Shaping Urban Futures in Mongolia

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The sky hung grey with coal smoke at the beginning of winter in 2016. It scratched my throat and stung my eyes as I stood in the snow outside my friend’s new apartment in Ulaanbaatar. Zorig was worried: his child had the beginnings of a cough that morning. Fearing the onset of a severe chest infection that would linger in the coal smoke-filled months ahead, he had arranged to have her admitted immediately to hospital. She ended up staying there for 10 days, receiving injections of vitamins and preventative antibiotics. That week newspaper articles had appeared on my Facebook feed describing overcrowded hospital corridors, as worried Ulaanbaatar parents sought the same kinds of treatment for their children. ‘And this is only the beginning of winter’, Zorig exclaimed. ‘I don’t know how I am going to keep my daughter healthy for the months to come.’

He was also worried about his apartment. Although it was newly built, he had found that last winter his heating was intermittent. ‘Oh, you mean the “heating”?’ he jokingly exclaimed, referring to his apartment. ‘Yeah, last year the heating was not so great. The building’s heating is now being managed by a new company, maybe it will be better this year.’ Their apartment sat unevenly alongside several other new buildings. When I left the entrance to the building, I tried to avoid slipping on the extremely icy footpaths that ended abruptly a few metres away from the building, leaving me to weave my way around several parked cars crammed together. Wheels rasped on frozen, compacted snow, as people slowly drove away in a small, jammed procession of cars. The night before it had taken 30 minutes for Zorig and I to drive the short distance (roughly 150 metres) off the main road down winding, narrow, almost single-lane streets, due to the number of cars attempting to park in this landscape. There was no clear road access nor easily accessible garages. Once reached, his apartment acted as a small, calm focus in this
landscape of rapid urban development – a warm respite from the cold and coal-smoke air pollution outside.

Over the course of my research into people’s attempts to acquire and own property in Ulaanbaatar, my interlocutors often cited ‘quality’ (chanar) as one of the main determining factors of their decisions to buy a particular apartment or land plot or to move between different areas of the city. People balanced their assessments of building quality, and its place within Ulaanbaatar’s larger infrastructural landscape, alongside the quality of life they might experience when making a certain apartment their home. When conceptualising the city through people’s quests to align material quality with life quality, finding property in Ulaanbaatar becomes, significantly, a question of infrastructural integrity. Access to centrally provided heating and water – their presence or absence, or the problems their absence can give rise to – become infrastructural ways in which the city itself is being conceptualised. An apartment purchase becomes the purchase of a tiny portion of a larger interconnected urban network. But it is also something more than that. It is the emplacement of the bodily self and family within the larger material urban environment, with all its known and unknown environmental, affective consequences.

Living in Ulaanbaatar forms a continual negotiation of the presence and absence of these infrastructures. The lack of centrally supplied heating to the ger districts leaves the city mired in severe, coal-smoke derived winter air pollution for several months of the year – pollution that is quickly creating an ongoing biopolitical crisis (Sorace 2018). As noted by medical anthropologist Chisato Fukada, over the past two decades Ulaanbaatar residents have been incrementally tracing the subtle changes in their bodies wrought by increasing air pollution. They map seasonal health patterns including coughs, headaches, itchy and watery eyes and swollen throats (Fukada 2017). In 2014–16, when Fukada conducted ethnographic research on residents’ perceptions of air pollution, the toxicity of pollution was being intimately linked with an increase in miscarriages and developmental issues in children (Fukada 2017).

Finding apartment housing or moving to the outskirts of the city provide possible ways (albeit transitory and partial ones) of seeking homes that remove oneself and one’s family away from the worst of the air pollution. Similar to the ways in which residents map the effects of air pollution on their bodies, my interlocutors attempted to map the changing urban landscape as they sought the best possible forms of infrastructural heating connections when attempting to buy apartments. While apartment areas are usually connected to centrally provided heating, ageing socialist-era infrastructures and fast rates of building that
expand beyond existing infrastructural systems means that quality infrastructural connections, while certainly likely, are not always necessarily a given. Conceptualisations of, and a seeking out of, quality has become a prism through which Ulaanbaatar is known on infrastructural terms by its residents. Here attempts to map infrastructural connections have become a continuing material critique of the changing urban form.

This chapter is not an ethnography of the technical systems of infrastructure themselves. It does not necessarily form a study of the ways in which a ‘technical system originates in one place, growing in response’ to particular factors and techniques (Larkin 2013, 330), influencing people’s ways of life. Instead, this chapter provides a resident-centric perspective on the poetics and politics of infrastructural atmospheres (Larkin 2013, 329). It focuses on the ways in which residents themselves view the city, its interlinked infrastructures and their home within it. Evaluating forms of material quality gives rise to types of personal, moral evaluations of the city itself.

Conceptualisations of quality, or chanar, emerged as an encapsulating theme throughout my research that interweaves several areas of this book discussed thus far. Conceptualisations of quality influenced Chuluun’s choice of apartment, described in Chapter 1. It formed part of the impetus for residents of building no.X to go and improve the area around their building, and also shapes the decisions of land holders in choosing which part of the ger districts they would like to live. Taking a closer look at how people conceptualise ‘quality’ in multifaceted ways reveals how choosing property in Ulaanbaatar exposes the hidden complexities, contradictions and interrelationships that make up Ulaanbaatar’s built environment. Assessing quality has become a way in which city residents critique the manifestation of the so-called urban centre and periphery. This critique gives rise to a type of formative urban ethics in this era of a lack of equitable infrastructural provision and resulting growing air pollution.

Finding an apartment with good quality infrastructural connections was not always easy to do. Looking at ‘quality’ as a prism for understanding forms of infrastructural uncertainties allows the reconsideration and expansion of existing studies on postsocialist, Soviet-influenced infrastructural systems – such as that seen by Collier’s seminal analysis of the politics surrounding postsocialist Russian thermal-powered heating systems (Collier 2011). Like the Russian town of Belaya-Katliva that forms the main focus of Collier’s study, Ulaanbaatar also experienced infrastructural ‘bundling’ during the socialist period. In 1959 this saw the heating system and production of electricity becoming inextricably,
materially interlinked in ‘intransigent’ ways (Collier 2011) into the one centralised (tövlôrsön) thermal energy system, supported by hot water produced at three combined heat and power plants (Boldbaatar et al. 2014, 140; ADB 2008, 1). It created a system through which infrastructural systems extended outward from a ‘kernel’ of the ideology of communality, providing an interlinked, bundled, centralised system that was heavily inter-reliant on its component parts (Humphrey 2005, 43).

Like that experienced in Russia, at the end of socialism after 1990, Ulaanbaatar’s central system has undergone refurbishments (ADB 2008). Since 1990 the city’s rapidly expanding ger districts have now vastly expanded this infrastructural network. As Collier notes on Russia during the Soviet period, this ‘quantum leap towards ubiquity’ was accompanied by an understanding that providing equitable heat was the Soviet government’s responsibility, achieved through continuous, reliable and centralised heat in the one central system (Boldbaatar et al. 2014). Post-1990 in Ulaanbaatar, the failure to provide equitable heat and the resulting dire, permeating and engulfing air pollution coming from people’s attempts to heat gers with coal stoves has been seen as a catastrophic failure of urban, and indeed national, governance to provide this essentially human, Mongolian, urban right to equitable, environmentally safe heating. Such failure has increasingly culminated in forms of public protest (Fukada 2017). In these, as in Russia, the government is viewed as ‘failing so miserably in what seem[s] obviously to be their responsibility’ (Collier 2011, 204). More recently, an initiative was launched in 2018 by the Ulaanbaatar municipality in which they began providing free electricity to the ger districts between the hours of 9pm and 7am, enabling residents to heat their gers and buildings (baishin) with electric heaters at no cost. Such an initiative was launched in an attempt to reduce pollution. It also demonstrates a municipal attempt to assume an encompassing responsibility for the growth in winter air pollution.

In this postsocialist landscape, the lack of infrastructural provision includes not only reaching the expanding ger districts, but is also seen as implicated in the construction rate of new apartment buildings. Refurbishments to the Ulaanbaatar District Heating System funded by the ADB (ADB 2008) have been undertaken to address heat loss, system degradation and ‘shortcomings in the heat supply’ that had been emerging since the late 1990s (ADB 2008, 1). While many new apartments are indeed connected to centralised heating networks, my interlocutors often voiced rumours about buildings they had heard about in which the heating supply was intermittent, inadequate, or not what they or others
expected when buying an apartment in that building. In Ulaanbaatar, when residents seek out an apartment, a building’s internal infrastructure is by no means simply taken for granted (Larkin 2013, 336). As noted by others (Larkin 2013; Chu 2014, 365; Schwenkel 2015b, 520), different infrastructures’ literal invisibilities were not viewed by my interlocutors as being part of a kind of seamless ‘embedded technical backdrop of social flows’ (Chu 2014, 353). The fast rates of construction were being viewed as potentially not matching adequate concomitant expansions of infrastructure to sustain this construction. New buildings were thus viewed as potentially suspect unless proven otherwise.

Ways to find out about the quality of a building’s infrastructural connections were various. They could be found either through living in it, through knowing someone who lives there and was able to vet its infrastructural quality or through assuming the high quality of buildings built by a trusted construction company, known for ensuring such infrastructural integrity. Seeking infrastructural quality became a way for my interlocutors to critique forms of urban expansion and fast rates of growth. Concomitantly it became ways in which residents critiqued the kind of processes that made these fast rates of growth possible. Potential infrastructural slippage is thus seen as an example in which someone has prioritised profit accumulation over providing suitable safe housing.

Subterranean spaces became speculative zones as people attempted to map and understand potential slippages in infrastructural connections. One day in November 2016 I met with a ‘chöölööt ajilchin’ – a ‘free-worker’ or day labourer by the name of Baatarzorig who had been spending the morning advertising his skills in the Bi Chadna, or ‘I can’. This was a well-known, colloquially named area of the steps of a building in Ulaanbaatar where itinerant labourers and construction workers waited around to be hired for different kinds of construction jobs. The Bi Chadna was known as a place where older construction workers no longer hired for work on large-scale construction sites could find intermittent employment.

Baatarzorig, my research assistant and I had begun talking together on the steps of the Bi Chadna and we decided to step inside the nearby warm café (tsainy gazar) to talk further over a cup of milk tea. Baatarzorig was in his 60s; he had worked in construction during both the socialist period and the postsocialist period. His reflections on the changing nature of Ulaanbaatar revealed a fascinating historical perspective on the city’s built forms. As we spoke that day he described how, in his opinion, the system that provides heat throughout the city was being overrun. Drawing a diagram in my notebook to demonstrate, he explained how the centrally
provided heating infrastructure has nodes or sub-stations, and that each sub-station now supplies heat to far more buildings than it was originally designed to. This, he said, weakened the provision of heat to some newer apartments. When I myself lived in Ulaanbaatar for the first time, in 2006, I was told that older, ex-socialist apartments were always warmer than newer ones; sure enough, the ex-socialist era apartment I lived in during that time was overly warm during the winter. Baatarzorig’s perceptions that had been developed over the course of his career reflected a wider tendency among my interlocutors to try and understand the physical workings of the urban landscape in Ulaanbaatar – which for him included seeking an understanding of subterranean environments.

Given this, finding a new apartment thus becomes a search for more warmth in an uncertain, changing urban landscape. Like the ger districts consisting of self-built houses and fences that were easily erected (and moved secretly at night), the apartment areas are also works in progress. With the heating of separate gers and small buildings (baishin) essentially outsourced to individualised households in the ger districts, and the possibility of a lack of effective infrastructural connections in new buildings, residents feel the need to compensate for this potential slippage by assuming the onus for seeking out the best connections possible.

**Manifesting quality**

One warm, sunny afternoon in June 2016, I drove out with Tsogoo, a real estate agent, to see apartments in a brand-new development that he had been hired to sell. During the period of economic downturn and many salaries being frozen (both in public and private sectors), there had been a marked decrease in apartment sales. Since 1990 it had been common practice for construction companies to largely sell apartments themselves. However, in this recent fluctuating economic environment, construction companies had been increasingly hiring real estate agents in an attempt to sell and rent more properties. In turn, a small but growing number of these agents had begun to set up agencies in Ulaanbaatar in more recent years. Tsogoo worked as a real estate agent in a company directed by his business partner Myagma – an astute businesswoman with a keen knowledge of the history and political economy of housing, real estate markets and finance in Ulaanbaatar. The apartment complex (hothon) I was visiting that day with Tsogoo was called Haven Town. The developers had hired the company to sell the apartments, and Tsogoo was working as the onsite real estate agent.
As Tsogoo and I drove out towards Haven Town, we headed south of Ulaanbaatar. We drove down a main road towards the Tuul river, a thin body of water winding beneath the base of the Bogd Han mountain range. As we drove out on the main, new road in this direction, the surrounding urban landscape of apartments and commercial buildings opened up to the sparse grassy fields in this part of the city. The dusty landscape was dotted with outcrops of new, luxury developments; some were gated, surrounded by high concrete fences with archways over the entrance way. We soon turned down a dusty, unpaved road that bordered several of Ulaanbaatar’s newer and expensive luxury apartment complexes, then pulled up in an alcove alongside a temporary fence; it was lined with shipping containers and demountable buildings supporting construction and site management. These lay under the shadow of a new, blue and white building with clean lines and new paintwork that arched out above us.

As we got out of the car, I noticed the quietness of the surrounding area. It was true that we were now far away from the congested roads that made up the centre of Ulaanbaatar, but the quietness was also due to the lack of people in this newly developed area. Occasionally the sound of building work emanated out of surrounding structures, and residents entered and left some of the more completed developments, but it was still far removed from the city centre bustle. The construction of Haven Town was near completion. Several tall apartment blocks stood together in a rectangle with a large central space in the middle. Entering by the large glass doors at the main doorway of the first building, we came into a new lobby; some electrical wires still dangled from light fixtures and temporary foam padding was still affixed around door frames. This building’s interior was clearly still incomplete. This incompleteness gave Tsogoo the opportunity to explain to me one of the main selling features of the Haven Town development – that of its unbridled quality (chanar).

Tsogoo and I entered an empty three-bedroom apartment. It had a spacious living area overlooking the central space created between the tall apartment blocks. As we walked around the apartment, Tsogoo explained to me how the large central area between the buildings meant that all the apartments are assured at least a half day of sunlight. Tsogoo then started to explain to me the origins of the components in all the apartments. One of Haven Town’s selling points was that it contained features made with ‘Yevrop Brendüüd’ or European brands. The wooden floors, he said, are ‘tsever tsars mod’, or ‘pure oak’, from Italy. He then showed me the bathroom; it featured smooth, cream tiles, adorned with an understated
pattern. ‘All the tiles in here are Versace brand’, he said, emphasising the
detail and craftsmanship of the beautiful laying of small, square, patterned mosaic tiles in the shower stall. This building and its interiors, he
said, had been overseen by a European engineer, a man strict on making
sure construction workers completed work to the highest quality. He then
left, returning with an unused tile from an adjoining temporary office
space in which he received potential buyers. Tsogoo laid the tile upside
down on the kitchen bench, revealing its underside that was detailed with
the Versace logo – the proof of its superior ‘quality’ (Figure 5.1).

Tsogoo also showed me other hidden aspects of the apartment’s components. Opening a bedroom door, he disclosed a solid metal embossed stamp on the inside of the door jamb, just above the lock of the
doorknob; it detailed the brand insignia and name of a luxury European wooden door company. Walking into the lounge, Tsogoo opened a small compartment in the lower part of a wall revealing shiny new internal heating infrastructure – valves and piping – through which one could regulate the supply of heat to the radiators in each room (Figure 5.2). These valves and piping, he said, were made by an extremely good company. He

Figure 5.1 Tsogoo ‘proves’ the quality of a tile to me by revealing its underside, embossed with the Versace brand name. Source: author
then opened up a fuse box, also made by an Italian electrical company. The building’s lifts were made by a company based in Switzerland; even the sewerage pipes of the apartment complex were from Europe, which, according to Tgosoo, meant that ‘people will know it will last’. In a brochure for Haven Town, the front page advertises how the building was ‘Yevrop chanaraar sünderlüülev’ or ‘erected through European quality’. Here the nature of the building itself was purported to have come into being through ‘quality’ – a subjective, intangible essence – infused within its internal components and the way in which they were put together.

Pouring capital into the construction of a building made from such expensive components and interior fixtures was a huge risk for the investors and the developers. Yet it was not an uncommon feature of new luxury developments built during the previous six years in Ulaanbaatar. Meeting with Tsogoo that day and listening to his musings on the benefits of ‘quality’, his salesmanship fitted the role of someone tasked with selling the best features of an apartment to potential buyers in a depressed economic climate. However, it also echoed to me the many other types of conversations that I had had, and would continue to have, with my

Figure 5.2 Tsogoo shows me the piping and valves behind the building’s internal heating infrastructure as proof of their quality, revealing another European brand. Source: author
interlocutors in different areas of the city about ‘quality’. It linked with discussions about the relationship between material quality, the reasons residents sought out particular types of real estate and the possible types of quality of life (am’dralyn chanar) that different types of dwellings could give rise to.

What the developers were aiming to sell in Haven Town was not just a luxury building that adhered to transnational conceptualisations of what a ‘global’ city should include as markers of its economic success. Another section of the Haven Town brochure listed ‘Twenty-five reasons to select this hothon (mini-town)’. In this part, alongside lists of the building’s internal features, the surrounding amenities and its overall ‘safe environment’, a section was included that listed the building’s ‘lifetime guarantee of quality’. This section included several key points, among them being that the building was ‘Fully connected to the engineering central line’ and has a ‘40- to 60-year guarantee of quality building construction’, and ‘full cast design [of building] resistant to earthquakes measuring 8–9’ on the Richter scale. These claims to quality, rather than simply relating to luxury interiors, extended from the core of the building itself and spanned outwards into a larger infrastructural network. The quality of the development’s infrastructural connections to the rest of the city (its connections to electricity and centrally-provided heating) were something to assure a potential buyer of – they were not something that potential customers would necessarily take as a given. Like Tsogoo, this brochure was attempting to make visible the building’s hidden infrastructural make-up and to argue for its importance. In so doing, it deliberately appealed to a clientele that valued, assessed and sought out multifaceted aspects of ‘quality’.

Colours, temperatures and connections

As one interlocutor explained, when describing to me how she selected her apartment: ‘I looked for the best quality apartment, the one that is warmest during winter.’ Numerous people I spoke to placed high emphasis on the need to have a building that possessed good internal heating infrastructure, with a reliable connection to Ulaanbaatar’s ageing, centrally-provided heating system. When I asked what aspects of quality they were looking for, rather than mainly mentioning the aesthetic qualities of a building, interlocutors most often told me the most important thing was that it had a quality heating connection, followed by the quality of a building’s connection to hot water and its internal plumbing system.
The building’s structural integrity was also described as very important, as well as an apartment’s location and height within the wider, quickly changing urban landscape. One would not want to buy a sunlit apartment on a lower floor, only to have a neighbouring building constructed a year later permanently blocking sunlight from reaching their home.

Discussions of quality also emerged in other ways. A resident by the name of Ochir lived in an old building close to building no.X. He worked as a heating systems technician in the construction sector. As I stood with him outside his apartment in Ögöömör, he traced for me an underground network of upgraded heating pipes that he suspected lay beneath our feet. He observed how much he wished he could gain access to these pipes by obtaining an apartment in a newer development, one that he envisaged could be built in place of his building. In other instances, meeting with people in the ger districts, they complained to me about the poor quality of the soil after years of latrine use, as well as the constant air pollution that surrounded them in winter.

Accurately assessing the built form of an apartment when purchasing property is hard to do – especially when it is difficult fully to ascertain the exact nature of a building and to determine who is responsible for different aspects of its construction (Skinner 2016; see also Chapters 2 and 3). Instead people use other kinds of markers to try and ‘read’ the urban landscape. They look for physical markers that help them to avoid poor building quality and maximise their chances of finding a building of high quality (ih chanartai). One cold afternoon in November I accompanied a woman called Nyamaa around a newer district in the southern fringe of Ulaanbaatar. This area had been sought after for its relative distance from the site where a lot of the city’s coal-smoke air pollution was produced. For the past 15 years or so, this area had been a popular place to buy a new apartment. However, in more recent times the city’s air pollution had found its way to this area as well.

In this newer suburb, a large number of apartments have been steadily built. Some areas maintain appropriate gaps between buildings, close to restaurants and playgrounds, but numerous other apartment blocks in this area now sit alongside each other. Some of these have limited parking, traffic for the majority of the day and confusing levels of road access. Nyamaa, with whom I was visiting at the time, mentioned that her mother deliberately chose to buy her this apartment on the top floor of her building. With several buildings being built close together in this area, her mother feared that the view and regular sunlight would soon be blocked if she bought an apartment on a lower floor. As we walked down narrow streets lined with newer looking apartment buildings – most of
which were around 10 or so storeys in height – Nyamaa showed me one such apartment block. She pointed out its particular paint colour and explained to me that people knew this colour and the building’s design. This colour was commonly used by the same construction company on the same building plan in other areas of the city; it formed part of its recognisable brand. However, she told me that this company now had a reputation of building to an extremely ‘low quality’ (muu chanar). The particular colour of these buildings had therefore become a warning flag to those reading the surrounding landscape.

Colours, rumours and speculation form part of the multifaceted strategies that people engage in while attempting to ‘divine’ the nature of the surrounding landscape. ‘Observing’ and ‘seeking’ become part of divinatory techniques, forming ways of reading the unpredictability of infrastructural connectivity (De Boeck 2015, 48). Several of Nyamaa’s relatives had lived in this lower quality building. They had described to her how the internal plumbing systems were extremely unreliable and there was not a sufficiently reliable supply of water to apartments, especially on upper floors. Nyamaa also told me that during the socialist period this district had been undeveloped, and the postsocialist provision of infrastructure had since been intermittent. Also, she said, this particular building had many cracks in it, causing people in general not to trust the structural integrity of the building.

Walking further in this area, we came across an unassuming building of a drab, blue colour that blended with the overcast sky. It stood in this part of the district, not looking too different from the design of the other buildings. My friend described this building as one of the first new postsocialist apartment blocks built in this area in the 1990s and commented that it is known to be of extremely high quality. ‘A lot of rich people live there’, she said. Mapping the colours of buildings formed a signifier interwoven with rumour that indicated the potential for hidden infrastructural quality, or lack thereof.

Another crucial aspect of people’s assessments of ‘quality’ was the type of technical relationships a building had with the larger infrastructural ‘systems’ within the city. This is an aspect of quality that is much harder for residents to assess. In wealthier areas of the city, rather than being an absolutely guaranteed way of accessing better infrastructural connections, outer appearances of newer buildings often hid a variety of infrastructural connections with significant differences in quality. In 2017 Nomi (see Chapter 1) now lived in a new apartment complex (hothon) of semi-detached houses in a southern district of the city. This house was extremely spacious, with a large, open-living, tall-ceilinged
living room and kitchen and carpeted stairs that led up to two large bedrooms and a bathroom. When I visited her one afternoon in 2017, Nomi told me how the construction of these small *hothon* of semi-detached houses had been instigated by a group of people who had been friends over many decades. Collaborating together, this group of friends – several of whom had been quite active in business in the recent past – had themselves sourced and sub-contracted a construction company to build the small complex.

Such semi-detached housing, while rare among areas filled with apartment buildings, is now appearing more often in wealthier areas south of Ulaanbaatar. However, while a symbol of wealthier living, it was not necessarily an indicator of ‘exemplary’ infrastructural assemblages. Nomi’s house, for instance, was connected to the main heating supply. However, its water was not from the city water supply but supplied, as she described, ‘from the mountain’. The water came from ground water and was pumped up from the earth. This meant that Nomi did not trust the water. She believed that it had too much chalk in it and complained that this left a white residue on her cooking implements. Like many others in Ulaanbaatar, Nomi and her family used a water purifier, so her young child could drink fresh water.

Rather than centrally provided infrastructures of heating and water provision always forming a contained infrastructural ‘other’ to the permeating, atmospheric air pollution of the coal-fuelled stoves and multitude of water sources in the ger districts, areas of ‘slippage’ also appeared in other apartment complexes. These served to blur the boundaries between infrastructural systems and the surrounding urban and rural environment. One interlocutor described to me how an apartment building further south in a very wealthy part of the city could not be connected to the main central heating provision. Instead, in a similar way to the myriad number of gers and houses heated by coal fires in the ger districts, this building had its own central heating system, fired by a coal-fired furnace. These kinds of infrastructural slippages created openings for a proliferation of business opportunities. Importers of a Korean hot water system, for example, had found out about a building with inadequate centrally-provided heating. They had started selling individual water heating systems door-to-door in this apartment complex as people attempted to compensate for this lack.

Such stories were commonly circulated among my interlocutors. They were often recounted in conversation, especially when someone had just heard about my research project for the first time, or when I was reconnecting with old friends to whom I had not spoken for a while. Such
moments of slippage and ‘breakout’ from the ‘uneventful’ and mundane capacities of infrastructure (Chu 2014) could be said to be capturing people’s imaginations the most. If infrastructure is working as it should, it is arguably not noticeable, nor that remarkable. Discussing infrastructure then, naturally, brings out stories of failure and moments of disappointment. However, in this landscape of fast rates of building, where new connections are frequently being made and networks ‘stretched’ (as new connections are made to older systems), these rumours formed part of an emerging critique and cynicism towards the changing nature of the urban landscape. They contribute to a critical perspective that is useful to residents when assessing how, or if, they will invest their own money and lives by choosing particular apartments.

**Quality as a conceptual prism**

The prism of quality forms a perspective on the city that looks out from – and links together – the intimate space of the home with the city at large. During my fieldwork, it formed part of the ‘social life of environmental knowledge, perception and problem definition’ in Ulaanbaatar (Rademacher 2015, 139) and reveals the intimate and bodily inter-relationships that residents have with the underground, hidden and not-fully-knowable infrastructural effects of changing patterns of urbanisation in the city. In this conceptual space, material, physical elements and the social perceptions of them become interlinked and shape one another (Latour 1993, 94–6). This mutual absorption of the natural and the social (Das 2011, 320) becomes an important way in which urban residents conceptualise the relationships between themselves and city forms. It also becomes a way in which people conceptualise and bundle a sense of the material world inwards towards themselves (Nielsen and Pedersen 2017, 258).

Assessments of quality become a way in which urban residents attempt to move beyond the oscillations of knowledge and ignorance in the Ulaanbaatar urban environment (Anand 2015; Pedersen 2017). The hidden nature of infrastructures is a cause for concern precisely because they are not fully knowable. Their hidden aspect makes them suspect. Attempts to seek out whether an apartment is better quality, whether by asking friends who might know someone living in the building or by choosing a reliable construction company owned by an acquaintance, are both ways in which people attempt to pre-empt the type of embodied, sensory experience that a particular apartment might give rise to.
However, despite these attempts, buildings themselves change; despite gathering as much information as possible, it is essentially impossible to know everything about a building. Only when one tries to take a shower or live through a winter in an apartment does the nature of its internal infrastructure become apparent, and more knowable over time.

Prefigurative assessments of quality thus become an attempt to shape one’s own future infrastructural experience. This brings in a consideration of the aesthetic, physical nature of infrastructure in a way that moves beyond Larkin’s discussion of how infrastructures ‘shape the ambient conditions of everyday life’ (Larkin 2013, 336) to look instead at how residents prefigure possible infrastructural futures. Gauging a building’s quality instead becomes an attempted analysis (however partial or speculative) of the aesthetics of form (Perkins and Morphy 2006, 323–4) of hidden infrastructures in a proactive, future-making way.

Seeking quality results in my interlocutors viewing Ulaanbaatar through a materialist literalist lens (Lea and Pholeros 2010, 190–1). In their article on government housing that is provided for Aboriginal people in remote areas of Australia, Lea and Pholeros (2010) advocate for a type of material literalist focus on the actual nature of government-provided Aboriginal housing in Australia. In looking at the actual built nature of the house, they argue, one no longer sees the ‘house’ celebrated in government brochures and official photographs as evidence of the government ‘providing’ housing for Aboriginal ‘recipients’. Instead, looking at the literal components of a house reveals a multitude of unfinished and inadequate aspects of the building, for instance sewerage pipes that are not connected to proper sewerage systems. Such infrastructural inconsistencies will very likely accelerate a house’s disrepair and decay.

When looking at a house this way, as Lea and Pholeros state, a house ceases to be an actual ‘house’; it becomes something else in its incompleteness. A materialist literalist lens allows one to move beyond the official discourse and the types of glossing to which they give rise. Attempting to look at the material reality as much as possible for what a building actually is exposes types of inconsistencies, power relationships and competing ‘conviction narratives’ (Chong and Tuckett 2014) that are part of the making of built forms. Lea and Pholeros advocate this perspective as an ethical stance that deconstructs dominant official Australian state discourse surrounding Aboriginal housing needs.2 I argue that when seeking out or questioning the quality of built forms in Ulaanbaatar, residents similarly engage in a type of materialist literalism as a way of attempting, as much as possible, to seek the truth of the material nature of a built apartment.
In this instance, Mongolian materialist literalism becomes a form of urban ethical positioning. Assessments of ‘quality’ form a latent critique of an overactive, fast-paced construction industry and ‘wild’ (zer-leg) capitalism that has given rise to such a fast rate of building. It also forms a corresponding critique of a municipal and national government that has allowed such an increase in construction, all the while failing to provide comprehensive core infrastructure to the majority of the city’s ger districts. Questioning the nature and form of an apartment itself results in the built nature of an apartment becoming a broad ethical signifier that shapes a reconceptualisation of the city’s built forms and its urban politics. Also ‘hidden’ are the types of power relationships that enable construction to occur in the first place (Skinner 2016), the agreements between developers and the municipality, and the suspected links between political networks and the construction companies themselves.

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, people wishing to engage in urban development initiatives potentially become open to being suspected of secretly seeking profit in a selfish way rather than wishing to benefit the city and its residents in an equitable way. The perception that people could very possibly prioritise the building and selling of apartment buildings for profit over ensuring that the apartment is of suitable quality with quality infrastructural connections means that critiquing infrastructure forms a critique of the unequal power relationships embedded in the urban landscape itself. This makes even more sense when considering Mongolian conceptual frameworks surrounding power, ethics and the nature of objects in exchange in Mongolia more generally. As Højer (2012) notes in his study on the exchange of physical items in the unequal relationship between pawnbroker and loan-seeker in pawn shops in Ulaanbaatar, ‘the quality of the objects [pawned are] tied up with the affects and intentions involved in the [unequal] exchange moment’ (Højer 2012, 47). Apartments themselves also become charged objects, in that they represent a physical manifestation of the unequal meeting point between developers and flows of capital on the one hand and urban residents seeking a home on the other. Like the pawned objects discussed by Højer, apartments simultaneously represent new possibilities yet are, at the same time, ‘the products of larger structures of inequality in the Mongolian society of today’ (Højer 2012, 47). Thus a critique of infrastructural integrity is not necessarily an indication that many apartments are indeed infrastructurally deficient. Instead, it forms a way of attempting to critique, and thus understand, a fast-changing urban environment and the types of power relationships that make it possible.
The politics of proximity – infrastructural pull

The widespread speculations made on assessments of quality give rise to multiple people within the economy of housing and real estate in Ulaanbaatar – construction companies, as well as potential apartment buyers – being highly dependent on rumour and speculation over changing infrastructural environments when trying to work out where to buy an apartment or construct a building. Speculations and rumours over hidden infrastructural knowledge – the workings behind walls or under the ground – give rise to fundamental anticipatory economies and material outcomes that shape the construction and buying of apartments.

As outlined in Chapters 2 and 3, the district of building no.X forms a place where types of infrastructural provision end and the ger districts begin, forming a complex, oscillating overlap of different kinds of built forms. In November 2015, when visiting a similar area, I saw that new infrastructural systems of sewerage pipes and electrical supply were being laid in a stretch north of the city, alongside a particular small river that borders landplots (Figure 5.3). Talking with people living in hashaa

Figure 5.3 Promissory infrastructure: new sewerage pipes are laid north of the city, alongside expansive numbers of land plots not connected to core infrastructure. Source: author
(fenced land plots) that bordered these new infrastructural installations, one land owner I spoke to was really pleased. He believed that having infrastructure laid so close to his land meant that the value of this land would grow, increasing the chances of a construction company wishing to acquire it and compensating them for their land. Despite the fact that these land holders did not have access to the infrastructure being laid metres away from their land, the pipes and wires themselves became ‘promissory infrastructure’ – material objects through which ‘the future is felt, encountered and inhabited’ (Cross 2015, 425).

The promissory nature of pipes and wires being laid also produced economies of anticipation in other ways (Cross 2015, 425). Returning to Ulaanbaatar in the following spring (2016), I heard that some construction companies had been building north of the city. Similar types of infrastructural systems had been laid down in different areas, extending into other areas and private developments of apartments within the ger districts. This infrastructure was being extended in order to cater to specific private enterprises, culminating in the establishment of a new heating system sub-station in an area north of the city.

An interlocutor told me how a construction company had heard about this infrastructural extension and had decided to begin building near to this sub-station, hoping that if they constructed a building a connection would be provided to them from this sub-station to accommodate their new building. Unfortunately, this interlocutor explained, the particular technical make-up of this sub-station was specifically built for its original purpose; it would not accommodate connections to new buildings some distance away. The new building built by the outlier construction company thus sat finished, but not connected to any supplies of heating or running water. Throughout my fieldwork, other rumours circulated of similar buildings being built in areas of Ulaanbaatar’s ger districts. People had bought apartments in such buildings while they were under construction, but infrastructural connections were never provided. Now these people were burdened with owning a freezing cold apartment that they could not heat adequately enough to live in during Mongolia’s harsh winters.

Such speculative landscapes arose around land close to infrastructure. This gave rise to types of economic activity that shaped the landscape in physical ways – forms of urban shaping that occurred regardless of whether these built forms actually had successful access to infrastructure or not. They were formations of different kinds of actions borne on speculation and rumour – attempts to try and map future infrastructural manifestations and the type of quality they would engender. This was
done through witnessing the urban landscape, by mapping the laying of pipes as well as attempting to map the underlying social infrastructures that make newer infrastructural systems become manifest in Ulaanbaatar. These examples reveal a type of infrastructural pull. Simply being near the potential for infrastructure, however (in)complete, gives rise to powerful anticipatory devices.

The politics of proximity – infrastructural push

The incomplete, unfolding and perpetually in-the-making nature of infrastructural assemblages throughout the city, and especially in the ger districts, simultaneously gives rise to types of ‘infrastructural push’ within Ulaanbaatar. By infrastructural push I am referring to the way forms of infrastructural slippage and its effects propel other kinds of movement and action away from the negative effects of problematic assemblages – a different perspective on urban movement in Ulaanbaatar that is infrastructurally determined.

This can be seen in different ways as people have attempted to retreat from air pollution. One way that people have attempted to avoid it has been to retreat into the home itself. While conducting fieldwork in 2016, I heard of a person who was pregnant with her third child. She lived in an apartment on the seventh floor of a building in an area of the city, where she worked from home. During her pregnancy, she decided during the cold, pollution-filled months from October–April to spend almost all her time indoors, seeking to protect her unborn child from the possibly severe effects of coal-smoke air pollution. Once her child was born, she decided to remain indoors with her child to protect her baby’s lungs for at least the first year of her baby’s life. Similar strategies have been noted by Fukada, who describes how women attempt to alter ‘their family planning strategies in an attempt to time their pregnancies around less polluted months’ (Fukada 2017). Women, Fukada notes, advise each other that June to October are the better times to get pregnant. Doctors also advise women to remove themselves from the city altogether, and both to carry out their pregnancies and give birth in the countryside, as far from the capital city as possible (Fukada 2017).

Another significant ‘infrastructural push’ has given rise to movement between different sections of the city itself. One such movement has already been described earlier in the chapter – the move to build luxury buildings south of the city, near the Tuul river and within the Bogd Han National Park, in an attempt to escape air pollution. Indeed
the advertisement for Haven Town promotes this apartment complex as being *agaaryn bohirdoogii* – an area free from air pollution. Another type of infrastructural push can be seen within the *ger* districts themselves, where people move away from relatively more central, crowded areas to land plots on the periphery of the city. Visiting an interlocutor on the city fringe in April 2016, they described how living this far away from the city core improved their *am’dralyn chanar* or ‘life quality’. The open land, she said, provided possibilities not found in apartments, such as the opportunity to grow vegetables and sell them and to run a business on her land. Yet she also emphasised how this situation improved their quality of life, because they were now further away from the engulfing, permeating air pollution.

**Seeking quality – shaping perceptions of the urban in Mongolia**

The paradigm of seeking infrastructural ‘quality’ – whether that be attempting to access it, or to remove oneself from the negative, flow-on effects of a lack of equitable infrastructural provision – reveals the ways in which viewing Ulaanbaatar through the prism of quality shapes conceptualisations of the city itself. Considering the way that infrastructural provision among new apartment buildings is also potentially incomplete, and in-the-making undermines the powerful polarity between the ‘core’ of the city and the *ger* districts, as evidenced by the nature of the built environment. While there are undoubtedly powerful class divides between the two main areas of the city (Byambadorj et al. 2011), figuratively seeking information on the internal nature of a building or speculating on pipes beneath the ground reveals how there is no single, unidirectional ‘pull’ from a so-called ‘poorer’ urban periphery to a so-called richer, more stable urban ‘core’. Instead there is also movement away from problematic infrastructure and its effects. Ulaanbaatar residents are, to paraphrase urban theorist Christian Schmid, undertaking a type of urban ‘decentering’ or ‘ex-centric’ position. Residents look ‘from the periphery and ask where to find the “the urban”’ (Schmid 2018, 592), as manifest through the quality of what the urban in Mongolia should be within the conditions of the reality of what it is becoming.

The search for property also reveals a reconceptualisation of the moral, critical evaluations between material environments and class in contemporary urbanism in Mongolia. Revisiting Collier, the ‘problem-making’ that accompanied the neoliberal reasoning attributed
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to Ulaanbaatar’s post-1990 infrastructural landscape, when its central heating systems were ‘unbundled’ (Collier 2011, 242), has now given rise to an infinite number of possibilities of different kinds of infrastructural assemblages. Apartments that should herald in an urban future without air pollution and more equitable access to heat can instead form potential signs ‘of future uncertainty’ (Schwenkel 2015b, 531).

Navigating this uncertain landscape has given rise to new ways in which people reconceptualise their relationships to this changing urban space. The financial cost of extending existing core infrastructure to every land plot in Ulaanbaatar is untenable and numerous overlapping plans exist for alternative solutions consisting of a multitude of different stakeholders (Anderson 2014). The government, both at the national and municipal level, has come under criticism for its failure to implement a comprehensive solution. City residents’ reconceptualisations of space through seeking out different forms of ‘quality’ reveal people’s individual reactions to infrastructural uncertainty that give rise to a conceptual reconfiguring and rereading of urban space. Choosing to live on a land plot, buying an apartment at the top floor of a building and seeking ‘inside’ knowledge of a building’s infrastructural history all form types of strategies born from a changing landscape.

A materialist ethics of the urban

Seeking quality when buying an apartment becomes a morally-imbued conceptual frame. Will this building and its infrastructural components actually do what someone says it is going to do, and what a prospective owner wants it to do? An apartment’s facade might look beautiful and complete, but it could hide an ineffectual heating connection or weak water supply to apartments on higher floors. The paradigm of quality, or chanar, encapsulates its antithetical states of what it is materially opposed to in Ulaanbaatar: the production of air pollution through coal fires and cold temperatures. Looking at how people access property reveals a much larger ethical quest to try and find a ‘good life’, with increased ‘quality of life’. This quest reveals the intimate and bodily interrelationships that residents have with the underground, hidden and not-fully-knowable infrastructural effects of changing patterns of urbanisation in the city. Seeking quality becomes an ethical act that reveals ‘an expanded notion of the good life: one that is not merely limited to the logic of consumption.
but acknowledges a larger social responsibility’ (Anagnost 2004, 207) that providing housing should entail.

Thus quality as a conceptual framework is far more than whether an apartment has heating or not. It becomes a materialist ethical framework that can potentially reveal and call into question hidden power relationships (Zigon 2014, 752). The prism of quality reveals types of ethical ‘world-building’ that may exceed (other) ‘familiar moral concepts’, in a way that cannot ‘be neatly conceptualized but nevertheless motivate action in the world’ (Zigon 2014, 762). Such ethical world-building becomes part of a larger ‘politics of aspiration’ among those seeking property (Zhang 2010, 12). It also reveals the inverse potentialities of infrastructural lack – that the expanding land plots allow for other possibilities that extend beyond an apartment’s walls and its hidden pipework. A materialist literalist lens might sound like a practical approach. However, the changing nature of physical urban forms, processes of urban development and the multitude of social entanglements that they consist of, mean that assessing Ulaanbaatar’s urban landscape through the prism of quality is a highly difficult, changeable, subjective and fluid process. Assessing quality forms a critique of the urban form that permeates throughout different social registers and scales, as multitudes of residents attempt to negotiate the atmospheric and material consequences of not-fully-knowable infrastructural assemblages.

Notes

1. Not the real name of the development.
2. In their article about government-supplied Aboriginal housing in parts of Australia, Lea and Pholeros (2010) describe the presence of a culturalist perspective on Aboriginal ‘behaviour’ in official discourse. Such culturalist perspectives espoused by some people attribute the disrepair of Aboriginal housing not to its bad construction, but to Aborigines’ so-called propensity for hunter-gatherer movement and social behaviour that is supposedly not ‘commensurable’ to the sedentary nature of the built structure of a house. Lea and Pholeros instead argue that a materialist literalist lens turns the onus away from the perceived ‘behaviour’ of Aboriginal people, and rather looks at the ways that these houses themselves are badly constructed in the first place – so much so that they might not qualify for the term ‘house’ at all. This, Lea and Pholeros argue, is a more ethical perspective that takes into account extreme power imbalances in the making and providing of government housing in Australia.