Preface

This book places front and centre the lived experience of urban development and change in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. It does so through an ethnographic account of the ways in which urban residents attempt to own, and hold on to, forms of real estate during times of economic oscillation. Recent experiences of increased foreign direct investment and economic growth, followed by a drop-off in this investment, have deeply shaped Ulaanbaatar’s real estate economy and its construction sector. Forms of temporary access to land have created proliferating possibilities of converting urban land into assets. The fast rates of urbanisation occurring in many parts of the world are often buoyed by increased investment of capital and ensuing construction, yet these in turn often give rise to many other unseen effects, diverse economic practices, politics, ethics and urban subjectivities. Construction becomes simultaneously a solution and a problem (Gleeson 2014), especially when economic processes do not work as they ‘should’, or people are dispossessed of land to make way for further urban change.

This book traces how some of these phenomena have been experienced in Ulaanbaatar drawing from 12 months of fieldwork conducted over 2015–17. It explores expanding circulations of money, housing finance schemes, redevelopment processes and emerging urban ethics during times of economic fluctuation. Following different actions, strategies and techniques that form the ways in which residents precede and underwrite the owning of real estate property, *Shaping Urban Futures in Mongolia* considers Mongolian conceptualisations of growth, multiplication, fair portioning and land custodianship and the way they shape people’s engagement with their urban landscape. Connections are revealed between the intimate space of the home, formations and ideologies of the national economy, forms of urban development and disrepair and the types of politics and ethics that can arise as a result. Through residents’ attempts to own property in the city, Ulaanbaatar itself becomes a site of examination and critique, as a space of difficulty as well as potential.
Here residents live and work within a dynamic urban economy that is intricately interconnected with transnational flows of finance and urban planning knowledge.

Such a topic explores some of the intersections between the anthropology of economy, ethics, politics and urbanisation. It integrates this with a consideration of Mongolian concepts of possession, ownership and custodianship. It does so with a consideration of Mongolia’s experiences with capitalism following the end of socialist governance in 1990. The cross-cutting themes explored in this ethnography stem from research that I conducted as part of a project funded by the European Research Council (ERC) entitled *Emerging Subjects of The New Economy: Tracing Economic Growth in Mongolia*. This research project was based at University College London’s Anthropology department and ran from 2014–19. I undertook a four-year postdoctoral research associate position in this project under the supervision of the project leader Professor Rebecca Empson. The *Emerging Subjects* project consisted of four anthropologists and a geographer, all of whom conducted individual research on different topics, including the extractive economy, nationalism, subjectivities and debt (to name a few). Overall our research examined the ways in which people experienced Mongolia’s recent significant period of economic growth and subsequent extreme economic downturn after 2013. As part of the preparation for field research we explored different anthropological approaches to the study of emerging economic subjectivities, capitalism, economic temporalities and resource economies. This formed a valuable, conceptual launchpad for exploring other themes that emerged in our own individual research.

My own research interests on these topics emerged earlier during my doctoral research located in Mongolia’s west, which I completed from 2008–13 at the Australian National University. This research focused on musical performance, intersubjectivity and social moralities in a rural west Mongolian district. Here I learned how performance formed part of the attempts made by different people to try and create good futures. The majority of fieldwork for my PhD occurred from 2009–10 – a time when there was increased investment in Mongolia’s extractive sector. Many of my interlocutors at this time shared with me their anticipations of bright economic futures that were going to accompany this growth. Expectations of future wealth became part of my research on sociality and performance, as people correlated the possible causal effects of their own daily ceremonial and other musical sociality with its ability to harness fortune (*hishig*) and bring in good futures.
Musical performance thus formed part of an active prefiguration of futures people wanted to bring into being, implicating life in this rural area dependent on mobile pastoralism, the surrounding landscape, the climate and national economy of Mongolia as a whole. Researching people’s inter-generational, inherited custodianship of different musical knowledges, I also learned about perceptions of ownership, including engagements with spirit worlds embedded in the landscape and the responsibilities one carries when inheriting custodianship. The possession of rights to land access also pivoted around understandings of responsibility and negotiation of value. One cannot separate the cultivation of musical knowledge as a resource from that of the portioning and managing of landscape as a resource as well (cf. Humphrey 1995).

I came to the Emerging Subjects project with perspectives on custodianship and ownership that stemmed from rural Mongolian mobile-pastoralist understanding of land tenure. While I was very much aware that the capital, Ulaanbaatar, forms a considerable economic and political centre in Mongolia, living in rural areas revealed the presence of different kinds of centres and peripheries. The rural homeland of my interlocutors during my PhD research was itself a major socio-spiritual centre; they travelled to and from this homeland and referred to it as a significant reference point when elsewhere in Mongolia. Because of this, I began my research on ownership in Ulaanbaatar in 2015 with the perspective of one looking at the city from within Mongolia: from the ‘countryside’ (hööö) towards the city. From here my ethnographic gaze widened considerably to incorporate the wider political economy of urban development, the development of forms of financialisation around housing provision and the diverse population that has made a home in Ulaanbaatar, both recently and over several generations.

Ulaanbaatar is a city composed of essentially two main built areas: the centre of the city, principally made up of apartments and other buildings connected to core heating and water infrastructure, and the ger districts, expansive areas of fenced land plots, often housing self-built houses or ger (the white, felt, collapsible dwelling used by Mongolia’s mobile pastoralists). The two areas are distinctive, due in part to the fact that Ulaanbaatar’s ger districts are not connected to core heating and water infrastructure. There is a growing and important body of scholarship being written and produced about the ger districts, some of which can be seen in the work by Rick (J. E.) Miller (2013, 2017), Byambadorj et al. (2011), Terbish and Rawsthorne (2016, 2018) and Elizabeth Fox (2019). This book in parts also discusses the ger districts (see Chapters 4 and 5). However, overall, Ulaanbaatar’s areas of apartment blocks form a major
ethnographic entry point of this book. I present this picture to demonstrate how the two areas overlap, are interlinked and mutually reinforce each other in different ways.

A central theme of this book is the way in which the presence of these two influential built environments influences people’s lives. Many residents engage with both areas on a daily basis. Apartment areas, like the expanding city periphery, are also very much a work-in-progress. As Ulaanbaatar faces increasing demands for affordable housing and increasingly severe air pollution in winter, this ethnographic narrative reveals the importance of taking the mutual influence of these two built areas into account. Doing so reveals ways in which Ulaanbaatar’s urban residents are questioning their futures, and what they believe urbanism in Mongolia should indeed become.