Shaping Urban Futures in Mongolia

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Conclusion: Making the City Visible

[People] strive to realize their goals through practices that may then congeal into forms not necessarily consonant with those planned above.

Verdery (2003, 362)

As an effect of the ways the event reverberates with its surrounding environment, it becomes possible to imagine and establish new relationships between previously detached components which are fitted together in unstable constellations.

Nielsen (2009, 332)

The rise in investment in Ulaanbaatar from 2009–13 spurred an acceleration of urban transformation. This multiplication of apartment and other commercial buildings brought with them concomitant proliferations, linked to the processes involved in bringing these ‘goods’ into being (Verdery 2003, 355). Long planned-for systems of mortgage financialisation were instigated, with government housing policies and flows of capital coalescing into the launch of politically popular financial programmes. Regimes of land possession that had long been part of Mongolian forms of master-recipient relationships, and the formation of rights (erh) to access parts of a state-owned whole, underpinned a fluid paradigm through which urban land was further sectioned off for growth and expansion. These land regimes allowed the proliferation of the erection of construction-company fences, the pouring of concrete bases of future buildings, the staking out of land and the holding of land in place in order to plant the ‘seed’ of capital, or höröngö, to grow and multiply.

This transformation of the landscape formed a continued, albeit accelerated form of postsocialist privatisation of urban land, in which ‘the urban’ in Ulaanbaatar expanded in an unprecedented way. Ex-socialist infrastructural interconnections support the weight of these newly
constructed apartment blocks, as the municipality, assisted by international finance organisations and other stakeholders, incrementally upgrade and extend heavy pipes and heating sub-stations. Expensive, these upgrades are required to meet the rush of investment-fuelled construction. For a long time the full infrastructural needs of people setting up land plots in Ulaanbaatar’s ger districts have not been met.

This speed of capital and portioning-off of land formed a landscape of potential: a type of ‘productive anticommuns’. Rushes to privatise, while closing off and excluding areas that were once state-owned greenfield (undeveloped) sites, opened up numerous possibilities. Internationally touted anticipations of dizzying profits and ensuing forms of speculation-driven investment encouraged a multitude of players to invest. For people who were able to acquire land and financing, the productive, flexible anticommuns was a blessing. With an inundated bureaucracy and aspirational plans and capital circulating among expansive networks, it became, for some, a profoundly salient and potentially profitable form of urban economic governance. Forms of ezemshil possession rights that had origins in Mongolian pastoralist uses of land became part of an expansive acceleration in the sectioning-off of urban land that took place through the granting of temporary possession rights.

While Ulaanbaatar had experienced similar withdrawals of funds and services after the end of socialism in 1990, the downturn in investment after 2013 resulted in newer changes in the urban landscape: half-built buildings, indebted construction companies, and a financial system designed to circulate money between commercial banks in order to support the offering of (relatively) affordable mortgages. The ethnography explored in this book details the effects of this reduction in funding – a withdrawal that now affected the newer proliferating networks that had underpinned these different real estate assemblages.

This drain of capital formed another wave of economic flux on a changing, atomised, privatised, postsocialist urban environment. As seen in the preceding chapters, construction companies bartered materials while residents held onto dilapidated housing and experimented with forms of alternative monetary circulation in order to make do with a lack of funds. In this space, the city was still one of potential. However, this potential was manifesting in a diverse array of forms that did not solely rely upon investment of funds as a key solution. Longer-term goals that reached both before and beyond the recent boom in foreign direct investment gave rise to different kinds of goals: keeping a system of mortgage provision going during economic oscillation, for instance, or seeking municipal housing and circulating money between trusted friends. The numerous strategies
employed by diverse sets of people underpinned and continued the growth that extended from disparate portioning of a commons (urban land). This flexibility and diversifying strategies mean that the resulting anticommons remained productive. However, profit was not the sole or overarching aim from these proliferating strategies. Instead, the many actions underpinning dynamic ownership have become a base from which to view and critique the city form itself. Such formations have given rise to the cultivation of different kinds of subjectivities in relation to one another, forming a burgeoning ethical critique of wider Mongolian urban spaces. Attempts to own real estate in this changing environment and fluctuating economy form a space that enables people to ask what the city should be providing its citizens, and what kind of seed one’s höröngö, or investment, can – and indeed should – be growing into.

Holding land, cleaning out rubbish, devising intricate systems of monetary circulation in order to take out mortgages form the ‘fluid and ephemeral processes of “holding things”’ (Busse and Strang 2011, 4–5). They form dynamic ways of attempting to hold shifting property and forms of ownership in place in this urban environment. With ‘things’ themselves under processes of change – either physically, through disrepair, or financially, through interlayers of debt and truncated flows of capital – the diverse expansion of the ‘processes through which people assert and contest rights’ (Busse and Strang 2011, 4) come to the fore as constituting the workings of Ulaanbaatar’s property market. The ‘prerequisites’ for the ‘claiming of rights’ (Verdery 2003, 355) – including holding land and putting up fences (Chapters 2–4) as well as debt networks made possible through the generation of trust (Chapter 1) – may be shifting and unstable, but they are arguably more ‘secure’ in the long term than a piece of paper detailing such rights. One arguably cannot ‘attend’ to a piece of paper the way one can attend directly to a piece of land, or to the enaction and building of a relationship between friends.

Actions become paramount in the formation and processual continuation of ownership. If one leaves a block of land, there is no guarantee that a possession certificate will ‘hold’ the land in place. However, meetings can be held between residents to work out the next step of a stalled redevelopment deal (Chapter 3), unused apartment rooms can be cleaned in order to maintain a dilapidated building on sought-after land (Chapter 2) and the rights of construction companies can be disputed (Chapter 4). Actions, speculation and ‘reading’ the material quality of the landscape (Chapter 5) have all become ways in which people attempted to understand the ‘urban’ in Mongolia at this particular juncture in its history. Such tactics are integral to the way in which people interact with
the city, imagine their place in it and attempt to claim their own potential stake in the hope that it will expand and grow in the form of the expansive understanding of property.

**Owning and shaping**

Closely examining the types of actions that underpin ownership reveals the subtle shaping of forms of personhood and the materiality of property itself within the city. It reveals the presence of urban knowledge and ‘imaginative and physical engagement with the environment’ to which ownership gives rise (Busse and Strang 2011, 10). As seen through each chapter in this book, examining acts of owning exposes types of emotional attachments to one’s place in the city and the economic possibilities this presents. It strongly reveals the presence of the negotiation between private interest and a responsibility to the public (economic and urban) good. These kinds of phenomena reveal different ways in which the ‘productive’ anticommons has provided a type of environment for diverse forms of urban shaping. Diverse practices of ownership allow people to gain a stake in an urban environment in times of economic decline.

This book demonstrates several manifestations of what urban *shaping* can be in this context. Indeed, Ulaanbaatar’s ger districts are a clear example of how residential forms of owning and claiming a stake through building fences and houses, and erecting ger, have profoundly shaped Ulaanbaatar’s urban environment. This shaping has been physical, the city has grown vastly in size, as well as experienced changes in its atmosphere through severe seasonal air pollution. The physical shaping of the landscape through setting up gers and self-built houses in the ger district form essential ways in which possession and ownership rights are themselves claimed (Chapter 4; Miller 2017, 2013; Højer and Pedersen 2019). Reminiscent of such physically transformative actions in the ger districts, the formation of public and private through the physical maintenance and delineation of building structures became a physical way in which people held a dilapidated building ‘in place’ (Chapter 2). Indeed, the very presence of the commercialising potential of temporary possession rights has contributed in making the growth in construction possible. When construction fails to take place, it provides a framework to contest these rights (Chapter 4). Ulaanbaatar’s areas of apartments, like the ger districts, are also very much in-the-making.
Branching out from these physical forms of shaping, the preceding chapters have also demonstrated how this form of shaping expands well into so-called other ‘prerequisites’ that underpin the claiming of property rights. These implicate the supporting of nascent systems of financialisation from within (Chapter 1), the types of relations emerging in stalled redevelopment zones (Chapters 2 and 3) or the ways in which people re-orient their perspectives to different built forms in the city that give rise to a materialist ethical positioning within the landscape (Chapter 5). Going beyond the shaping of self-built houses and land, these examples encompass Ulaanbaatar’s built areas of apartments as well as systems of housing finance. These other ‘relational modalities’ that underpin Ulaanbaatar’s urban economy (Nielsen 2009, 331) reveal the ways in which residents seeking out types of ownership are subtly reworking types of financial arrangements and urban political networks. The environments produced by a reduction in foreign direct investment have required a diversification of strategies. The ‘shaping’ that occurs may not be as overt as the setting up of a fence, but its subtle influence is essential to the way in which Ulaanbaatar’s urban economy is currently being made, remade and reimagined.

Recent studies discussing forms of resident-driven urban ‘shaping’ in cities elsewhere have focused on the attempts by urban residents to create ‘alternative’ spaces that bely transnational financial flows or different kinds of economic governance (Cabannes et al. 2019). The preceding chapters of this book however, in highlighting the ‘subtle reworking’ of urban economic forms, complexifies and deconstructs a presumed dichotomy. This is the dichotomy between, on the one hand, vast rates of urban change instigated by so-called ‘global capitalism’ and, on the other, residents who are potentially being affected by these processes. The preceding chapters of this book instead demonstrate how the subtle reworking of different spheres that support property ownership are the very ways in which capitalist economic engagements in Ulaanbaatar are being formed – ways that implicate both spheres and blur the lines between them. In discussing ways of reworking Ulaanbaatar’s urban economy, I use the term ‘alternative’ very cautiously. Rather than being separate from existing capitalist encounters, these diverse (often non-monetary) strategies and visions that underpin forms of dynamic ownership are inextricably linked to, and affected by, transnational financial flows. Even if they present different ways of doing things, residents’ strategies form small, incremental diversifications of the way in which capitalist practices are manifesting. They highlight the ‘diversity of life projects and the full range of social relations and productive powers’
CONCLUSION: MAKING THE CITY VISIBLE

(Bear et al. 2015) that form what we come to know as capitalist practices within Ulaanbaatar’s urban real estate market.

This perspectival shift away from ‘capitalism’ as something discrete, or imposed from above, does not attempt to do away with the types of potential unequal power relationships, loss of rights or inequal forms of wealth distribution that occur in processes of real estate investment (Harms 2016a, 215–16; Chapters 1–4). Nor does it attempt to romanticise the agency of individual residents. Instead this perspective highlights the diversity of urban capitalist forms, the significance and impact of the presence of urban residents and the types of ideologies and politics that are emerging in this changing landscape. Revisiting two key points outlined in the Introduction, I now present a synthesis of two overarching phenomena that have emerged through this ethnography. These are, firstly, the emergence of shifting politico-economic urban subjectivities and, secondly, visions of potential that are emerging out of dynamic ownership’s ‘subtle reworking’ of Ulaanbaatar’s urban landscape.

Politico-economic subjectivities

My interlocutors’ experiences of formulating types of ownership bring to life some ways in which political and economic conditions are shaping urban politics and the urban itself in Mongolia. This not only reinforces but also expands upon some recent scholarship of economic networks, economies of favours and power and wealth inequality in Mongolia (Humphrey 2012; Narantuya and Empson 2018; Sneath 2018). Humphrey’s evocative article (2012) demonstrates the way in which economies of favours underpin – and form a considerable part of – economic and political networks in Mongolia. Favours, in this instance, imply gratuitous forms of help that do not imply a transactional obligatory return, but instead form parts of building esteem and lasting relationships.

One can also gain ‘knowledge, tips and insider information’ (Narantuya and Empson 2018, 434) through networks of favours. They form ambiguous types of exchanges rich in potential. Tracing forms of favours between small- to medium-sized business enterprises in Mongolia, Narantuya and Empson note that through exchanges of assistance and information, favours can allow businesses to ‘spread their risks and support each other at moments when repayments become difficult’, at a point where ‘such relations are at the necessary heart of many different kinds of economic activity in Mongolia precisely because of their non-transactional motivation’ (Narantuya and Empson 2018, 434). Here ‘favours in themselves always
leaving something open and uncertain: what people may hope for or expect might not happen, forming a way in which ‘lasting relationships’ and a ‘sense of self-worth’ can be cultivated (Humphrey 2012, 37).

The ostensibly non-transactional elements of favours and the cultivation of connections and self-worth make favours extremely powerful in their potentiality. They can be something to rely upon when macro-economic processes do not play out in the way that was expected. Chuluun’s decision to take out a loan from a trusted construction company director, in order to fund his apartment deposit and obtain an 8 per cent interest mortgage (Chapter 1), formed an example of a type of exchange that is cultivated between friends. While not a favour per se, this type of proliferating monetary circulation, or mōngōnii ergelt, played a small part in making an apartment purchase possible during times of decline – it formed an incremental part in supporting the perpetuation of a mortgage product within a nascent system that was new and unfolding. In this example trusted ‘relations open[ed] up the possibility for a range of ways of doing business in a climate that does not guarantee economic and social security’ (Narantuya and Empson 2018, 419).

While economies of favours can also be powerful vehicles of potential, the very fact that they work within and beyond existing institutional parameters means that for someone outside of such networks of cultivated esteem, these networks can appear opaque. Because favours are ostensibly non-transactional they are also less predictable and more expansive in their perceived potential because of this lack of predictability. The cultivation of esteem is generative of proliferating forms of productive relationships that can beget more favours – further widening the gulf between those who are within particular networks of favours and those who are not. The unpredictable nature of favours also gives rise to much speculation and suspicion about the benefits being wrought by such networks, especially from those who are well outside of such networks.

In considering the forms of urban politics discussed in this book, the dynamics between visibility and invisibility emerge as a significant theme in the assessment of the urban landscape in Mongolia. Different networks can enable people to raise funds, as well as organise together in productive ways. The post-1990 postsocialist processes of privatisation, as well as the recent economic growth period, resulted in an ‘extraordinary concentration of capital in the hands of a tiny minority’ (Sneath 2018, 477). This is an environment in which ‘economic dominance of the super-rich is entangled with party politics and state power’ (ibid.; see also Radchenko and Jargalsaikhân 2017). The workings of different politically linked networks of esteem are often the source of much speculation.
Patterns of visibility and opacity shape political atmospheres in Mongolia. As noted in the Introduction, ‘MANAN’ (the Mongolian word for ‘fog’) forms the acronym of the two major political parties in Mongolia: the Mongol Ardyn Nam (Mongolian People’s Party) and Ardchilsan Nam (Democratic Party). Manan has been used ironically to describe the perceived opacity of networks that shape Mongolian politics at the national level (Munkh-Erdene 2018). Moments of clarity breaking through the fog occur at different moments in the eruption of specific corruption scandals, such as the discovery of 49 Mongolian names in the listing of offshore accounts in the Panama Papers in 2016 (Sneath 2018, 477). At the time of writing, the most recent corruption scandal involved the misuse of a Small to Medium Enterprises Development Fund (SME). Journalist investigations in 2018 revealed that much of this money had in fact been given to companies tied to ‘prominent politicians, often via family members, friends, and elaborate shell companies’ (Sorace and Jargalsaikhan 2019).

Many Mongolians acutely sense and critique the effects such networks have on shaping the Mongolian economy, and thus sometimes attribute blame for the economic instability they experience to these economic flows. While moments describing people cultivating their own networks of esteem appear throughout this book, my ethnography has revealed ways in which networks are also the object of critique. The preceding chapters provide an ethnography of owning-driven interrelationships that, while implicated in larger systems of monetary circulation and affected by construction company deals, provide a focus on people who do not have large amounts of political or economic power. It reveals emergent and varying forms of politico-economic subjectivities in Ulaanbaatar’s urban economy, demonstrating diverse strategies and ethics emerging at this time.

On first glance, the attempts by residents in Ögöömör to hold construction companies to account and to potentially look for avenues to begin urban development projects of their own seem to be echoing, or assuming the same types of economic discourse and practices, as those found among others instigating urban development. This could be said to form a particular Mongolian, market-driven discourse of urban rights. As Harms (2016a) notes of large-scale redevelopment processes in Vietnam, dispossessed residents can take on market-driven discourses of rights that, while they are being dispossessed of land through these processes, at the same time reflect a similar discourse to that of the developers (Harms 2016a, 12). Rather than seek compensation (which was viewed as a futile endeavour due to a general lack of funds), Ulaanbaatar residents took a construction company to court in order to have the company’s ezemshil possession rights
Some people expressed their desire to start their own redevelopment project in the future; some of my interlocutors had indeed already begun to seek out information on appropriate construction companies. Similarly, after the SÖH leader Enhee’s previous efforts to appeal to different institutions to improve Ögöömör fell on deaf ears, she then set about diversifying her work into supporting redevelopment (Chapter 3). When previous forms of economic and political power or authority are diminished with the withdrawal of capital, the strategies of people in Ögöömör reflect forms of urban economic and political governance within the district itself (Nielsen 2009, 330), given the literal absence of construction company heads and direct municipal intervention at the time.

However, attending to the fine-grained ethnographic detail of how residents in Ögöömör interacted with each other reveals an expanded, oscillating form of politico-economic personhood that begins to move away from the ways in which my interlocutors perceive networks of favours to operate. They were at once a product of larger political and economic factors and yet simultaneously held the possibility for a different perspective to emerge (Højer 2012, 48). In this instance, forms of visibility (as opposed to invisibility) became an integral part of the cultivation of economic and political nous among people in the district. Throughout my fieldwork, the residents and the SÖH were conspicuous in their presence. They were not only living and working in the same small area, but were also physically holding onto apartment buildings, attending street meetings and attempting to speak to politicians at public events. The maintenance of such visibility was integral to their respective formation of influence among each other. In a similar way to holding land, being present was one way in which one’s economic investment or höröngö – the seed of a potentially multiplying stake – could be ‘planted’ and maintained. Absence came at a risk that they could not afford to take – unlike construction company heads, who likely had alternative businesses and wealth accumulated elsewhere. As Reeves advocates, paying attention to such detail moves beyond the assumption that larger economic shifts assume the ‘straightforward iteration between a given … regime and the fashioning of … selves’ in postsocialist contexts (Reeves 2014). The experience of residents in Ögöömör reveals ways of relating that formed among disparate networks of emerging influence. Such interrelating is focused around urban politics of accountability.

These locally based oscillations of influence extended from a type of ‘government of the self by oneself in its articulation with relations with others’ (Foucault 1994, 88). Central to this was a type of subjectivity that formed as a ‘consequence of actions, behavior or
“performativity” (Keller 2007, 353; italics mine). The need to be visible in the landscape in order to maintain one’s höröngö gave rise to a recognition of the productive self-making that emerges through an intersubjective ‘reciprocity of perspectives’ (Wagner 2018, 505), thus causing one’s dynamic self to shift and change in relation with others (Empson 2011, 322). Moral critiques of whether someone was potentially going to accumulate profit, and thus the future wealth-generating potential that this accumulation could bring (High 2017, 112), were potentially extremely socially damaging. If one was seen to be self-interestedly accruing personal profit through different kinds of urban development endeavours (rather than benefiting the district as a whole and contributing to forms of assistance and help) they could be critiqued as immoral (Højer 2012, 46; Sneath 2006, 90). Such critiques could potentially limit the possibilities of future collaborations and beneficial networks between people in the district. There was a keen recognition among my interlocutors of the power of certain speech acts in damaging these fledging relationships.

When residing in the same district, visibility was unavoidable – so instead residents were putting it to good political use. Regardless of one’s personal ambition within the urban economy in the district, residents and the SÖH did not want to be seen by other residents as hiding behind opaque networks of power. Visibility was utilised in order to cultivate, in a nuanced way, a type of district-level form of politically-salient accountability. It thus formed a type of counter-politics to the type of opacity surrounding wider networks of esteem. Visiting Enhee in the offices of the SÖH some time after the residents of building no.X had moved to live in alternative municipal housing, I noticed a large table to the left of her office, overloaded with piles of papers. ‘What are these?’ I asked her, gesturing to the table. ‘That is my arhiv (archive)’, replied Enhee. ‘All the paperwork detailing the redevelopment projects is contained there’. According to Enhee, the archive formed a detailed history of the redevelopment plans, available for all to see. Invited to sift through some of the papers with my research assistant, we saw that it contained numerous building plans, the details of construction companies, as well as lists of local political representatives whose political affiliations were colour-coded by different highlighters. It formed an attempt by Enhee to do away with the ‘infrastructures of ignorance’ (Pedersen 2017) that pervade the Ulaanbaatar urban landscape. Instead the archive sought to bring the processes of redevelopment, as well as the SÖH, into being as a known subject, as opposed to a hidden, unknowable one (Nielsen and Pedersen 2017, 258). In doing so, it formed a way for Enhee to try and ‘protect’ herself from the possibilities of critique (Højer 2012, 40).
Essentially there was no guarantee as to whether this visibility, while compelling in its physical presence, would be enough to convince a sceptical, disparate and inhomogeneous group of residents. As seen in Chapters 2 and 3, residential alliances were fleeting; they needed to be continuously reshaped and remade as people engaged in a variety of strategies to hold onto their individually acquired höröngö. Enhee’s efforts in attempting to make the workings of redevelopment visible, debates around someone’s moral personhood in relation to profit, attempts to hold onto property and to clean up rubbish: all formed attempted mediations of the presence of at least two conflicting forms of urban possibility. These were the presence of politically and economically entrenched networks that hold the key to urban development and a type of forced accountability among residents, borne of the necessity of laying different claims in a similar geographical location.

These actions of dynamic ownership formed incremental attempts to answer the question of whether improving the urban landscape can benefit from, but at the same time differ from, the processes that had been emerging until this point. Is it possible for a resident both to straddle successfully the realm of ‘influence’ and yet at the same time be ensconced within favourable networks in the district? Can a resident instigate a redevelopment project without being accused of attempted profit-making? Following such emerging forms of residential formations serves to reveal types of potentially varied manifestations of Mongolian urban politics. As different locally driven initiatives continue to emerge in Ulaanbaatar, at different places and at different scales, these and many other questions and possibilities will no doubt continue to emerge in new and disparate ways (Terbish and Rawsthorne 2018).

Visions of potential

Some of the most striking things that I heard while following disparate ethnographic threads throughout this research were the different visions of hope and possibility that underpinned acts of owning and making owning possible. These were at once on a personal, familial scale – for example, Chuluun’s desire to buy an apartment for his growing family and so come into his own as a responsible father and husband. Nomi’s description of her family’s overseas-funded monetary circulation demonstrated how it allowed them to purchase apartments both before and after the speculation-driven boom (Chapter 1). She described how this mutual support gave them opportunities during times of economic flux;
the process allowed them to be more secure and provided them with more certainty. Similarly, in Chapter 4, Bayar viewed her land as being intimately tied to her potential as a provider and relative. She viewed her future ownership of this land as her right (erh) – the way to build her economic future through gaining full ownership (ömchöl). The bitter-sweet frustration Bayar felt at being unable to move beyond temporary possession rights was this very frustration of not being able to bring her land into its full social potential.

This kind of belief in the generative possibilities of ownership extends far beyond the individual. It also formed part of individually-expressed collective visions of what the city and economy should and could become. Economic ideologies underpinned forms of alternative monetary circulations (mönöntii ergelt) which, at the time of writing, are forming part of expanding systems of financialisation (Chapter 1). These ideologies reverberated throughout different scales. Attempts to evoke a better economic future through different actions emerged out of the ways in which people combined an analysis of their present and attempted to re-orient their knowledge for the future (Miyazaki 2006, 150). Chuluun believed the loan he received for his apartment deposit from the construction company director acted as a type of ‘economic stimulus’. While another layer of debt for himself, this exchange of money was viewed as working as an (incremental) step towards improving the Mongolian economy in times of decline. Similarly, the loan officer believed that the new systems of mortgage financialisation would ‘keep the economy on the proper path’. These ideologies form a type of prefigurative iteration, ‘making one’s means as far as possible identical with one’s ends, creating social relations and decision-making processes that at least approximate those that might exist in the kind of society we’d like to bring about’ (Graeber 2014, 85).

At the other end of the spectrum proposed by this book in Chapter 5, the seeking of material quality of apartments also forms a type of enacting and bringing into being of future potential within the urban landscape. This type of anticipated future is sought through a deep, critical examination of the material nature of the city itself. Trying to seek out material quality of a building, or choosing to bypass air pollution by living in the city’s outskirts, formed ways of viewing and acting within the city that were infrastructurally driven. This infrastructural vision of the city was one that surpassed class divides between apartment buildings and the ger districts. It was instead one in which people were seeking a type of infrastructural integrity. In doing so, this ‘materialist ethics’ formed a critical look at the city itself. Its presence reveals a seeking of dignity
within the urban landscape that has ‘political implications’ (Zigon 2014, 762), forming a latent critique of the fast rates of building and the potential infrastructural variation and slippage of which residents are wary. It forms an active engagement with – and materialist critical stance upon – the presence of continued air pollution, as people move to the outskirts of the city. While seeking out the quality of a building is a deeply practical activity, it is also profoundly personal, and speaks to a larger relationship that one is trying to make with the city as a whole.

However, evoking these visions of potential – in an exchange of money, in speculating on a building’s internal infrastructure and also in trying to improve one’s own neighbourhood (Chapters 2 and 3) – do come at a cost. These visions of potential simultaneously reveal the taking on of a burden of responsibility. Individuals are going further into debt when buying apartments; residents are looking to the physical nature of a building itself rather than trusting that it fits the regulatory infrastructural requirements. Residents section themselves off in apartments during winter, foregoing time outside in order to protect children from air pollution. As astutely noted by Badraa in Ögöömör (Chapter 2), dealing with forms of urban fluctuation ‘is everyone’s problem, isn’t it?’ Chuluun’s evocation of economic stimulus in Chapter 1 reveals a situation where he himself feels responsible in part for the direction of the economy as a whole.

Referring back to Mongolian understandings of economy as a portioning of a whole and a shared governance of possessions, Chuluun could be seen as enacting his portion of shared governance (and shared responsibility) through his economic actions. Different interlocutors’ strategies and justifications of them form ‘concepts that articulate the essential intertwining that constitutes their particular being-in-a-world’ (Zigon 2014, 752). These methods of context-driven, ethical worldbuilding (taking on more economic risk, residents discussing the moralities of profit accumulation) are emerging in times of economic downturn as strategies for potential alternative ways of being in a landscape that needs change. Here ‘such hope surfaced repeatedly in the uses of these ideas and tools despite their repeated failures and perhaps even because of these failures’ (Miyazaki 2006, 151), where hope ceases to be something specific (Miyazaki 2006, 149).

These discourses of responsibility are incredibly important in shaping urban economic and social formations in this period of Ulaanbaatar’s history. While acts of owning reveal significant burdens of responsibility, they also form the potential for new ways in which to conceptualise the city. They give rise to a growing form of popular mobilisation from
the city’s inhabitants who are, by their very presence, incrementally shifting the way influence is being cultivated at different scales. At this point in Mongolia’s history, Ulaanbaatar is a key site of urban possibility. However, its significant environmental challenges and economic flux need to be negotiated. Within the expansive steppe, residents have been living alongside recurrent air pollution in a fluctuating economy.

Focusing on the prism of ownership reveals ṭörönögö to be a stake in the city that implicates these diverse materialities and economic encounters. Inherent in Mongolian conceptualisations of ṭörönögö is its potential for generative growth. Such possibilities of multiplication and generative growth can expand in both positive and negative ways, attracting the multiplication of good and bad energies (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2018, 904; High 2013). In a vastly changing city, residents are wary as to what sort of environment the city is offering for them to grow their ṭörönögö in the most favourable way. In questioning this, conceptualisations of ṭörönögö become the seed that is giving rise to proliferating ethical visions of what the city should be.

Following individual attempts to keep and grow one’s ṭörönögö reveals such actions as forming a proliferating, shared portioning of Ulaanbaatar as a whole. The city becomes a site of diverse and vibrant familial networks and ethics, ‘highlighting the disjuncture between the emergence of paradigmatically “neoliberal” discourses of capitalist consumption, on the one hand, and materially and institutionally embedded practices that allow very different logics of care, of labour, or of ritualised redistribution to be sustained, on the other’ (Reeves 2014, referencing Collier 2011). Owning property in Ulaanbaatar forms the basis of shared ownership of both shared potential and shared problems. Acts that underpin dynamic ownership bring into relief the mechanics of the city and the new social formations that can arise out of this shared proliferation of shifting stakes in the surrounding environment. It brings into relief both an acute awareness of the city and a profound questioning of its future.