

To Build a City on a Forest

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for the Forest Curriculum

1. Introduction

'Forest City' is a mega smart city project, built right off the coast of Johor, Malaysia. A joint venture between Country Garden Group, China and the Malaysian-government-backed Esplanade Danga 88 Sdn Bhd (EDSB)¹, the Country Garden Group, Pacificview Sdn Bhd's, Forest City is on the Iskander Special Economic Zone (SEZ), protruding into Johor strait that connects Singapore and Malaysia. The city is meant to attract affluent Singaporeans who can own property or drive down for weekend pleasures; Chinese investors seeking to own properties other than in China; and Malaysians benefitting from extractivist occupations like real estate, oil or even palm oil. Built on four reclaimed interconnected islands and spanning 30sq kms at the heart of an ASEAN universe, the strategic location of Forest City had also been taken into account by its owners from a global viewpoint. Forest City is a six hour flight to China (or India), is accessible to 15 APEC countries. It will also be connected to the ASEAN airline network. But perhaps Forest City's promise in the media thrives most on the conjunction between the words 'forest' and 'city' - the project touted as a 'smart and green futuristic' urban expanse. Look at any simulated image of Forest City and it looks like Nebuchadnezzar's 'Hanging Gardens', with planted trees, bushes and shrubs, protruding from any and every inch of concrete available. The city is also meant to contain a 'designed' tropical forest at its heart. The green in Forest City is material and metaphorical. Material, as every inch of the urban landscape is covered with plants, and metaphorical in the sense of being carbon/emmission neutral. The city mobilizes what is a multi-layered urban planning concept. It is layered with the vehicles and parking spaces hidden underground, while the top layer is made navigable through an extensive light rail system, making it an entirely automobile-free public realm. Like a million other tales of greenwashing, Forest City's projected green-ness only hides its roots in extractive capitalism. The valued public-transport-free realm is made of steel, chrome and wood, fired by coal and by labour exorted from somewhere else. Could there be an urban green-ness such as this without recognizing its exploitative materiality, its hidden away origin story? Even the much vaunted smartness of a smart city thrives on extracting user data, on the labour which mans such systems. With real time data analysis of its public infrastructure, unique user ID numbers that connect users to all the urban infrastructure, and round-the-clock surveillance of public spaces, Forest City banks on this strategy. A smart city by itself is a history of optimization and control, but now with Forest City, such a landscape of sensors, and screens, and data analytics is camouflaged by tall canopies, bushes, and waxed broad tropical eaves.²

Mega urban projects like Forest City, have become tools with which we think about infrastructure. Infrastructures like rail, pipes, telecommunication fibre optics, roads, and trucks are systems that move mankind, and matter³, amongst an ever expanding area of technology. In our everyday experiences infrastructure is environmental, in that infrastructure not only shapes and controls our environments (more on this later), but also seeps into all aspects of our lives, more often than not receding from our consciousness. Such stories of Forest City speaks to a history of infrastructure and mega projects not written in stories of growth, value, and property accumulation, but through narratives of missing paperwork, reclamations gone awry, financial and political

²
For more on the politics and poetics of Forest City read the wonderful piece by Daniel A. Barber, Erin Putalik, "Forest, Tower, City: Rethinking the Green Machine Aesthetic," *Harvard Design Magazine, Special Issue Into the Woods, 2018*, <http://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/45/forest-tower-city-rethinking-the-green-machine-aesthetic>.

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Brian Larkin, "Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 42: 327-343.

¹
All the introductory information has been gleaned from the Forest City homepage, especially the About Us and Smart and Green headings in the website. Visit them at <https://www.forestcitygp.com/>

quagmires (scams if you may want to call them) a history of extraction, and how capital ruins worlds here and elsewhere. Such narratives are not of promise, but of ruin, of projects crumbling from their moment of birth, of their origin.⁴

2. Politics on/below ground?

What is it like to build a city on the forest?

Not in, but on.

A friendly reminder that such a proposition is anchored in place and encoded in language.

One of the strangest words that goes around in infrastructural parlance is 'reclamation'. Reclamation refers to both the practice of endowing farrow or useless land with value, often through the provision of resources like water, labour etc., but also the capturing or regaining control of cultural value or pride.⁵ Reclamation is the capture of sovereignty, for better or for worse, to 're-claim' as it were. Forest City remains entangled in multiple claims of reclamation, with Malaysia, Singapore, China and Hong Kong all laying claim to these four islands. But such geopolitics speaks to the relevance of geology itself. Could the project be of economic value, we ask, if it were not strategically located in the sea, proximate to trading waters, containers, ships, ports and Singapore? Forest City's value comes from its strategic location, made possible only with reclaimed lands. Johor has plenty of open farrow or unused hinterland, but reclamation has opened up new spaces into the sea, giving it more worth by way of its proximity to Singapore. Forest City's geopolitical value derived from its geo-engineering of land, and its manipulation of geological constructs around the area.

Reclamation primarily refers to the practice of grafting land, but in most cases it is the emergence of human engineered (or anthropogenic) lands at/by/in/from the sea. Reclamation then is the prophecy of newness built on geologic maneuvering, of new sites of leisure and habitation, new positionalities and new proximities, new settlements jutting into older land formations.⁶ Reclamation is the site of speculative world building tied to capital.

What technical nomenclature can we use for world building that speaks to reclaimed lands?

Sculpting, (terra)forming, molding, inscribing?

All these words probably stand true in the case of reclamation, but as we build and sculpt land according to our will, we also ought to remember that reclaimed lands are often a tabula rasa; empty sites or canvases upon which we project our engineering will.

But what reclamation hides is its processual cousin - redistribution. Redistribution is necessarily recalibration - a realignment of pressure points and intensities. For China's 'Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)', it is the redistribution of sand along the logistical supply chain with trucks scooping sand copiously at Teluk Ramunia (150km inland from the sea), for the sprouting up of these sovereign green islands.⁷

4 Our narratives of suspension and halting with Forest City merit one important disclaimer. A lot of contemporary narratives about Chinese infrastructural projects failing and being suspended are written from American perspectives that often devalue China's projects as being shoddy, mediocre and full of loopholes and slipshots. Forest City is far from being mediocre, or shoddy, and Country Garden's own market reputation speaks otherwise. In this work, we both look at instances where the project faced moments of suspension (either with clearances or passport scams), but we also wish to open the suspended project and parse through all the violences. For more on the politics of talking about mediocrity in Chinese infrastructures, read Laleh Khalili, "Growing Pains," *London Review of Books*, Vol. 43, No. 6, March 18, 2021, <https://lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n06/laleh-khalili/growing-pains>.

5 Tekla Aslanishvili and Orit Halpern, "Scenes from a Reclamation," *E-flux Architecture*, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/new-silk-roads/313102/scenes-from-a-reclamation/>.

6 *ibid.*

7 Serina Rehman, "Trends in South-east Asia: Johor's Forest City Faces Critical Challenges," *ISEAS Yushof Ishak Institute*, no. 3, 2017, pg. 22. For more on sand, port authorities and how global supply chains develop their own tactics around sand follow *Centre for Research Architecture, FutureLand: Stories from the Global Supply Chain*, Centre for Research Architecture: Goldsmiths University of London, 2017-2018, <https://logisticalnightmaresite.files.wordpress.com/2018/08/futureland-reader1.pdf>.

The sand then gets dumped over the fragile mud sea beds. If ‘dumped’ sounds harsh, we could go with ‘forcefully laid over’. Dumped has that quality of projection - a sense of action, energy, a sense of refusing to settle. Sand takes ages to settle and coalesce, needs weight (from top) that would compress and pack it, needing time to be observed, in case there are leakages, subsidence (land subsiding) etc. But that would entail larger and longer gestation periods, delaying or even suspending the projects, leading to delayed investment and delayed capital. The Country Garden Group, the corporation responsible for Forest City, has over the years acquired a notoreity for completing projects on/before time, but such clearances have often side-stepped safety concerns, foremost of which includes bypassing the time required for the sand to settle. In early 2014 cracks appeared in the Forest City’s Show Gallery and other hotel buildings, relaying if nothing else that the fragile land beneath had not solidified in time.⁸ Cracks are mildly disruptive, they generate a buzz here and there, suspend construction for a while, and arouse distrust amongst its residents. But as time moves on, cracks are forgotten, more sand is dumped, more sea is reclaimed, and more land gets concretized.

3. Muddied Politics

Soon after the construction of Forest City had begun in full swing, Singapore intervened, calling out the Johor government for overlooking many environmental clearances.⁹ Well, as we know, in the history of mega-infrastructure projects, the reports and their clearances are attuned/modulated/suited to taste thereafter.¹⁰ A world of post-facto paperwork.

Foreign environmental reports on Forest City claimed the project was not merely reclaiming land. It was redistributing the coastal shoreline. The project was appearing over, above, and adjacent to the Tanjung Kupang seagrass meadows, altering an intertidal verdant landscape.¹¹

The sea grass meadows that once stood where Forest City now rests, are covered with reclaimed sands, and in areas adjacent or next to the island, just mud. Without seagrass that controls and mediates oxygen levels in water, what is left is a habitat that produces an eutrophic outgrowth of macroalgae, which without sufficient plantlife to consume it, cannibalizes breathable oxygen from the water.¹² Overabundant, and hard to eradicate, these macroalgae produce a shiny greenness of their own. But such a newly sculpted landscape as Forest City, like any smart city, papers over such not-so-shiny biological forms of the green – greens found in seagrass meadows (over which Forest City stands), in mangroves swamps (that were nearby) and in the algae that grew in these mudbeds. This particular green stands in for all forms and histories of green; a literal green-washing of the landscape. Our images of Forest City, in its brochures, model-simulations, 3D videos are all about ever renewing mechanized growth, with glossy shiny metals, people and plants alike, as if nothing could rust or wither away, as if the algal growth, seagrass or mangroves ever existed in its midst.

Reclamation lands are politics muddied. Reclamation processes in one place produce unclaimed lands elsewhere. As Forest City intrudes into low lying beds, silt deposits, over time, perhaps will create new silt-ba-

8
Ibid, pg. 16.

9
Williams, pg. 4.

10
Even as we write this article, major glacial floods and landslides are underway in Uttarakhand, one of the main provinces bordering the foothills of the Himalayas. As environmentalists point to how these landslides have been brought about due to developmental or infrastructural projects that have often had no government clearances, we cannot but help highlight the fact that recently the central government made amendments to the Environmental Laws, allowing projects with no clearances, but have been initiated nonetheless, to have post-facto clearances. This means that projects that have already begun cannot be undone, and clearances cleared just as paperwork formality.

To know more on the recent events around this, read Mayank Aggarwal, “Government pushes for post facto environment clearances while apex court disapproves,” Mongabay, April 6, 2020; Tarini Mehta, “Legalising illegality: Post-facto environmental clearances,” Decan Herald, Sept 24, 2020, While Forest City technically had environmental clearances, the fact that interested governments, including Singapore, pointed to how many clearances provided to the project violated environmental laws, functions, and homeostatis, pointing to a larger history of how environmental clearances become the way in which illegality is passed over, not as ways to control or restrict it.

11
Rehman pg. 22, Williams pg. 9.

12
Rehman, pg. 32.

sed islands. Silt concentrates in uneven patches, accumulating and concentrating more silt along the way. Silt begets silt. Perhaps, this tale of begetting points to a path of dependency and layered accumulation. A metaphoric tale of infrastructure itself. The Port of Tanjung Pelepas is built upon silt formations around Forest City and an older history of terraforming intertidal seagrass meadows.

4. Surplus/excess:

Between 2017 - 19, the state-run Qatari news channel Al Jazeera ran an investigation into the issuing of passports by the state of Cyprus to foreign nationals, under a scheme that allowed multi-millionaires and billionaires to secure European citizenship in exchange for significant financial investment in the island. This was largely facilitated through the procurement of expensive beachfront properties along the Cypriot coast, rendering these foreign nationals eligible for Cypriot passports. This scheme was heavily criticised by the European Commission as essentially 'selling off' hallowed European citizenship, but the Cypriot government denied any impropriety. By this time, however, several high profile foreign nationals, including Russian Oligarchs under investigation, Asian business people, Venezuelan bankers - Politically Exposed Persons - had had their applications of Cypriot passports approved. Among them was Yang Huiyan, the scion of Country Garden Holdings (a subsidiary of the Country Garden Group), promoter of the Forest City project. Her entry on the Al Jazeera website, on what have become known as the Cyprus papers, reads as follows:¹³

“杨惠妍

Year of birth: 1981

Application approved: 23.10.2018

Estimated net worth: \$27bn

Info: Billionaire businesswoman and the richest woman in Asia. Yang is the majority shareholder of property developer Country Garden Holdings, a stake largely transferred to her by her father, Yeung Kwok Keung, in 2007. He is also a member of The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CCPPCC), an advisory body to the government.

Related applicants: Yang's husband, Chen Chong, also acquired a Cypriot passport. He is a member of the 12th Guangdong Provincial Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

Second citizenships are not allowed under Chinese law and can result in the automatic loss of Chinese citizenship.¹⁴

If nothing else, the Cyprus Papers revealed what we already knew - capital always produces an excess. Sometimes an excess of passports: some who can afford to have many, and some like the undocumented migrant workers can't afford to have one, living precariously at the edges of the state. Capital is always a state of excess, an accumulation of wealth, sometimes diverted towards infrastructural projects, state-built

¹³
For more on the same follow the link here - "Cyprus Papers," al Jazeera, <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2020/cyprus-papers/index.html>; The original source document can be found here - <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/7042297-ZH-06-Yang-Huiyan.html>

¹⁴
Sudipto Basu, "On the Ends of the Network as a Zone of Friction (And Extraction)," *APRJA*, Vol 9: 1, 2020, <https://aprja.net/article/view/121486>.

ding and reclamation sites, and sometimes siphoned off into circuits of corruption as well. Capital produces circuits of infrastructure (and joins them with circuits of corruption) of swiftly moving land deals and passports with no real investment in citizenship. In fact, corruption vastly expands what could be logistics and circuits. Without a history of corruption accounted for, the tale of Forest City is merely one of elites of Malaysia, Singapore, Johor, and the ASEAN-Chinese. Sometimes locals intervene and expand the site onto concerns for the non-human, to sea-grasses, mangroves and siltation. But corruption, always operating as an outlier, far extends what might be the site of Forest City itself. It brings into fold the beached landscapes of Cyprus, next to the tropical palm trees of Malay Iskander, circulating from one to the other. Capital and corruption always expand, engulfing everything that touches its way. Even the forests face a similar fate.

5. After the State:

Forest City was created in the Iskander Special Economic Zone. Special economic zones carry the notoriety of being Special Exceptional Zones (SEZ). Hyperbolic as it may sound, SEZs are truly exceptional. They often bypass all state protocols, and rigours of planning, they are Leviathans who stand for and by themselves. Sovereign of their own making. SEZs are extra-State spaces (not spaces for romantic emancipation), but spaces where histories of predation are wrought. The State reproduces itself at these edges, the point at which bodies - human, non-human - and other become stated. SEZ's are interfaces, that which lies out of the state are brought within the fold, from labour to sand, to fish and ports - and those which lie within the state are pushed further and further outwards.¹⁴ Capital spills from Foshan to Nicosia to Johor, and beyond becomes stated, or defined, in that process. Becoming 'stated' is not merely in the production of borderlands, or in their ability to produce exceptions (as in the off-shore off-site, where this capital becomes processed), but rather in the tangles of the infrastructure that produce it.

It is an old tale now to speak of the bodies of the numberless, nameless largely South Asian migrant workers who exist in a permanent state of slippage from State. Enough careers - NGOs, state-actors, even artists peddling the latest form of porno-miseria - piggy back these migrants, within the logic of the harvesting of excess. Malaysia's particular relationship to these bodies speaks to the necessity of the unstated body in the State's reproduction of itself, maintained by the infrastructure of perilous sea voyages, of crossings of uncrossable borders, of sweat within damp walls, of fake passports, forged documents.

To understand what it is to build a city on a forest, we must unravel the multiplicity of layers in which becoming-stated occurs. Neo-colonialism by any other name, surely. An extractive infrastructure that both confirms and denies the State. The Belt and Road Initiative thus becomes a peculiar condition in which the machinations of the State are simultaneously extended and denied, necessitating a re-examination of the modes through which sovereignty, citizenship and categories of belonging are framed, across human and non-human worlds.

Author's Bio

The Forest Curriculum (Bangkok/Yogyakarta/Manila/Seoul/Berlin/Santa Barbara) is an itinerant and nomadic platform for interdisciplinary research and mutual co-learning, based in Southeast Asia, and operating internationally. Founded and co-directed by curators Abhijan Toto and Pujita Guha, and with Rosalia Namsai Engchuan, it works with artists, collectives, researchers, indigenous organizations and thinkers, musicians, and activists, to assemble a located critique of the Anthropocene via the naturecultures of Zomia, the forested belt that connects South and Southeast Asia. The Forest Curriculum organizes exhibitions, public programs, performances, video and multimedia projects, as well as an annual intensive in a different location around the region, which gathers practitioners from all over the world to engage in collective research and shared methodologies: *The Forest And The School*, Bangkok (2019); *The Forest Is In The City Is In The Forest I*, Manila (2020) and *II*, Online (2020-2021). The platform collaborates with institutions and organizations internationally, including Savvy Contemporary, Berlin; Ideas City, the New Museum, NTU CCA, Singapore, Nomina Nuda, Los Baños, and GAMEc, Bergamo among others.

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