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Trends in Southeast Asia

SPECULATING ON WORLD-CLASS
TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE
IN HO CHI MINH CITY

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ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK
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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Speculating on World-Class Transportation Infrastructure in Ho Chi Minh City

By Hun Kee Kim

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Population, cars and motorbikes have increased at higher than expected rates in Ho Chi Minh City, leading to increased congestion and strain on existing transportation infrastructure.
- While the city has a transportation infrastructure plan, it lacks adequate funds and is reliant on official development assistance (ODA) and foreign direct investment (FDI) to finance it.
- Amidst the backdrop of an opaque regulatory environment and intense competition among global ODA institutions, city officials speculate on multiple and contradictory transportation projects simultaneously.
- Conflicting interests between Bus Rapid Transit and Metro projects in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City exemplify the state's speculative forms of governance in capturing transnational flows of ODA capital to finance infrastructure and call into question dominant framings of infrastructure as rational processes and technologies that work against the so-called irrational and unplanned structure of the city.

Speculating on World-Class Transportation Infrastructure in Ho Chi Minh City

By Hun Kee Kim¹

INTRODUCTION

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) has seen its population and the number of vehicles on its roads rapidly increase over the last ten years. Today, there are close to 8 million motorbikes in the city, and over half a million cars.² Recently, the Chairman of the Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee, Nguyen Thanh Phong attributed rising congestion problems to larger-than-expected population growth. Estimates that had put HCMC at 10 million inhabitants by 2025 have already been vastly exceeded, and Nguyen announced that the city is already home to roughly 13 million inhabitants. The number of motorbikes on the roads is now at 7.6 million, alongside over 700,000 cars. Recent data show that over 1,000 new motorbikes are added into traffic each day.³

The city has responded in various ways to these strains on the transport infrastructure and to its growing congestion problems. Most recently, HCMC authorities, following their counterparts in Hanoi, have been considering the implementation of a motorbike ban in the

¹ Hun Kee Kim is a Visiting Fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

² Department of Transport, Ho Chi Minh City.

³ Vi Vu, “Guess How Many People Are Jamming into Saigon? Hint: It’s as bad as Tokyo”, *VN Express International*, 17 August 2017 <<http://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/guess-how-many-people-are-jamming-into-saigon-hint-it-s-as-bad-as-tokyo-3628742.html>> (accessed 17 August 2017).

urban core. Urban planning analysts have advised against such a drastic measure, citing that such a ban would exacerbate the primary causes of the congestion, namely the huge number of private cars in the city, while regressively punishing those without cars who presently have limited public transportation options. They further argue that such a ban should be implemented only when the city has a comprehensive public transportation system in place. A series of ring roads, light-rail/metro-rail lines, bus rapid transit and a bus system are part of the city's present public transportation plan. While the plan may represent a comprehensive approach to public transport, the transportation infrastructure challenges that the city faces today are many.

For one, urban development in Ho Chi Minh City is simultaneously a highly bureaucratic and flexible process, a paradox born out of the city's development at the nexus of state and market practice — what is now referred to as late socialism. Decentralized government agencies and foreign investors who bring capital and infrastructure expertise to the city negotiate a wide range of possibilities. The result is a heterogeneous urban landscape where each project is made piecemeal, often in defiance of the central city master plan.

Cutting across this urban patchwork are large-scale transport infrastructure projects conceived, planned and built by foreign investors and development institutions, such as the construction of highways, roads, metro/subway developments, bus rapid transit, city bus systems, etc. Such projects are often planned as coherent wholes, but must subsequently be disarticulated and disassembled to deal with the political, legal and bureaucratic realities of the city. Further, transport infrastructure projects themselves are not only made piecemeal, but are themselves diverse with regards to their sources of investment, models of development, and the conditional and contingent connections forged with government agencies. As a result, those who produce urban space in Ho Chi Minh City have developed a range of adaptive strategies to see their projects come to fruition amidst these uncertainties.

In this article, I explore the challenges faced by planners, official development assistance (ODA) organizations and governmental organizations who propose and build transportation infrastructure in Ho Chi Minh City, and explain how narratives of both success and failure

often hinges on a false dichotomy between the ideal plan and a purportedly fragmented and unplanned city. This dichotomy, I argue, conceals the competitive and speculative nature of world-class city-making, and the structure of international finance for transportation infrastructure.

URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN VIETNAM

The greater HCMC metropolitan area is made up of 22 districts and has the largest population of any city in the country at roughly 9 million inhabitants. Vietnam remains a single-party, socialist republic ruled by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). The country is most widely known in North America as a site of conflict, first in a war of independence from French colonial powers that ended in 1954 and afterwards as a site of conflict with the United States. The American war ended in 1975 when the country was unified under a communist flag. Post reunification, the seat of communist power remained in the north, in Hanoi, which launched a series of Marxist-Leninist policies aimed at reforming what it saw as unethical capitalist practices in the southern regions. These were attempts to subsume land, production and the moral order under the central planning mechanisms of the state. This period, 1975–86, is generally referred to as one of state failure, where the regime could not handle the challenges of production and distribution under policies that encouraged agricultural and industrial collectivization and centralization.

These failures prompted the rise of a cadre of southern reformers who in the mid-1980s gained political influence and enacted a series of market reforms in the sixth party congress of 1986, called *Doi Moi*. This opened the once centrally planned economy to private enterprise, foreign investment and forms of property rights.

Both reform and transition are enduring and ubiquitous concepts in Vietnam. The country has been subject to the reform agendas of multiple sovereign powers. These include French colonial rule, U.S. influence in the south prior to the war, communist and socialist reform agendas, many of which were forms of technical cooperation with the Soviet Union and East Germany, and reforms associated with its transition to market-oriented socialism. There are also current reforms that fall under a general category of global standards, often pushed by donor agencies

like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. Transition is also a key concept in Vietnam that bears some reflection. Vietnam has been transitioning to market practice since 1986 and is now approaching its thirty-year mark, nearly twice the length of existence of the previous regime it is supposedly transitioning out of — an eleven-year period between 1975 and 1986.

Since the transition spans nearly thirty years, it is an expansive topic of discussion. For my purposes in this article, I will just briefly say that this transition to market-oriented socialism opened up new pathways for private land ownership, urban development and investment. While the state technically owns all land in the country, subsequent reforms to the land law introduced rights in the form of renewable land leases and private ownership of structures built upon leased land. In HCMC, this land lease arrangement along with new reforms to foreign investment laws resulted in a construction and real estate boom fueled by transnational investment, particularly from Asia, but also from key western development institutions, beginning in the late nineties which continues today.

Vietnam's urban growth has been spurred on by foreign direct investment (FDI), net inflow of which increased from US\$1.3 billion per year in 2002 to US\$6.6 billion in 2007 and US\$9.3 billion in 2008.⁴ Asian investment played a key role in this story. The top investors during this period were Japan, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea, most of whom took turns being the top FDI investor over the last ten years.

Urban areas grew an estimated 27 per cent from 1984 to 2007. The Ho Chi Minh City mega-region accounted for approximately 52 per cent of all FDI received in Vietnam. As much as 85 per cent of this went into the property sector in 2007.⁵

⁴ General Office of Statistics, Republic of Vietnam.

⁵ Sanghoon Jung, Du Huynh, and Peter G. Rowe, "The Pattern of Foreign Property Investment in Vietnam: The Apartment Market in Ho Chi Minh City", *Habitat International* 39, no. 1 (2013): 105–13.

Waves of FDI coupled with state control over the land and legal regime produced something akin to what You-tien Hsing, in studying the urbanization of Chinese cities, calls “socialist land masters” or government units that act as land developers, using their control over land to coordinate development and direct capital.⁶ In Vietnam, the exercise of government power in urban development is diffused compared to urbanization in the cities of China. This has led to less coordinated processes and outcomes. This heterogeneity of players and outcomes, however, allows Vietnam to be more flexible and adaptive to global capital flows, on which it is dependent for growth.

PLANNING IN THE PAST

The paradox of urban development in HCMC is that the proliferation of authority, laws and regulations leads to greater flexibility and variation, even in financing. A prominent urban planner in Ho Chi Minh City, Thu,⁷ characterized planning there as a process that happens through a catching up with a defiant past. She stated,

Even though the master plans and city plans are very good, we have to keep going back every five years and change them to fit reality. Nobody follows the plan because there are different rules for different types of people.⁸

This is the voice of Thu, who advised city-level government on urban planning, including the Ministry of Architecture and Planning and the highest governing body in the city and the province level, the Ho Chi Minh City People’s Committee. Thu’s statement about planning for the

⁶ You-tien Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 33–59.

⁷ All names of informants have been changed.

⁸ Interview with author, 19 June 2012.

past is a common lament among urban analysts and planners working in cities of the global South.

This lament was candidly reiterated to me by Minh, a director of the Ho Chi Minh City Department of Architecture and Planning, who explained that every five years, he and his department would begin a new planning process, first by updating to the new realities that went against previous iterations of the plan and second by adjusting the plan to new priorities resulting from changes in government leadership which often occur every five to ten years.⁹

This is compounded by the proliferation of planning authorities, like the Department of Transport that is responsible for the coordination of current transportation systems in the city, which defying conventional wisdom, does not coordinate with the Department of Architecture and Planning, the agency responsible for creating master plans. Both claim to lack significant coordination with the Management Authority for Urban Railways, a new government unit falling under the purview of the Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee. As I will demonstrate later in the article, these agencies also appear to work independently of the Urban Civil Works Investment Management Authority of HCMC, the governing unit in charge of the bus rapid transit network (or BRT) expansion. In fact, transportation planning authorities produce contradictory plans, many parts of which have aspects that defy the city's master plan. An exasperated Minh reports that these are plans that his department has to be constantly updating in Sisyphean fashion. According to Minh and echoing Thu's statement about catch-up planning, master plans essentially operate by conforming to a defiant past rather than projecting into the future. That is, the plan operates more as a living archive rather than documents of collective will.

Implicit in Thu's and Minh's laments about the planning process in Ho Chi Minh City is a critique and rejection of the present material city in favour of an ideal planned city. That is to say that planning is put

⁹ Interview with author, 16 January 2017.

forward as a single rational set of possibilities against the irrational make-up of the unplanned and chaotic city. Following Abdou Maliq Simone, these plans are overtures to the “city yet to come”, and consequentially most often remain exactly that — overtures to the city never quite fully realized.¹⁰ Separating the city into ideal and material, into a planned and unplanned, is a form of spatial idealism that continues to have resonance in planning practice. Attempts at governing through standardized rules and objective planning principles are often undone by the persistence of older values and urban practices. They are often undone by other pre-existing and exceptional ways of ordering and managing the metropole, what Mariana Valverde calls “seeing like a city”.¹¹

SEEING LIKE A CITY

Rather than start with the ideal plan and then proceed to determine the city as deviant, it is more productive to start with the ontology of the city. Such an approach reveals a number of pre-existing value systems and logics at work in HCMC which contribute to the persistence of planning failures.

First, decentralization policies have created overlapping regulatory jurisdictions and a general lack of clarity about the scope and reach of government agencies. Decentralization in the Vietnamese context relates generally to the process of transition — Vietnam’s own version of perestroika, a process of marketization beginning in 1986 as a response to the historical failures of communist central planning. Decentralization includes all forms of bureaucratic and economic restructuring that devolve decision-making power from the central government to province and local levels of government. For the production of urban HCMC,

¹⁰ A.M. Simone, *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

¹¹ Mariana Valverde, “Seeing Like a City: The Dialectic of Modern and Premodern Ways of Seeing in Urban Governance”, *LASR Law & Society Review* 45, no. 2 (2011): 277–312.

decentralization of authority for development and planning approvals has unleashed new powers for the province, city and its districts. These smaller political units, following Annette Kim, operate like fiefdoms where district leaders can develop their own urban investment and development plans.¹²

Decentralization in the Vietnamese context has had the effect of multiplying and atomizing land and regulatory authority, creating a form of government that is extremely flexible on the one hand, capable of making and bending plans, creating a norm of exception to meet the needs of foreign investment, but on the other hand remaining a system that, due to its flexibility, cannot forecast city development according to a centralized logic. This incapacity to consistently predict how inevitable conflicts are settled between various regimes of rule increases risks for those involved in making the city and, more importantly requires a high degree of political know-how to engage in urban development in the city.

Second, the effects of decentralization are compounded by uncertainties produced by the presence and deployment of multiple legal orders within the same social field — or what Sally Engle Merry calls “legal pluralism”¹³ — an argument that is supported by the work of prominent legal scholars of Vietnam, most notably John Gillespie and Mark Sidel, who argue that multiple regimes of law and regulation overlap and contradict one another.¹⁴ What results is a crowded legal present, made up of multiple legal histories that span French administrative law,

¹² Annette Miae Kim, *Learning to Be Capitalists: Entrepreneurs in Vietnam's Transition Economy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹³ Legal pluralism is a term coined by Sally Engle Merry. See Sally Engle Merry, “Legal Pluralism”, *Law & Society Review* 22, no. 5 (1988): 869–96; Sally Engle Merry, “Global Legal Pluralism and the Temporality of Soft Law”, *Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law* 46, no. 1 (2014): 108–22.

¹⁴ Mark Sidel, *Law and Society in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). John Gillespie and Penelope Nicholson, *Asian Socialism & Legal Change: The Dynamics of Vietnamese and Chinese Reform* (Canberra ACT: Australian National University E Press & Asia Pacific Press, 2005).

Soviet legal principles, communist principles from the central planning era, and transition era laws, not to mention contemporary Western legal principles now being practised as standards of global finance and development. District leaders, regulatory agencies and various bureaucratic units that engage in city-making thus have a wide array of contradicting tools to choose from in order to meet their needs and solve project specific problems.

Third, the city is made in defiance of urban plans because the need for transnational investment supersedes the plan, which is to say that Vietnam experiences FDI dependency when it comes to funding urban development and infrastructure projects.

For example, according to the Centre de Prospective et d'Études Urbaines (PADDI) based in HCMC, the city's transportation master plan has a total of 469 approved projects costing an estimated total of US\$121 billion. But despite these approved projects, the department of planning and investment estimates that the city's capital budget meets only 5 per cent of the total investment required to execute projects set out for the year. Projects are often rushed to the top of the list based on the likelihood that they can secure ODA financing, leading to a hierarchy of projects based not necessarily on need and planning priority, but on the trends and best practices determined by donor agencies.¹⁵

Further, it is important to note that infrastructure projects themselves are drawn into the competitive logic of global capital in the form of ODA loans and large donor activity. For transportation projects alone, there are currently six separate proposed rail lines in addition to Bus Rapid transit projects, tramways and monorail proposals aside from road and bridge infrastructure projects funded by international cooperations, each of which has its own designs, contractors and equipment with no overarching framework in place to make these systems compatible, interoperable or functional at a regional or wholistic scale. These funders are

¹⁵ Clement Musil and Morgane Perset, "Financing Transport Infrastructures in Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam): Tools, Innovations and Challenges", Urban Development Management Support Centre — PADDI, Working Paper Series no. 2 (2015), pp. 1–19.

presently: The Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the German government, the European Investment Bank, the government of Spain, as well as feasibility studies for more rail being conducted by Chinese, French and Korean ODA as well.

For private real estate developments, the activities that fall under what Thu's and Minh call "catch-up planning" do not necessarily hamper urban growth nor do they act as a barrier for those who seek financial gain through real estate development. Legal pluralism and the atomization of authority and FDI dependency create a set of flexible strategies and tools for various arms of the state to draw upon in order to meet the needs of foreign capital, particularly their specific risk and risk management rationalities. In other words, state agencies can comfortably and flexibly call upon different regulatory rationalities to match the needs and risk profiles of investors bringing real estate projects and models of development to the city. These variable "faces of risk" constitute a flexible canvas for experimentation with different sources of finance and logics of governing.

Amidst this more flexible and atomized process of urban development are also large-scale transportation infrastructure projects. Like the real estate sector, Vietnam's infrastructure development is highly dependent on foreign investment and development loans. Since the city and province lack general funds to finance and support over 95 per cent of their approved transportation infrastructure projects (totalling US\$121 billion), the city has also linked speculative real estate markets and property markets to infrastructure.

This is achieved primarily through the mechanism of "build, transfer agreements or build, operate, transfer, or build operate own transfer" agreements or BT, BOTs or BOOTs in which the city exchanges land (and utilizes its powers to convert rural land to urban real estate) to secure infrastructural investments from both local and global engineering and construction firms.¹⁶ Korea's GS Engineering and Construction

¹⁶ Figures for public private partnerships and for BOT/BTs are unavailable and difficult to obtain. According to PADDI's report, "Financing Transport

(formerly part of LG), for example, obtained land for its Nha Be new town development in the periphery of the city through its investments into HCMC's ring road infrastructure, a US\$340 million project. Today, GS is completing parts of the engineering and construction of the elevated subway lines of a portion of metro line one, and has received urban land that they can use to develop into luxury property.

These cases illustrate the diversity and heterogeneity of players and financial schemes in the construction of infrastructure projects in HCMC and in Vietnam in general. This diversity and heterogeneity rub up against the fact that often times, infrastructure projects require coordination across multiple projects and must also span the entire city or regional scales larger than the city and require coordination across multiple bureaucratic and political districts, provinces and regulatory agencies. But they also cross other domains, such as public and private capital and loan granting development institutions, each of which is engaging in what has become the competitive activity of urban planning. In this way, there are multiple planners at work in the city, working independently of one another — planners who produce an urban fabric that Thu and Minh, in their earlier statements, read as irrational and illegible.

INFRASTRUCTURAL SOLIDARITY

Individuals and firms who plan and execute infrastructure projects in the city (government agencies, ODA agencies, infrastructure engineering firms, developers and construction firms, transportation planners, urban planners, etc.) often perceive themselves as coordinators and unifiers amidst the competing interests and overlapping laws of multiple

Infrastructures in Ho Chi Minh City”, the Department of Planning and Investment reported thirty infrastructure projects that included private investors since 2004. This figure contravenes those of the Department of Transportation that have listed thirty-seven projects for just transportation alone. While these figures are hard to obtain, cities like HCMC continue to use public private partnerships and BOT/BTs to finance infrastructure, evidenced by the city's repeated requests for investors to partner in infrastructure projects.

regulatory agencies. Seen in this way, implementing infrastructure projects are monumental undertakings that require project leaders to envision complete projects with all their working components and then find ways to push such projects through with plans staying as intact as possible, despite conditions of decentralization, legal pluralism and ODA competition. In reality, this is hardly, if ever, the case. In most cases, large-scale infrastructure projects are proposed as complete wholes which then subsequently go through the process of disarticulation, dismantling and disassembly into component parts in order to negotiate and meet the demands of political bodies, regulatory agencies, districts, neighbourhoods, etc., as well as through competition with other forms of infrastructure. The complicated reality of political relations and patronage politics, along with the politics of land procurement, compensation, and competition, can drastically reshape or derail entire projects.

The role of infrastructure in this narrative is a heroic one, even in failure. When painted in this light, it is an ideal form. It is one that is capable of what Ash Amin calls the “politics of staples”.¹⁷ Here, infrastructure has a unifying quality, capable of piecing the fragmented and splintered city back together, to suture, or as Amin argues, staple together.

There are limitations to thinking about infrastructure as an urban feature that reconnects a fragmented city. Such a logic relies on a starting point that reads the city as failure or as fragmentation. This view presents two limited possibilities. The first is an exaltation of infrastructure as potentially a healing force, one capable of making sense of the illegible and fragmented city. In this frame, infrastructure is coded as successful, unifying and transformative. The second possibility is a framing of failure. That is, infrastructure projects are deemed failures when the realities of the fragmented city prove too great a barrier to the implementation of rational infrastructure projects. Thus, even in failure, infrastructure projects remain rational and unifying against an overwhelmingly fragmented city that presents too difficult a backdrop to operate within.

¹⁷ Ash Amin, “Telescopic Urbanism and the Poor”, *City* 17, no. 4 (2013): 476–92.

In an article on urban infrastructure in Colombia, Laura Cesafsky critiques this view, calling it the thesis of “infrastructural solidarity” arguing that such a framing solidifies infrastructure into a false axis of stability and instability.¹⁸ The thesis of infrastructural solidarity is a technological view of infrastructure, one that envisions infrastructure as distinct from the conditions that it is supposedly trying to address.

Useful here then is a critique of the thesis of infrastructural solidarity which is aimed at the thesis’ inability to recognize heterogeneity and the *assemblant* character of both the city and infrastructure projects themselves. In other words, infrastructure and the city are always co-constituted, and produced as such despite attempts by those planning and building infrastructure to characterize them as separate. In other words, it is important for infrastructure projects to reframe their city ontology and begin with the particularities of the city itself and its heterogeneous nature rather than begin with an opportunity, project or set of best practices that were conceived and developed in a lab, or abroad or through financial mechanisms. Cities are not broken and fragmented entities separate from the conceptually perfect infrastructures they encounter. Rather, infrastructures themselves are also conceived and built amidst the messy political, material and symbolic realms that make up the city.

To describe HCMC as fragmented therefore limits the possible narratives of infrastructure in the city, fixing it in binary terms of success and failure, unity and disunity, connectivity and disarray, rational and irrational. There remains a grey area at the intersection of the planned and unplanned — between what is often understood as rational planning against an irrational city. What Thu and Minh see as the backward, fragmented city, is in fact a set of governing strategies artfully deployed to experiment with multiple contrasting futures for the city yet to come. That is to say, the ways in which infrastructure projects must be disassembled and reassembled according to the logics of legal pluralism and heterogeneous regulatory landscapes are a vital part of Vietnam’s

¹⁸ L. Cesafsky, “How to Mend a Fragmented City: A Critique of ‘Infrastructural Solidarity’”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 41, no. 1 (2017): 145–61.

larger process of establishing transnational connections of capital and governance. Infrastructure projects must be seen as constituted out of this picture of transnationalism and globalization, and moreover, they must be disaggregated and treated as a heterogeneous set of projects, each with very different sources of income and financial rationalities, scales of operation, negotiations with government and ultimately, different outcomes. This heterogeneity allows us to see that the success or failure of specific projects is not necessarily due to the city's fragmentation, but rather, is part of a larger project of experimentation and world-class city making.

THE BRT PROJECT

One so-called failed infrastructure project in the city, the proposed Bus Rapid Transit network (BRT) for Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City illustrates this point. BRT was one of the earlier ideas proposed for Hanoi and HCMC. The projects were proposed by the World Bank first through feasibility studies in 2005, and later officially approved as projects through World Bank loans in July of 2007. The plan began first in Hanoi, as a citywide project to introduce Bus Rapid Transit based on Bogota's *transmilenio* infrastructure in Colombia. The plan was then to expand this work to produce a BRT network in HCMC.

Bogota's *transmilenio* BRT is a system of dedicated bus lanes and bus stations on raised platforms implemented in 2001, which allowed the city to use existing road infrastructure like an over-ground rail system, with buses instead of rail lines. The idea behind the BRT was that Bogota was essentially creating an above ground transit system, at lower cost than rail, by utilizing existing road infrastructure. BRTs typically run on electricity or low emission engines and have a net positive effect on the environment by taking personal vehicles off roads.

One of my key interlocutors, who in this article I call Daniel, is a planner who worked on the development of the Bus Rapid Transit lines in Bogota for the Inter-American Development Bank and later became a project coordinator for the World Bank's BRT projects in Asia, working on the HCMC BRT project. As he describes it, it was in 2005 that the *transmilenio* BRT infrastructure of Bogota had become the "poster

child” of the World Bank and was formulated as a best practice and mobile policy technology being exported to the developing world. During this time, BRT made the rounds in global development policy circles, with the former Mayor of Bogota, Enrique Penalosa stating in various policy forums throughout the global North that buses represented democracy in action and a low-cost solution to transportation problems in the developing world.

Daniel believes that he was hired onto the project not only for his planning skills, but also to play the role of the Colombian expert, who had worked on the BRT lines in Bogota and Mexico City and who, in his own words, added cultural legitimacy to the project for the securing of loans. Daniel says the following,

It is not a coincidence that it was me that was chosen to work on these projects. Me being Colombian, me having this expertise in BRT and having worked already for four years on BRT projects in South America for the Inter American Development Bank. The point of me coming to the World Bank was for me to bring the Latin American experience with buses to Asia. I can't tell you how many times I was brought into a meeting to play the part of, “oh and he's from Bogota” and I would play the part and say, “oh, my city is this and that, buses, etc.” and that is how we kind of sold the loans.¹⁹

Earlier in the same interview, Daniel recounts the priority of loans to ODA institutions and that his objectives at both the Inter American Development Bank and the World Bank was primarily to secure them. Daniel describes his first day of work and orientation at the bank.

On my first day I go to the guy that hired me and we are chatting and he says, “well, we usually do this kind of orientation each quarter for new employees and it's not for another week, so I am going to give you the whole spiel right now so you don't

¹⁹ Interview with Daniel, 8 March 2017.

waste your time.” So I am like, “ok let’s go!” I’m holding my notepad you know, super ready for the real deal. And my boss says, “We have two products. Our first product is technical cooperations. These are grants to do studies for larger projects requiring loans. Our second product is loans. And we use our technical cooperations to get loans. Any questions?” And that was it! I couldn’t believe it. I thought we were going to talk about the important social development goals, MDGs [UN Millennium Development Goals], reducing poverty, you know, all the stuff development banks put in their mission statements. But no, and I said wow, at least this guy is honest about the job — and this is really an important point. You see, these banks operate on two currencies. The first is prestige, and we can define that in however many ways you want. Prestige works to secure the second and more important part, which is loans. These banks die if they aren’t putting out money in the form of loans.

As Daniel recounts, the BRT in Vietnam originally started out in 2005 as a comprehensive transportation plan for Hanoi, where the World Bank supported doing a broad transportation demand analyses, and of that it helped the city design a BRT network. Based on the transportation demand analysis, a number of high demand routes were slated for BRT lines. The project went through the bank’s loan approval process, meaning the project did a feasibility study with local planning agencies and government officials, upon which the project was approved at a concept level. Further, the World Bank did a feasibility analysis looking at the broader scope of the project and how to make it implementable, and it passed through a number of rounds of studies about things the bank is interested in — financials, loans, environment, social, technical, etc. After a final round of engineering and design along with a final round of approvals, the World Bank gave the go ahead to start contracting vendors to begin building the infrastructure. It is at this phase of the project that my Daniel says the following,

So what happened is, the bank put in all these efforts in creating this BRT network, in getting all the approvals with the Hanoi

people's committee and relevant planning and agencies and what not, and once this is all in place, once we get all these approvals, then all these other banks show up. The European Development Bank is one, the Asian Development Bank is another one and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency is another one. What happens is that all the high demand BRT routes, the ones you need to build revenue and sustain the project, are taken up by these other banks, and they throw money to complete the detailed design phase and make them into some form of rail system. So Hanoi was building a couple of monorail lines, and a metro, and BRT. So this is very problematic, that people, including us, would throw technical cooperation grants to complete design phases so they can secure loans for their infrastructure projects.

What Daniel describes here is how ODA competition for loans can undermine projects. The BRT project as a whole was conceived in such a way that high ridership lines supported the existence of lower ridership lines. As a number of key corridors were ceded to metro and metro rail projects, the planned citywide BRT network eventually failed. In the end, the BRT line is now one proof-of-concept line, and additional lines are in jeopardy due to other perceptions and metrics of failure, like one recently reported by the press in Hanoi, depicting the BRT entangled in city traffic.²⁰ Here, the BRT failed to put in a simple divider between traffic and the BRT, the result of members of Hanoi's People's Committee arguing that a publicly funded lane should not be the exclusive domain of only buses. This intervention contravened the entire point of a BRT, which is to have a dedicated rapid bus lane. While a dedicated lane has since been put up, similar arguments have been brought up, the most

²⁰ Ba Do, "Scofflaws Thwart Hanoi's New 'Rapid' Transit System", *VN Express International*. 29 December 2016 <<http://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/scofflaws-thwart-hanoi-s-new-rapid-transit-system-3521240.html>> (accessed 12 January 2017).

recent of which was for all public buses to have access to the dedicated BRT lane.²¹

So, fresh off the heels of disaster in Hanoi, the bank proposed to take its hard-learned lessons and shift its focus to Ho Chi Minh City. This, according to both my informant and urban planners in HCMC, was an attempt to move further away from the politics of Hanoi. Here, the assumption was that HCMC was a less politically entrenched city, where planning could happen without as much interference and fragmentation from political factions. HCMC was seen as more of a clean slate.

The HCMC BRT project, much like the Hanoi one, was initially conceived of as a comprehensive network of bus lines cutting across a ring road. But taking a lesson from Hanoi, the World Bank decided to scale back its ambitions and focus on one line, a single BRT line on a high demand corridor that would serve as a proof-of-concept design. But in similar fashion to Hanoi, this project was subsequently moved to accommodate metro rail plans funded by other ODA organizations.

Furthermore, the first relocation of the BRT line presented new costs created by the particulars of the road itself. While it was on one of the remaining corridors with acceptable ridership numbers, the existing road infrastructure was insufficient, and would require significant land clearance to make room for the BRT, resulting in ballooning costs and making the project unfeasible.

As a result, the BRT line was relocated once again to its current proposed and approved project location, the Vo Van Kiet expressway, along the river, a corridor with low ridership rates but without the land confiscation issues of the previous relocation. As fate would have it, this new site for the BRT line, Vo Van Kiet Expressway, is a recently completed riverfront corridor that was financed and built by JICA. As my informant points out, the ironies here are too much to bear. The original BRT plan for HCMC was a proof-of-concept design that was displaced

²¹ Saigoneer Staff, “Hanoi to Allow Public Buses to Use Exclusive BRT Lanes”, *Saigoneer*, 10 May 2017 <<https://saigoneer.com/vietnam-news/10042-hanoi-to-allow-public-buses-to-use-exclusive-brt-lanes>> (accessed 10 May 2017).

by proposed rail projects, only to be moved to two different locations and finally settled on a road built and recently completed by JICA as part of the city's transportation infrastructure plan. This road will need to have at least two of its six lanes partially demolished in order to create the load-bearing platform for BRT heavy bus usage. Meanwhile, JICA is one of the main ODA agencies constructing metro rail lines in the city.

CONCLUSION: GLOBAL POLICY AND HETEROGENEOUS INFRASTRUCTURE

Instead of framing the BRT's failure as one due to fragmentation and the failed city, it is more productive to understand it on a register of flexible governance and experimentation amidst a globalizing set of transnational development actors. In HCMC, transportation lines are sites of intense experimentation and competition, with a range of different models of urban development and their financial schemes in play.

Thus, from a city governance perspective, what the thesis of infrastructural solidarity calls a form of fragmentation and failure is actually a late socialist strategy to make the city flexible to multiple ideas and multiple technologies of transportation infrastructure. In this case, the city, much like it does with foreign real estate capital, can flexibly hedge different futures proposed by development institutions by engaging all of them and experimenting with them simultaneously.

I suggest that the city and the state cannot create a consistent urban development regime because the state must diversify its governance in order to secure outside investment. This form of hedging is particularly important for a city like HCMC which is so dependent on foreign capital for its growth — foreign capital that is incredibly diverse in origin, scope and scale of work, types of projects, etc. And in a moment when the contemporary reference points of the world class global-city are rapidly shifting, from the likes of New York, Paris, London to ascendant Asian cities like Shanghai, Singapore and Seoul, so must the arts of governing expand to capture these new models of capital, expertise and urbanism. These arts of governing are a kind of infrastructure themselves, that condition the way that capital, expertise and material coalesce in the city.

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