

# CHINAMADE BRIEF



## Yangon's "New City"

*Courtney T. Wittekind, February 2021*

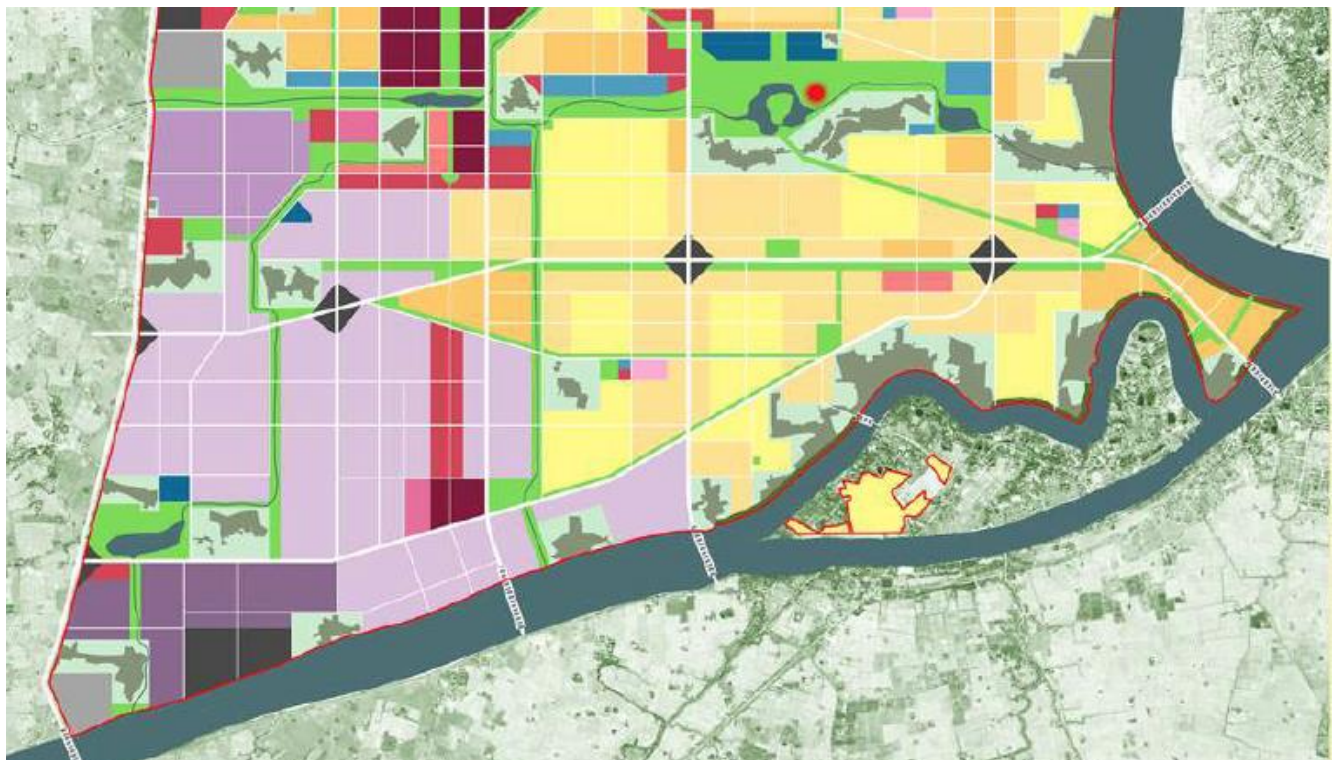


Figure 1. An official land use map repurposed to accompany an advertisement for land plots (Original map courtesy of the New Yangon Development Corporation).

Just last year, an advertisement announced that two large plots of land were for sale in the southwestern outskirts of Yangon, Myanmar. They were situated in an area presently awaiting redevelopment as part of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, itself a key component of the Belt and Road Initiative's implementation in Myanmar and the wider Southeast Asia region. Appearing in brochures circulated by real estate brokers and shared across a series of Facebook pages dedicated to strategic investments in peri-urban Yangon's burgeoning real estate market, the advertisement featured a large multicolored map of what was to come: a "New Yangon City" (Khine Win 2018) of over 20,000 acres, connected to Yangon's urban core by a series of bridges and highways. In yellows, greens, purples, and reds, the map distilled a series of official visions for what Yangon's periphery would look like

after being converted into urban land. Once an expanse of green—the site of sprawling rice fields for which Myanmar’s lowlands are known—Yangon’s southwest would be parceled off and reclassified into residential, commercial, or industrial zones. A business center, sports complex, civic plaza, and convention center would rise up at the center, linked by newly paved roads, open green space, and a riverfront promenade.

But, as the text of the advertisement made clear, the form and features of the coming “new city” were less a concern than the timeframe in which it would materialize. Written in the style of an imagined conversation between buyer and seller, the advertisement addressed the most common fears weighing on those interested in a land purchase:

*[Buyer:] As for me...I knew ... the things I've heard, can I ask them?*

*[Seller:] “Give it a go,” he said.*

*Q: Will they manage to start the New City during the current government’s tenure?*

*A: “Only 50/50,” he said.*

*Q: In that case, then the outcome is uncertain for buyers?*

*A: “If you will buy only when the outcome is certain, the current price will be about two or three times higher for you” he said.*

*Q: So it’s possible that it will take a long time...?*

*A: “It could be a long or short time, it just depends on the luck of buyers and of those who have plots to sell,” he said.*

Concluding, the seller directed interested buyers to the source of the map featured: *“You can be certain [the project] will happen soon. The plan is very good. Go and see for yourself on the developer’s page.”*

I begin this Brief with a description of this text not because of its exceptionality, but rather because it is one of a surge of land advertisements circulating on- and off-line, which, together, attempt to spell out not only *what* will constitute Yangon’s highly-anticipated “new city,” but *when* it will materialize. The question of *when* is an urgent one for residents of Southwest Yangon who must navigate the gaping void that stretches between a large-scale project’s proposal and its implementation, weighing practical concerns—planting schedules, seasonal harvest periods, time-sensitive sales of land and other property, and borrowing and repayment timelines—against a persistently unpredictable sequence of project stages. In the case of the proposed New Yangon City, while the concerns about upcoming delays mentioned in the advertisement—slow-downs due to administrative handovers and COVID-19 (Phyo Way 2020; Nan Lwin 2020)—have caused alarm, uncertainty related to the timescale of the project’s implementation has a much longer history.

### **A New “New City?”**

While the land advertisement described at the start of this proposal sought to leverage a specific planning map as evidence that buyers could “be certain” of project outcomes, these maps mean more in central Yangon’s office buildings than in the city’s outskirts, where towns and villages are littered with traces of earlier development efforts. A drive down the main road that links peri-urban Yangon’s southern Dala township with Twante, to the city’s west, finds torn and sun-bleached posters, flyers, and billboards, all promising land in “new cities,” “smart cities,” and “modern developments” of years gone-by (see Than Than Nwe 1998; Rhoads 2018). These are what Ashley Carse and David Kneas have called infrastructural

“zombie” projects; “killed” due to concerns of feasibility, transparency, or as a result of local resistance, they nevertheless rise up again and again, with new iterations sparked by changing contexts and remade potentials (2019; see also Goett 2016).

Lying only 860 meters across the Hlaing river from Yangon, the three southwestern townships of Twante, Kyeemindaing, and Seikkyi Kanaungto have long been identified as a strategic site for urban expansion since Yangon’s urban core was constructed under British colonial planners (Pearn 1939). And under the successive governments that have ruled the country since independence, Yangon’s Southwest has remained a high-priority area, highlighted in numerous plans, across decades, as the ultimate solution to Yangon’s ills: overcrowding, a lack of affordable housing, poor connective infrastructure, and uneven expansion to the city’s North and South.

Yet, even after its inclusion in Myanmar’s most recent major infrastructural and urban development plan, progress on a southwestern expansion is nevertheless overdue. After the official 2014 launch of the first Yangon “new city” proposal—then called the Southwest New City—the project was quickly called off, when questions arose about the process by which the project’s prized construction contract was awarded (May Kha 2014). Re-launched a year later with an open tender process, the project was narrowed down to three implementing companies in 2015 (Myat Nyein Aye 2015), with a goal of completing



Figure 2. A view of downtown Yangon from the city’s Southwest (Courtesy of Author).

construction of basic infrastructure—roads and bridges and key utilities—by 2017. But, in July of 2017, the project was stalled once again when the new national government, led by Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy, abolished the contracts of the three developers, aiming to begin the project again with renewed commitments to transparency and support for international investors (Myat Nyein Aye and Ye Mon 2016). Within that year, Yangon’s regional officials announced one more effort to restart the project, under a new government-led group called the “New Yangon Development Company Limited” (NYDC), which quickly signed a US\$1.5 billion framework agreement with China’s state-owned China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) (Kyaw Ye Linn 2018; Kyaw Phyto Tha 2019). While the project continues forward, numerous ongoing stumbling-blocks to weaken the chances it will be completed according to the timeline laid out in the original planning documents. Most recently, as has been the case with many BRI-associated projects, mounting concern around the potential long-term risks of a Chinese “debt trap” (Board 2019; Nan Lwin 2019) has prompted yet another slow-down, as NYDC allowed third parties to challenge CCCC’s initial bid for the project’s constituent infrastructure works.

While the particulars of this series of suspensions and restarts can often feel convoluted, the impact on Southwest Yangon’s residents has been swift and straightforward. Unable to anticipate what the future will bring—as citizens not yet urban, no longer rural (see Oakes 2020)—the New Yangon plan’s postponement has meant locals have, too, put their own plans on hold. Living in the “gap between promise and performance” (Gupta 2015), they wait to make crucial choices in hopes they can better align their plans with a more reliable timeline for the new city’s emergence.



Figure 3. Longboat drivers who ferry commuters to and from central Yangon await the construction of a bridge to the city’s southwest (Courtesy of Author).

### Infrastructural Space, Infrastructural Time

In my ongoing dissertation research, my goal is to examine this predicament by tracing the links between infrastructure-led development, proposed urban transformation, and a new form of *temporal* inequality that I argue is presently emerging in the wake of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. The spatial unevenness of urban and infrastructural development—and the tremendous inequality it routinely causes—has long been documented within an expansive literature on neoliberal urbanism (Brenner et al. 2009, 2012; Harvey 2012; Smith 2002), with influential works highlighting spatial stratification stemming from ecological destruction (Araghi 2009; Gordillo 2014), capitalist overaccumulation (Harvey 1994; Smith 2002), and gentrification and segregation (Caldeira 1996, 2001; Brenner et al. 2012; Harms 2011, 2016), among others. In Southeast Asia, in particular, scholarship in critical geography, urban studies, and anthropology has extensively documented the relationship between the uneven production of urban space and the forms of dispossession that underlie such processes (Li 2014a, 2014b; Harms and Baird 2014). As Asia’s so-called “final frontier,” Myanmar is often figured as an intensified case of these regional trends, with the country’s embrace of foreign investment linked to a “great land rush” that has upended longstanding relationships between populations and immovable property. As a result, an emerging anthropological literature on

Myanmar documents agricultural “land grabs” and their effects on populations facing eviction and displacement (Woods 2011, 2014; Prasse-Freeman 2012, 2016; Mark 2016; Ferguson 2014).

Yet, while recognizing critical scholarship that has emphasized the manipulation of space as central to the creation and realization of large-scale urban projects, my research underscores the extent to which the pursuit of urban transformation is equally concerned with manipulations of time. In emphasizing this, I join a number of anthropologists and other scholars who see urban and infrastructural investment as critical not only to present-day material transformations in residents’ everyday lives—the laying of pipes, paving of roads, and construction of high-rises, as three examples (Anand 2012; Harvey & Knox 2015; Arican 2020)—but equally to establishing new relationships across time (Harms 2013; Anand et al. 2018; Appel 2019; Carse 2014; Harvey & Knox 2012). Infrastructural investment and urban development have long promised modernity, development, progress, and freedom (Ferguson 2006), functioning as “promissory notes” that guarantee transformation in an undefined future (Appel 2018; also Stoler 2008). Yet, as has been shown in cases spanning the globe, large scale projects rarely adhere to the trajectories promised in planning documents, and, if eventually completed, their final forms routinely fall short of expectations. In a reflection that well captures the temporal dynamics of new urban plans’ implementation, Hannah Appel has fittingly noted that sweeping infrastructure projects do not so much “arrive” in their sites as “advance and retreat” in halting processes marked by delays, suspensions, and abandonment (2018; see also Carse 2014). Simply put, “project time”—defined as a temporal orientation that presupposes “the materialization of blueprint plans in physical form” (MacLean 2017; also Carse and Kneas 2019)—is an ideology rarely realized, as the linear trajectories it presumes splinter in the aftermath of project delays, suspensions, failures, and reversals (see also Gupta 2015, 2018).

This indeterminacy is a fact that planners, themselves, are quick to acknowledge (Abram and Weszkalnys 2011, 2013; Mack and Herzfeld 2020). Myanmar’s pillar urban development proposal—the “2040 Yangon Masterplan,” drafted by the Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC) with assistance from the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) initially pinpointed the year 2040 as an endpoint for an extended process of strategic urban development, going so far as to separate its timeline into short-term, middle-term, and long-term goals of five-year, ten-year, and 20-year “actions” that would lead to the realization of an “ideal future image of a city” (2013). In follow-up documents to the Masterplan, however, they acknowledge that even as the vision they describe is “basically targeting year 2040,” the city will “take much time to be an ideal image” and so therefore requires stakeholders to “foresee a longer period” up to even “a half a century later” (2018:I 2-1).

Such statements raise an urgent question for residents impacted by the 2040 Masterplan’s proposals: How does one prepare for transformations touted as imminent, while simultaneously foreseeing this “longer period” of potential project implementation? In seeking to answer this question, I propose that the theme of inequality, so dominant in analyses of spatial transformation, must be brought to bear on analyses of infrastructural delay and deferral. When the temporal horizon represented by a project’s potential completion is deferred, stubbornly receding into the farther and farther distant future, how might residents’ responses be differently constrained? For whom do the transformations promised by a “New Yangon City” materialize, and for whom do they remain indefinitely out of reach?

### **The Belt and Road: Unbuilt and Unfinished**

Since China’s proposal for the Belt and Road Initiative—conceived of as a new “21st Century Silk Road”—was introduced in October 2013, literature of the pitfalls and potentials of the Initiative has grown exponentially, describing the numerous and wide-ranging projects that make up the six primary economic

corridors envisioned by the Initiative: from high-speed rails to highways, industrial parks, special economic zones, and the construction and expansion of new megacities (Cartier 2018; DiCarlo 2020; Murton and Lord 2020). For scholars drawing on theorizations of critical and Marxist geographies, the BRI has broadly been conceived of as a “spatial fix” seeking to address overaccumulation in the Chinese capitalist system by providing sites for surplus capital (Harvey 1989, 2003, 2006; also Summers 2016, Apostolopoulou 2020; Bach 2017). When combined with the predominant rhetorical imagery of the Initiative as extending across the globe’s continuous surface through an expansive network of delineated spaces—corridors, zones, and nodes—it is not surprising that this framing has inspired a noteworthy literature on the ability of the Initiative to profoundly remake space (Summers 2020; Alff 2020). In a way that parallels the absence of the temporal in the earlier theorizations of spatial change described above, however, I propose that recent critical geographical scholarship on BRI projects could benefit from an equally lively discussion of the temporal implications of proposed large-scale socio-spatial change.

Interest in the temporal implications of the BRI has grown in the past year, particularly as a result of research into a broader “China Model” of development, which has sought to place analyses of BRI projects within a longer historical framing, considering them not as novel propositions, but as outgrowths of a domestic infrastructure push carried out *within* China since the 1950s (Oakes 2019). This framing has spurred research into the protracted trajectories of China’s infrastructural development boom, accounting not only for longer arcs of design, implementation, and construction rooted in socialist urban planning (Lam 2019; Tang 2019), but also those of decay and destruction that ensue after projects have served their intended purpose (Lam 2019; Rippa 2019). Following Sewell’s approach to an “eventful capitalism,” related efforts have traced the durational, knock-on effects of the “going out” of Chinese state capital, examining the relationship between capitalism’s expansion and its “hypereventful” history (Lee 2018).

Important temporal issues remain, however, when it comes to those projects promised under the banner of the Belt and Road Initiative, but not yet delivered. While certainly envisioned in a “Chinese register” (Oakes 2019) unlike their counterparts within China, or even in host countries in Africa, BRI infrastructure in the Southeast Asian region remains largely immaterial, envisioned but not yet implemented in the sites targeted for development. This distinction is one of great importance when it comes to tracing the newly emergent temporalities of infrastructure as, according to a recent article by Ashley Carse and David Kneas (2019), those infrastructures that remain “unbuilt and unfinished” ask not about the material, but about the immaterial— not about aftermath but anticipation.

Such is the case for the New Yangon City project, which is not so much unfinished as not yet begun. Official statements from politicians and developers seeking to reassure the public that the project is still moving forward have been buttressed by a widely publicized series of press releases, calls, and “in-depth discussions” between the Myanmar and Chinese governments confirming that BRI-associated projects will soon be “sped up” (Nan Lwin 2020a, 2020b). Yet the question of *when* still remains unanswered. In the context of COVID-19 associated slowdowns and suspensions, despite promises that BRI infrastructures will be developed at unmatched scales and speeds, concerns about the potential for protracted project timescales are especially urgent. As the author of the land advertisement reminds readers, it could be a long or short time depending on one’s luck.

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