

# CHINAMADE BRIEF



## Infrastructures of Urban Life Yet To Come

*Jessica DiCarlo and Courtney Wittekind, May 2022*

**I**nfrastructures of Urban Life Yet-to-Come was a double-panel at the Association of Asian Studies (AAS) Annual Meetings in Honolulu in March 2022. The panel was organized by **Courtney Wittekind** (Harvard University) and **Jessica DiCarlo** (University of British Columbia), and featured presentations by **Pallavi Gupta** (University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill), **Dan Luo** (University of South Carolina), **Sarah Moser** (McGill University), **Tim Oakes** (University of Colorado Boulder), **Jesse Rodenbiker** (Rutgers University), **Laurence Côté-Roy** (National University of Singapore & Université de Montréal), **Grace Yixian Zhou** (Cornell University), as well as Courtney and Jessica.

Our collaboration for this panel originated at the [Third ChinaMade workshop on the Social Life of Chinese Infrastructures in Southeast Asia](#). We noticed several shared themes across our respective research in Laos and Myanmar, particularly on the temporality and models of planned cities. Our work focuses on cities “in-the-making” or “yet-to-come,” which rely on the imaginative, speculative, and future-oriented nature of these projects. The panel began from our observations in Southeast Asia of proposals to create new urban forms and futures. Indeed, new cities and urban models are increasingly common across Asia and Africa (Keeton 2011; Nielson and Simone, 2017; Oakes, 2019). These are distinct both from existing “old cities” and from the now “out-of-date” models of city-planning that have been critiqued by scholars as producing unequal, unsustainable, and unlivable urban spaces. New urban development efforts, whether advertised as “green cities,” “smart cities,” “industrial hubs,” or “special economic zones,” share a common vision. They seek to rupture histories of flawed urban development, even as they channel built-from-scratch cities found in other times and spaces. Take, for example, high-modernist master-planned Islamabad, Singapore and its rise from “mudflat” to megacity, China’s waves of “new towns” since 1949 (Wang 2022; Xu 2022; Oakes, 2019), or Delhi as a “world-class city” (Ghertner 2015). Nielsen and Simone (2017) suggest that “utopic urban models” are envisioned and often built next to the existing locales they intend to replace. These planned cities are promoted as exceptional and independent from past development failures. However, as our panels showed, when looking at projects on the ground these promises quickly fade, bringing with them often unexpected outcomes.

While much attention has focused on these developments’ utopian forms, epitomized by developers’ promotional images of new city projects, few have materialized as the sort of “world cities” imagined at their outset (Roy and Ong 2011). In fact, the vast majority of new urban developments remain “unbuilt and unfinished” (Carse and Kneas 2020), categorized as “PowerPoint cities” existing only in presentations and on websites (Moser and Côté-Roy 2020). Likewise, many proposed city developments are temporarily paused, delayed, or outright canceled—persisting only “on paper” or in the unfulfilled dreams of politicians, engineers, and future residents alike. We propose that, within extended trajectories of urbanization and infrastructural development, cities “yet-to-come” have surfaced as intensely charged objects of

anticipation—as sources of hope, fear, expectation, and anxiety—with the potential to transform not just local futures, but also models of capitalist development, networks of regional and global interconnection, and avenues for speculation and investment.



Demolition worker at rest. The red spray paint on the building reads, 'prohibited from coming near.' Kunming, China.  
**Photo by Jesse Rodenbiker, 2017.**

In addition to the temporalities of new cities, the notion of a China model figured prominently across both panels, raising the question of how useful it is to conceptualize new cities under a “China model” of development. The widely recognized but internally variegated “China Model” of development has also been now joined by, for example, a South Korean state-led “newtown model,” as well as by wholly private actors like Rendeavour, an international company that calls itself “Africa’s new city builder” (Moser and Côté-Roy 2020). In a recent paper on Morocco, Côté-Roy and Moser (2022) suggest that the coherent veneer of the city model is instead undergirded by messiness, which they examine through the idea of “useful fuzziness.” Similarly, papers across both panels highlighted the very place-specific contingencies that disrupt the promises of the city-to-come, challenging any sort of coherent model, China or otherwise. Thus, rather than a national model, understanding city building and planning as inherently transnational further erodes the idea of a ‘China model.’ In sum, looking at the projects themselves, the histories that surround them, and their local contexts is more useful than nationally-categorized models.

From these overarching observations, two panels coalesced: one questioning the notion of a global city and China model, and another exploring the temporality of city-making.



Miniature model of Boten SEZ on display at the developer's hotel in Boten, Laos. **Photo by Jessica DiCarlo, 2019.**

In the first session, [Modeling the Global City](#), panelists reflected on several of the region-spanning plans and models that were mobilized by politicians, developers, and planners. It quickly became clear that a “model” of particular national origin did not capture both the internal variations within projects and the local political economic structures that shape them. Tracing the interconnections between projects as well as their movement between China, India, Southeast Asia, and Africa, panelists considered the new spaces or zones, relationships, and networks that are created when “new city” models travel globally. In contrast to the oft-cited China model, Laurence Côté-Roy suggested that the circulation of Malaysian expertise for city-building has expanded across Africa, shaping the city yet-to-come. However, more than top-down planning and governance, a commonality across papers is how these projects often turn out quite differently than intended. In practice, models from elsewhere are shaped by local contingencies, practices, and politics. The China model or Malaysian city is better understood as a relational process that takes shape in specific places. Indeed, discussant Tim Oakes noted, the idea of a model based on a particular national identity or cultural associations breaks down quickly when looking at projects on the ground. And yet, models provide a certain discourse and an aspirational vision. This, however, is not often realized in the projects themselves. Sarah Moser's case of Forest City in Malaysia illustrated this tension well. Rather than the ‘futuristic eco-city’ that developer's promote, Forest City has perpetuated logics of exclusion by reproducing urban forms and power dynamics introduced during the colonial era, such as racialized enclaves and catering to foreign aesthetics.

An additional insight from this panel highlighted the violence of infrastructure. In her study on Meixi Lake New Town, Grace Zhou questioned what constitutes a city and for whom they are built. She suggested that the new city is more about a speculative economy than improving lives or equitability. Similarly in India,

Pallavi Gupta showed how the laborers who make railway station infrastructures function were themselves made invisible and pushed to the background, while “new, clean” station technologies are brought to the forefront of planning and promotion. In other words, rather than the technical system providing support to humans, the opposite occurred. Finally, through demolition in Southwest Chinese cities, Jesse Rodenbiker argued that resistance to state resettlement projects is diffused through the long-term effects of living in partially demolished infrastructures. He vividly showed how demolition transformed peri-urban villages into a “patchwork of hazards” and infrastructural ruins, which weakened the collective will for residents to remain in place.

In the second session on [Time and Temporality](#), presenters reflected on the nature of the city “yet-to-come,” emphasizing the “new city” as laden with expectation and guarantees of momentum and speed, even when stalled. Foregrounding empirical material collected in proposed cities in China, Myanmar, and Laos, presenters examined how lives and lifeworlds have been suspended amidst development, as well as how various temporal imaginaries (re)shape the urban. Panelists highlighted various themes including hope and anticipation alongside unfinishedness, indeterminacy, and technological failure. In all cases, these new cities are to an extent ideological, a promise of a fast and fluid future. Tying together themes across papers through two contemporary works of Chinese science fiction, Dan Luo detailed imaginaries of the future city as light, fast, enormous, as well as affordable. She argued that present and past anxieties structure possibilities of future city building.

Although cities yet-to-come are premised on speed, they often are characterized by delay, blockage, and suspension. Tim Oakes picked up the paradox of speed and suspension within China’s “fast urbanism” over the past two decades. In his paper on Guian New Area in China, he shines light on the fragmented infrastructural effects that lie beyond the promised new city, the surrounding transport networks. Suspension, waiting, and expectation surround city projects in New Yangon, Myanmar and Boten, Laos as well. In each case, we raised the notion of linear project time in contrast to the ways projects actually stutter and leave people in prolonged states of waiting, expectations often dashed. This waiting entails a calculation of how and when people can intervene around impending projects, and how, often, they have to spring quickly into action with little warning. The “inevitable collapse” of project time, as Courtney put it, harms those whose lives and hopes have become entangled with the project. Rather than contend with the much hoped-for, fast-moving ‘China speed,’ people must navigate the starts, stops, and fits of infrastructural time.

Across the two panels, infrastructure thus emerged as both an empirical object and analytical tool. Highlighting Brian Larkin’s (2013) approach, Tim Oakes pointed out that, “infrastructures are things *and* relations amongst things.” A lens of infrastructure points to questions not of what was planned versus actually built, but of the trajectory of the city yet-to-come or city model as a process and system of socio-technical relations. Many of the papers theorized what is at stake in the “in-between” period that stretches from urban and infrastructural new city proposals, through project planning, up to “completion,” however defined. They also pushed back on the notion of a China model and national model of city making. Instead, new city planning and construction is anything but coherent, undermined by chaos, complexity, and ambiguity that constitute city-building on the ground.

### *Participants*

#### Session I: Modeling the Global City

- Infrastructural Diffusion: Governance through demolition in China by **Jesse Rodenbiker**
- City building with Chinese characteristics: The case of Meixi Lake New Town by **Grace Yixian Zhou**

- Smart cities, clean cities, and the invisible cleaning workers: A case study of railway stations in India by **Pallavi Gupta**
- Malaysian city models in Africa: Circulations of Malaysian expertise and new relational geographies in African city building by **Laurence Côté-Roy**
- Echoes of colonial planning in a ‘futuristic model eco-city’ by **Sarah Moser**

#### Session II: Time and Temporality

- (Il)licit urbanism, eventuality, and the rhythms of a city yet-to-come by **Jessica DiCarlo**
- Between anticipation and hope: The smart city in Chinese science fiction by **Dan Luo**
- Between futures foretold and futures on-hold: Infrastructural promise, temporal navigation, and economic calculation in a New Yangon by **Courtney Wittekind**
- Speed and Suspension: Urban China’s fitful lurch into the future by **Tim Oakes**

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**Courtney T. Wittekind** is a PhD Candidate in Social Anthropology and a Harvard-Mellon Urban Initiative Fellow. Her doctoral research pursues two lines of inquiry linked to urban development and economic insecurity in contemporary Myanmar. The first is an ethnographic study of the politics of planning amidst uncertainty in southwest Yangon, a region undergoing rapid transformation as a result of the ambitious New Yangon Development Project. Second, she probes Myanmar’s broader political transition, proposing that local responses to the delays and deferrals of a large-scale, state-led development project may reveal related stances toward nascent reforms. Her research has been supported by the Fulbright-Hays program, the National Science Foundation, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation. She will begin a position as a Postdoctoral Associate at Yale University’s Program in Agrarian Studies in 2022.

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