents who had fought in the wars against France and the USA to 'preserve the sacred land of the nation'. Quang Trung, it was pointed out, had been built with charitable funds, and the housing blocks had since depreciated substantially in both use and exchange value. In purely mathematical terms, tenants had already paid the price of their apartments over the course of 35 years through monthly rent (a few dollars) and periodic maintenance fees. In addition, the petitions reasoned that 61/CP from 1994 was no different from the Land Law of 1993, which allowed the transfer of land use rights without a fee or payment. And finally, petitioners argued that it would not be financially feasible for poor residents with low pensions, first to pay an inflated price for transfer of ownership, and then to purchase additional living space in a new complex. Counter to state objectives, this would increase the rate of poverty and impose additional economic hardship, including years of debt for retirees who already struggled to make ends meet. One warden suggested that developers should allow residents to *đổi nhà* (swap homes): that is, to provide adequate apartments in new buildings with no exchange of money. Several weeks later, he received a two-page response from the provincial government, couched in a juridical logic of benevolent care, maintaining that proper legal procedures were being followed in the interest of protecting the rights of Quang Trung citizens. Consequently, because both the rate of ownership transfer and the rate of compensation were in accordance with the law, the appeals were ultimately rejected.

Conclusion

What does it mean for a petition to be effective and to act with agentic capacity? While the petitions submitted by residents in social housing did not achieve their desired results, they did succeed in enabling petitioners to become more visible political actors whose strategies of mimicking the bureaucratic state enabled a prolonged conversation with local government through the circulation of documents. The two rounds of petitioning discussed above show how this conversation unfolded to become more refined and nuanced over the course of a year, as residents – mostly senior men – enacted new forms of political participation that fitted within the standard repertoire of prescribed bureaucratic practices to reify rather than undermine urban governance. And while the appeals were not productive in resolving grievances or assuaging the sense of injustice felt over redevelopment, local government did pay attention to the mounting discontent that the petitions conveyed. Six weeks after their submission, a district meeting was called for residents in Area C to assemble and speak directly to officials and developers about their concerns.

I first learned about the town meeting via the *thông báo* board in the building

where I lived (C2), which requested the attendance of all residents to express their views and demands. It appeared as though the dialogue would continue. ‘There needs to be a large turn-out,’ my warden, a retired general, informed me. And indeed there was: at 7.30 in the morning, residents spilled out of the meeting room into the hallway of the District People’s Committee. Yet many residents, particularly women who were more cynical about participation, decided not to go. One retired worker was frank in her assessment: ‘I am not interested; no one listens, no one responds. It would be a waste of my time.’ A female respondent from C6 also chose not to attend: ‘I no longer believe anything I hear. The people have been cheated enough.’ Indeed, attendees walked away from the meeting with a message that was not unlike the response to the petition: ‘Everything is being done in accordance with the law’ (*làm đúng theo pháp luật*).

In this article I have argued that documents and other bureaucratic artefacts, such as the *thông báo* boards, emerged as important actants in the mediation of communication and the transmission of affect between citizens and the state. Graphic artefacts in the hands of their creators or recipients were productive of affective energies that galvanized new forms of political agency in an effort to engage with the state and negotiate for additional concessions from developers. This agency became manifest in the collective act of petitioning that did not contest urban renewal *per se*, but rather its terms and effects on residents in social housing that signalled the withdrawal of the socialist state and its turn to a market-based model of property ownership. With rising social and economic stratification, the demand made by Quang Trung residents for state accountability and recognition of their social and political prestige *through an appeal to affect* was itself a political act that protested the failure of local government to fulfil its obligations. The right to the city claimed here by older citizens thus demanded recognition of their right to housing through the redistribution of property, rather than through market mechanisms of profit and land speculation.

The 2020 vision for Vinh City is one of global integration and regional growth, which the rebuilt Quang Trung estate in the centre of the city was expected to showcase. And yet because of the global financial crisis and the meltdown of Vietnam’s real estate market, this plan has since been abandoned and residents remain in their social housing ... still waiting.¹³ At the time of this research, city officials had invited consultants from Japan to help with the project of urban revitalization. ‘Why Japanese planners?’ I asked a high-ranking official at the Municipal People’s Committee. ‘Why not?’ he answered, explaining that Japanese cities were well designed and orderly, and that Japan supported urban projects in developing countries. ‘The culture of Japan also fits better with Vietnam,’ he added. But this market-oriented approach to urban growth revealed in the new master plan is one in which the foundations of socialist planning are uprooted, even as ideas about its value continue to resonate: ‘East Germany planned this city well,’ the official claimed. ‘It was a design that considered *con người* [humanity],’ he went on to explain, with no sense of irony at the loss of such planning principles.

¹³ As of January 2015, new investors had been found for Area A.

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