HANOI’S BUILT MATERIALITY AND THE SCALES OF ANTHROPOLOGY
Toward a Theory of ‘Architectural Facts’

Takanari Fujita

Abstract: Hanoi’s ‘collective housing quarters’ (KTTs) are a living legacy of its socialist past. Since the 2000s the state has set out radical redevelopment plans to transform KTTs into new buildings, but these have largely failed. What are the possible explanations for this failure? KTTs have gradually transformed in their material forms through self-built modifications initiated by residents. Such material property of KTTs bears on the pathway of redevelopment, but official discourses are silent about this. In this article I show how KTTs as things have the capacity to transform anthropological thinking. The material property of KTTs as a citywide phenomenon affords a particular scale of analysis, with which we can imagine humans as participants in the material world instead of viewing materialities as participants in society.

Keywords: alterity, collective housing, density, KTT, redevelopment projects, scale of analysis, self-built structures, thing-oriented approach

The urban landscape of Hanoi at large is rapidly changing, and it is especially difficult not to notice mushrooming high-rises at the peripheries of the city. Yet behind all the transformation, many things remain unchanged or change at a much slower rate. This article looks into a particular type of urban landscape in Hanoi that demands conceptual consideration of material stasis in order to tease out an implication for anthropological thinking about ‘built materiality’. I will argue that the stasis of built materiality is an ethnographic material that affords transformation of analytic scales of anthropological thinking. Namely, urban stasis enables us to think about a city as a material whole, or a thing per se, instead of treating it as an arena upon which social dynamism takes place. This ethnographic analysis will be carried out via an examination of material
properties of the city’s built landscape. I will suggest the term ‘architectural fact’ as a heuristic that highlights the scale of anthropological thinking that this analysis affords. By comparing architectural fact with the way that interlocutors and some scholars think about built materiality, I will argue that the notion of architectural fact evinces how ontological ‘alterity’ can be addressed in and through the urban environment of Hanoi, not by revealing hitherto unknown facts but by mutating our own anthropological thinking.

Hanoi is a densely populated city. It became particularly crowded when the socialist government seized the city in the 1950s (Drummond and Nguyễn 2020: 70). To address housing shortages, the government avidly constructed mid-rise collective housing buildings in the 1960s through 1980s. These buildings are known as khu tập thể (KTT), or ‘collective housing quarters’. There are about 29 KTT districts and 1,500 KTT buildings in Hanoi today, and they occupy a key place in the housing stock of the city.¹ In Vietnam, KTTs carry particular historical, political, and ideological significance in the general societal landscape. As Christina Schwenkel (2013, 2014, 2015a, 2015b) demonstrates, KTTs were first built as a form of social welfare for people who had contributed to the state by participating in the revolution. It was hence a ‘privilege’ to be allocated a KTT apartment. Second, the technologies used in the construction of KTTs were gifts from Vietnam’s socialist allies. KTTs were therefore explicitly state-of-the-art socialist-modernist buildings. Third, several decades after the marketization of the late 1980s, KTTs are now old, and people generally regard them as outdated remnants of the socialist past. As such, KTTs are a congealment of several important aspects of Vietnam’s socio-political histories.

In anthropological thinking, built materiality² has rarely been addressed for its own sake (Stender 2017; Yaneva 2017: 15–32). Instead, it has been seen as an index for something else—for socio-political, affective, or historical forces that swirl around and behind them (e.g., Larkin 2013; Lawrence and Low 1990; Navaro-Yashin 2009; Rabinow 1995). Some scholars like Bruno Latour (1992) came much closer to addressing built materiality for its own sake, but Latour also theorized artifacts as objects to which human actions are ‘delegated’ rather than as things per se, which seems to expose his tacit anthropocentrism. After all, built materialities, such as doors for Latour, are salvaged merely as ‘missing masses’ of human society, instead of the other way around—that is, instead of humans being ‘missing masses’ of the world of things. Built materialities are made out to be participants in society instead of humans being participants in built materiality. To put it bluntly, built materialities are typically treated from a human perspective.³

Instead of theorizing built materiality from human perspectives, could we not theorize humans from the perspective of built materialities, and see how humans are participants in the world of built materialities? At stake is how to ‘take things seriously’ (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017: chap. 5; see also Henare et
al. 2007; Holbraad 2011). As noted above, we already know the sense-making that is being practiced around KTTs in Hanoi, but what else can be known about KTTs other than human sense-making? What exactly could it mean to take built materiality seriously, and what could it mean to take KTTs seriously? What kind of knowledge could it be if such knowledge-making starts from built materialities, or from the ‘perspective’ of things? Motivated by these theoretical questions, this article examines a thing-oriented approach to look at KTTs that does not treat built materiality as an index for something else but, rather, as a thing that becomes a concept of its own kind.

**Transformation of KTTs**

The point of our departure is ethnographic. While Schwenkel delved into KTTs in the city of Vinh in central Vietnam, KTTs in Hanoi are unique and warrant their own set of research. What distinguishes Hanoi’s KTTs from those in Vinh is how deeply the market economy, combined with Hanoi’s extreme population density, has impacted the material properties of these KTTs. Starting in the late 1980s, KTT residents have engaged in practices of making self-built extension structures attached to the original buildings (Cerise 2010; Gough and Tran 2009; Koh 2006; Yong-Hak 2010). Public space between KTT buildings was enclosed by ground-floor residents and became permanent parts of their apartments. On upper floors, massive extension structures stuck out from apartment walls and enlarged the living spaces inside. Ground-floor extensions provided another ‘ground’ upon which upper-floor residents would build their own extensions. Or, new buildings emerged *ex nihilo* on appropriated lands between KTT buildings. These stories abound in conversations with KTT residents in Hanoi. All of such structures are made from varying materials and are sometimes structurally dubious, but at any rate they are solid, stable, and reliable enough for residents to treat them as proper parts of their apartments. One can find numerous such extensions at any KTT in Hanoi, and the majority of them are in fact significantly large. To unfamiliar eyes, KTTs oftentimes fail to manifest themselves as KTTs because they are covered all over by extensions. In figure 1, for example, numerous extension structures are attached to the building. The ground-floor structures rest on the ground, while some of the upper-floor structures simply stick out from the wall. Extensions occupy what used to be open space up to the fifth floor. Many ground-floor extensions are used as meal shops.

This massive transformation of KTTs derives from Hanoians’ dire want of housing space. In a typical design of KTT apartments, a household had a dwelling space of 20 to 40 square meters. In older KTTs, a bathroom and a kitchen were shared among several households, and sometimes there was no kitchen at all. An apartment was allocated to an entire family of two to six (Đặng
Dwelling space shortage was so grave that being allocated a KTT apartment, despite its modesty, was a ‘privilege’. This compelled the residents to extend their living space on their own. Through these extension works, KTT residents changed their built environment optimally to accommodate their diverse living needs. The prevalent practice of self-building also tapped into the grassroots market economy that thrived after the 1980s (under the đổi mới reform), when the state became increasingly sympathetic to the unmet needs of the people and turned a blind eye to bottom-up (illegal) practices of improvement, or even encouraged residents to make such improvements (Drummond and Nguyễn 2020; Geertman and Kim 2018; Koh 2006).

In this process, local state cadres played a crucial role in illicitly endorsing (or sanctioning) self-building practices, and such endorsement was also often driven by affective relationships between local cadres and residents or between neighbors (Geertman and Kim 2018; Kim 2015: 150–183; Koh 2006: 203–252). As such, the criteria and conditions that governed the practices were largely tacit and contingent, allowing radically diverse self-built structures to become attached to KTT buildings.

**Intervention Failure**

Meanwhile, large-scale redevelopment has been attempted at many KTTs since the 2000s (Dinh 2019; Drummond and Nguyễn 2020). Despite the fact that
the living spaces inside KTTs have been incrementally improved through self-building work, state discourses hold that KTTs are outdated, structurally dilapidated, and aesthetically unfitting. Thus, the state aims to transform KTTs into new residential quarters through redevelopment schemes. The modality of these plans is a chimeric mixture of state socialism and market economy, wherein the state appoints a specific developer, and the developer invents ways to make profit out of the given conditions and planning regulations of the site. However, the majority of these redevelopment projects have been unsuccessful despite the state’s sustained interest. This situation is a matter of concern for city planners in Hanoi at large. Because redevelopment plans do not get materialized, KTTs exhibit a certain static quality at the scale of their entirety, even if they have been undergoing many small-scale transformations due to self-building work.

According to Ngoc, a city planning expert who lives in a KTT apartment, the reason for the stagnancy of redevelopment can be summarized as follows. When the state appoints a developer, the developer implements feasibility studies, learns that the project is not profitable, and withdraws from the project. Then the state appoints another developer, and the same process goes on endlessly. This explanation for the lack of success is a view commonly held by planning experts in Hanoi (Dinh 2019; VOVGT 2017). I want to engage critically with this widely held perception about why redevelopment has been unsuccessful. This critical reflection will be beneficial for those of us interested in rethinking the relationship between humans and built materialities. For the moment, let us examine this perception more closely.

One major bottleneck that makes redevelopment projects unprofitable, according to Ngoc and many others, is the cost of compensation for the relocation of current residents. Having conducted a sociological research on KTT residents, Ngoc says that the majority of KTT residents do not wish to move out to make way for redevelopment because they like their KTTs due to their convenient location close to the city center, and that this general reluctance makes the relocation cost a demanding one for developers. What further hardens the resistance of residents is that they do not have full trust in the project’s promise that relocation will not negatively impact their living conditions. Because these people have already established their ways of life in the built environment of the current KTTs, when a project that the state proposes carries a hint of uncertainty, they tend to be skeptical.

Ngoc’s narrative centers on the motivation of KTT residents as individual subjects who are situated in a political/economic world. In her explanation, the path of KTT redevelopment hinges on how tenants perceive the costs and benefits of redevelopment. In other words, the issue is framed as one of household economy and psychological reaction in political contexts. Ngoc also boils down the essence of the issue to matters of individual humans: after all, she presumes, human agency is what determines the path of redevelopment.
The overall framework that underpins Ngoc’s explanatory model is as follows. For the state, KTTs are a symbolic object that embodies negative socialist histories. Because of the history that KTTs continue entrenching in the urban landscape of Hanoi, the state aims to transform them into new residential quarters that are more fitting for the current post-reform period. However, residents are reluctant to accept redevelopment out of concern about the potentially negative socio-economic consequences. Because of this reluctance, the state’s intervention fails. The result is that this ‘failure’ itself becomes a history of its own kind—a socialist history that continues to manifest itself upon the urban landscape. This is a psychological/economic explanatory model of understanding KTTs redevelopment (fig. 2).

Now, this psychological/economic explanatory model may seem like a sensible one. However, I argue that it omits an important element from the picture. As I will show, the missing element is a material one. Not only is this material element important, it is also obvious, or perhaps too obvious for us to even notice its importance. In what follows, we will see how, with this material element brought back into the picture, there emerges an alternative theoretical framework for understanding KTTs and the city of Hanoi. I will characterize this alternative theory as the study of ‘architectural facts’ of built materialities, and will contrast it to the study of ‘social facts’ of built materialities. The idea of architectural fact is important because it enables us to realize that the majority of anthropological studies of built materialities are in fact studies of social facts of built materialities. Below, I will first examine the built materialities of KTTs more closely in order to show what it means to consider the material element in theorizing KTTs.
Malleability, Boundary Straddling, and Mingling of Humans and Built Materialities

In 2019, Ngoc’s family and I were invited to visit the new condominium apartment of a friend of ours. The host had recently moved into Tropical Metropole, a large, newly developed estate of high-rise condominiums in Hanoi. The apartment was strikingly clean and modern, and Ngoc seemed to like the apartment as much as I did. While our host was busy preparing food, Ngoc and I found ourselves sitting at the dining table next to a large window. Looking out the window, Ngoc pointed to the next condominium in the same estate that soared in front of our eyes. It looked very close to us. “Look at the density [mật độ]. It’s scary [sợ],” Ngoc stated. She added that even if she were able to move into Tropical Metropole, she would choose to remain in the KTT apartment where she was living. Ngoc was commenting on Tropical Metropole, but she was also comparing Tropical Metropole and KTTs.

I want to take this comparison as a new point of entry for understanding KTTs. For if Tropical Metropole’s density is ‘scary’, what is the ‘non-scary’ density of KTTs? Density in Vietnam is defined in two ways at the same time: as population density and as built density. Built density, glossed simply, means the rate of built areas and floors per land unit (Tran 2018). Importantly, built/population density in planning (especially in Vietnam) is tied to complex qualities of the relationship between humans and urban built materialities, such as infrastructural functions and availability of public space (ibid.). Although Ngoc’s intention was most likely to speak about density as a quantitative property of Tropical Metropole, we need to understand her statement as coming from deeper and more far-reaching concerns about the relationship of humans with specific built materialities (see Pérez 2020). In other words, density matters in Hanoi because it is a conceptual proxy for the relation between humans and buildings. Ngoc’s mention of the concept invites us to interrogate built materialities in terms of that relation. Here, we are interested mainly in KTTs, so let us now turn to the specificities of the density of KTTs.

Thao, another friend of mine, has lived in close proximity to Bui Dong KTT since childhood. Technically, she lives outside of Bui Dong KTT, but she feels she belongs to the KTT—to the point that when I told her I had visited Bui Dong KTT some days earlier for my research, she said frustratedly, “Why didn’t you call me up then?” She suggested taking me to visit her friends who live in Bui Dong KTT. Thao and I met at a small café across the corner from the house where Thao lives. Both the café and Thao’s place are self-built buildings. As we ordered our drinks, Thao started talking with the lady who was standing at the bar. Thao explained that she and the lady, who ran the café, knew each other well. She told me how she regularly asked the lady to receive her online shopping parcels on her behalf, indicating that they were particularly good
neighbors on top of being a patron and a client. As it turns out, this café lady is also an owner-occupant of an apartment in Bui Dong KTT, with a modest self-built extension. While she lives in this KTT apartment, she runs a café within walking distance. This way, her life straddles across the boundary of the KTT in terms of its planning design as well as its residential function. Life at KTTs is not contained within the apartment buildings. Rather, people’s movements, daily activities, business opportunities, and personal relationships all spread from KTT apartments outward to their surrounding localities.

There are many reasons why these loose movements are possible, but one of them is that buildings, including not just KTT apartments but also nearby non-KTT buildings, are easy to expand and modify physically. People frequently add new extensions, new floors, or new rooms, thereby opening up new possibilities of life in those new spaces. In fact, the prevalence of self-built extensions as a unique material property of KTTs, as discussed earlier, is not a uniqueness exclusive to KTT apartments. Rather, it is a characteristic that is common to the entire built fabric of the city-center areas at large—the ‘inside-city’, or nội thành—within which KTTs are situated. Before the 1980s, the areas that constitute today’s inside-city had more vacant plots, farmlands, and marshes. Since before the socialist state introduced marketization policies, these areas became densely built up by self-building practices (Koh 2006: 203–252; Labbé 2013; Le 2016). In this process, the practice of self-building was an important part of what transformed these areas from urban peripheries into today’s inside-city (fig. 3). The self-built transformation of KTT apartments is but one manifestation of the overall urbanization of the inside-city. The café building that the lady rents and Thao’s home are among the countless self-built buildings that sprang up during this process, along with numerous extensions added to KTT apartments. And in such processes of urbanization, the boundaries of KTTs—or for that matter any boundary that planners would ascribe to the built forms in the inside-city—carry little significance. People easily straddle such boundaries by manipulating built forms.

This is a uniqueness about the built forms of Hanoi’s inside-city, including KTTs. For the sake of our discussion, let us give this uniqueness its own name. By a strategic stretch of the term, we shall call it ‘malleability’. This malleability is driven by self-built interventions and is tied into other important characteristics of KTTs as built materialities. First, as we saw, the malleability nullifies designed boundaries because people manipulate built forms and straddle such boundaries. Second, because of its malleability, the built landscape is fragmented and inconsistent. Extensions and other self-built structures are vastly different from each other in terms of area, shape, structure, material, quality, legal standing, costs that were spent, time that has lapsed, how they are used, and their commercial value. And third, there is a distinct kind of proximity between humans and built materialities. Human life at and around KTTs is
tightly tangled up with the malleable, self-built, and boundary-straddling nature of built forms. Humans cannot be without mingling with built materialities.

This is evident in how our conversation took turns at the café. When Thao explained to the lady what we were up to after our chit-chat, she immediately gave Thao the key to her apartment, encouraging us to visit it on our own and study it, although Thao had not anticipated such an offer. The lady was amused by my perplexity at how quickly she offered to show me her apartment. Her sense of security highlighted how tightly integral her social relations are to the business she runs in this particular building. Just like self-built extensions allow optimally adapting the physicality of an apartment to specific and changing needs of one’s family, it is by tapping into the manipulated built forms that the café lady and Thao have activated many possibilities of life—the possibility of running a business, establishing neighborly relations, and feeling secure with all these contingent ways of life. People’s lives as such work well because they mingle with malleable, self-built, and boundary-straddling built materialities. The café building, self-built by its owner, is not an element of these human affairs; it is a being that conditions, delimits, and orients human affairs. At KTTs, human life is placed inside the world of built materialities.
Explaining Again, Differently

And again, this is not an idiosyncratic story of just these two specific persons or Bui Dong KTT. Rather, it illustrates how built materialities and humans are entangled at KTTs across the city. This ontological way of being is consistent at the level of the entirety of a KTT, at the level of all KTTs combined, and even at the level of the inside-city beyond KTTs. This human-and-material way of being forms a coherent whole, made up of humans and built materialities as a collective.

This particular relationship between buildings and humans at KTTs, I argue, is the background out of which the concept of density was broached when Ngoc compared Tropical Metropole and KTTs. At Tropical Metropole, the relationship between humans and built materialities is radically different from that of KTTs, and we can interpret Ngoc’s utterance as a statement about these two different kinds of relationship. It is true that the population and floor areas per square kilometer (i.e., density as a linear scale) are much larger at Tropical Metropole than at KTTs, and Ngoc’s direct intention was probably to speak of these numeric scales of density. But her deployment of the concept can also be used as a new entry point for understanding KTTs—one that affords thinking beyond numeric density and considering the human/materialities relationship in a broader register. At Tropical Metropole, people are distributed into apartments without being connected to the broader world of built materialities. Movements are funneled into lifts moving up and down, into basement parking facilities that are often disorienting, and into designed pathways and roads that force rigid (and often jammed) flows. These are the qualities of the relationship between humans and built materialities at Tropical Metropole. In contrast, the density of KTTs is characterized by malleability, boundary straddling, inconsistency, and fragmentation, as well as proximity between built materialities and humans. Built materialities at KTTs are within everyone’s reach: things are within walking distance, one can build something if one needs it, and rich social relations are afforded in the interstices of fragments of built materialities.

Having started from Ngoc’s initial explanation of the failure of KTT redevelopment as a psychological/economic bottleneck, we have explored other aspects of KTTs in order to make sense of Ngoc’s personal but penetrating remark about ‘scary density’. In doing so, we have sought to understand what the non-scary density of KTTs is like. If we take density to be a matter of the relationship between humans and built materialities, the density of KTTs is primarily characterized by physical malleability. The inconsistent and fragmentary nature of malleable built materialities is the space that KTT residents, like the café lady, inhabit.

This is a fact about KTTs, and it is very obvious for people living in KTTs—so much so that they take it for granted. Interestingly, however, redevelopment
plans do not as readily embrace the same fact. As Dinh Quoc Phong (2019: 313) points out (and as my conversations with interlocutors confirm), planners rarely speak of self-built modifications as the central quality of today’s KTTs despite the fact that the inconsistency and diversity of existing built materialities are a critical problem for redevelopment. Because of such qualities, resettlement compensation is extremely difficult to calculate, let alone to implement. Whatever mathematic formulas the developers come up with for the calculation of compensation, they cannot represent all the economic values of variously modified KTT apartments. The ways of life that are afforded by the malleable built materialities of KTTs are not even quite definable or calculable in planning terms. Compensation plans cannot capture them, and, consequently, redevelopment projects stumble.

I stated earlier that Ngoc’s psychological/economic explanation omitted an important material element from the picture, and here we come to understand what this material element is. The defining feature of KTTs is their malleable, boundary-straddling, and inconsistent way of being as built materialities, to which humans live in close proximity. This is what was missing from Ngoc’s initial explanation. Mundane and insignificant though it may seem at first glance (and indeed that is why Ngoc and others usually ignore it), this material aspect fundamentally defines KTTs. And to the extent that it does so, it also determines the path of redevelopment plans at KTTs. Such plans are not designed to engage with these particular material properties of KTTs, and this prevents them from coming to fruition. With this materiality element brought back into the picture (fig. 4), the explanation for the redevelopment failure would now hold as follows

**Figure 4:** The materiality model of KTTs redevelopment.
(compare this with the psychological/economic explanatory model). KTTs symbolically embody socialist histories that the state aims to overcome. However, because of the current material forms of KTTs, the state’s intervention fails, and this failure itself becomes a history of its own kind. Here, the redevelopment failure emerges as a specific kind of ‘fact’ that is different from how it emerged from Ngoc’s psychological/economic model. Her model pointed to a fact about humans, and particularly a fact about humans as individual subjects. In contrast, the explanation that I have developed here points to a fact about humans and built materialities of KTTs, and particularly a fact about their collective on a KTT-wide and citywide scale. This is a materiality model of KTT redevelopment.

**Logics of the Human and Logics of the Material**

We are operating a comparison of two different explanatory models for the failure of KTT redevelopment. The first model derives from Ngoc’s initial explanation, which centers on KTT residents’ household economy and their psychological reaction against redevelopment plans, situated in political/economic landscapes. The second model centers on the material properties of KTTs and emerged out of ethnographic attention to the unique relationship between humans and built materialities of KTTs. What do we, as anthropologists, make of this comparison?

What interests us here is that Ngoc’s psychological/economic explanation roughly corresponds to conventional theorization of built materiality in human-centered anthropology. Brian Larkin (2013: 332–336), tracing a strand of anthropological theories about infrastructure, argues that the modernization impetus to make histories is enacted through the psychological awe that built materialities trigger (see Harms 2012; Schwenkel 2015b). A more classic example is Michel Foucault’s ([1977] 1995) exploration of the panopticon, which precisely points out how psychology is mobilized via built materiality for the purposes of power. Other theories of built materiality that center on political economy abound as well (see, e.g., Harms 2016; Holston 1989; Rabinow 1995; Sopranzetti 2017; Zhang 2010). These ideas aim to explain how state or capital makes history by affecting individuals through psychological and political/economic logics. What these theories invoke, in short, are the logics of the human. Similarly, the analytic work that Ngoc did in her initial explanation was to think in terms of psychology and economy—that is, the logics of the human—to make sense of the mutual constitution between history-making and (the failure of) intervention.

In contrast, with equal plausibility we could also imagine a different explanatory picture that bypasses or sidelines the logics of the human, as we have just seen in the discussions of malleable built materialities. This alternative theorization, however, is underdeveloped in anthropology, and this is where I aim
to make a contribution to anthropological thinking about built materialities. Caroline Humphrey (2005) was the first to propose an original lens for looking at built materiality along this line, through which she actively aimed to depart from logics of the human (see Holbraad 2018: 487). As Humphrey (2005: 55) writes, built materiality acts “as if like a prism: gathering meanings and scattering them again, yet not randomly. As a prism has a given number of faces, the light it scatters has direction.” Here, Humphrey is cracking a conceptual opening that allows a peep into the unique capacities of built materialities per se. Michał Murawski (2019), building on and expanding this small peephole, shows that certain built materialities, especially in the ‘still-socialist’ context of Warsaw (like that of Hanoi), have their own efficacy that keeps them intact or even evermore flourishing in spite of efforts by some to destroy them. What I am proposing in this article—building theoretically upon Humphrey and Murawski and countering some other strands of anthropology mentioned above—is to mediate through materiality the mutual constitution between history-making and intervention. In other words, when the state initiates redevelopment with the intention to make history, the intervention fails because it cannot penetrate the efficacy that derives from the material properties of KTTs. Because of this failure, the materiality of KTTs and of the city remains robust. Thus, the material property of the city continues solidifying the history of KTTs and of the city.

I have just used the nebulous term ‘efficacy’ to describe built materialities. What precisely is this efficacy? It is certainly not material ‘agency’, as KTTs are not exercising affective or physical agency upon humans.9 This distinction is important. In the triangular images of the redevelopment bottleneck, KTTs do not exercise any active or agentive force. Locked in the stasis of no demolition and gradual transformation, they are instead somewhat static on the scale of their entirety, as well as passive objects that are subservient to acts of self-building. In fact, this is the exact opposite of material agency (cf. Bennett 2010). KTTs are a matter of concern precisely because of their overall stasis and their susceptibility to small-scale interventions.

So far we have ethnographically delineated the efficacy of KTTs, but there remains some work to be done to clarify what it is that we are doing when we theorize things along this line. In what follows, I will approach this task through more theoretical and conceptual language.

**Scaling KTTs Differently**

One crucial strategy that I have been employing in my ethnographic discussion is to address KTTs on a particular scale. Here I am calling attention to the idea of ‘scale’ as a form of analysis in a Strathernian sense (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017: chap. 3). ‘Scale’ is not just a quantitative characterization of a concept.
Rather, according to Marilyn Strathern ([1991] 2004: xiv), it is how a concept allows and disallows empirical materials to emerge, or how one switches “from one perspective on a phenomenon to another, as anthropologists routinely do in the organization of their materials.”

When Ngoc considers the bottleneck of KTT redevelopment through an psychological/economic explanation, logics of the human are being deployed as the scale of analysis. The logics of the human, sensu Strathern, allow KTTs to emerge as a participant in the human world. Yet this is not the only sense in which Ngoc’s analysis operates on a particular scale of analysis. As Holbraad and Pedersen (2017: 122–123) show, each scale has its own quantitative character or its own size. Alongside the qualitative scale of analysis (the logics of the human) that Ngoc deployed in understanding the redevelopment failure, her scale of analysis also had its own quantitative character. That is, it had its own size, one that all scholars of human sciences are familiar with; it is the size of individual humans because household economy and psychology belong to individuals. Put simply, Ngoc’s analysis is of a human scale.

When Ngoc assumes a human scale of analysis (both qualitatively and quantitatively), she aligns with many anthropologists who reflect on built materialities in terms of their relationship with individual humans. Although the analytic frameworks may vary from downright psychology to more composite affect or from atomized subalterns to identity-based subjectivity, a common undercurrent for anthropological studies of built materiality is the assumption that the relationship between built materialities and humans should be discovered on a scale of individual humans and small, human-size things. Examples include individual prison cells (Foucault [1977] 1995); houses, rooms, and furniture (Buchli 1999; Kilroy-Marac 2016; Navaro-Yashin 2009); or fountains, leaking water, bricks, and rubble/debris (Bennett 2010: 4–10; Harms 2012; Schwenkel 2013, 2015b). I problematize this as individualistic and human-centered analytic predilection. In contrast to human-scale analyses, it is possible to imagine different analytic scales. Some of those alternative scales, in fact, will be more effective for theorizing certain built materialities such as those of KTTs.

**From the Perspective of Built Materiality**

Thus, our task is to identify one of such alternative scales. Holbraad and Pedersen (2017: 217) argue that things have their own “conceptual affordances” that enable us to arrive at different concepts by studying different things as things per se. This means that a certain kind of materiality affords a specific analytic scale that is unique to itself and, hence, different (qualitatively and quantitatively) from the human scale. The KTTs with their intervention failures and the
entire inside-city of Hanoi are precisely materiality that is capable of affording an alternative analytic scale.

Earlier, I argued for addressing KTTs from the perspective of built materialities. Being non-human and not having sense or speech organs, built materialities do not, of course, have their own ‘perspectives’. However, what if built materialities afford us a unique analytic scale that is distinct from those analytic scales that humans—whether Trobrianders or Hanoians—afford us? Seeing things from the perspective of built materialities does not mean that built materialities open their mouths, perform rituals, or exchange shells, which is nonsensical. Instead, the point of seeing things from the perspectives of built materialities is to transform our own thinking by tapping into the “conceptual affordances” of things as ethnographic materials (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017: 217; see also Holbraad 2011). In fact, such has always been the point of doing anthropology since Malinowski, except that, for a long time, the materials of anthropological analyses usually excluded non-humans.

At stake is how to overcome our own assumption that there is no other way that the world could be, other than what we are familiar with. Presenting one form of this anthropological otherness is the purpose of this article. Drawing on Holbraad et al. (2014), I call such otherness ‘alterity’.

**Architectural Fact**

How can KTTs be conceptually rendered otherwise? In contrast to the scale of individual humans, my ethnographic discussions have addressed KTTs on a citywide and material scale. On this particular scale of analysis, KTTs started to evince a unique efficacy of their own, manifested in the situation of citywide redevelopment failure. Instead of breaking down the cause/effect relations that constitute the failure of redevelopment interventions (which would return us to household economy and psychology), we looked at the overall stasis of KTTs as a citywide phenomenon constituted by materiality. This is a strategy of scaling up (fig. 5). The theoretical ancestry of this analytic move goes back many years. Emile Durkheim’s ([1895] 1982) sociological methodology and his concept of ‘social fact’ are a direct reference point. Durkheim’s strategy was to look at suicide on its societal scale and to discover an analytic object *sui generis*. Taking inspiration from Durkheim, I suggest that KTTs on their citywide scale, with their material properties and intervention failures as constituents of the triangle, evince an ‘architectural fact’.

An architectural fact is not merely a material fact. The internal logic of KTTs’ material composition and properties—such as malleability—are not our only concern, although they are of prime importance. Nor, as discussed above, do we focus on the relationship between particular materialities and individual
humans in the manner in which psychological, political, semiotic, or affect theories do. Rather, an architectural fact is a reality *sui generis* seen on a much larger scale: a reality that is “greater than the sum of its parts, cannot be reduced to its composing parts, and that supersedes the individual [humans and things] in every sense” (Carls 2021: 4). A city, for example, is an architectural fact, and KTTs are also an architectural fact. Not just KTTs’ large residential capacities, but also their history of self-building practices and the current intervention failure are crucial aspects of this architectural fact, because these are consistent on a collective scale across the city.

Although Durkheim’s ([1895] 1982) idea of social fact is usually understood as referring to societal forces that constrain and orient human behavior, in reality Durkheim himself had a much broader scope. In *The Rules of Sociological Method*, after discussing this definition of social fact, Durkheim also brings up a “second definition,” which is “generality combined with objectivity” (ibid.: 57), or “any way of acting […] which is general over the whole of a given society
whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations” (ibid.: 59). This second definition is particularly relevant for our purposes. With this definition in mind, and acknowledging that anthropologists have been under the powerful influence of Durkheim as a theoretical ancestor, I propose a loose characterization of anthropological thinking about built materiality as follows. The majority of arguments about built materiality today deal with social facts as long as materialities are approached as participants in society, and as long as these arguments ask how society works in its “generality” and “objectivity” (ibid.: 57) with the participation of materialities. Admittedly, this characterization needs to be heavily qualified in order to do justice to all the richness and subtlety that anthropology has produced. However, if we accept this characterization for the moment, then it enables us to notice how the idea of architectural fact is a radical departure from other anthropological thinking about built materiality. While the majority of anthropological thinking addresses built materialities as social facts, an architectural fact, as discussed in this article, is not a social fact. Even if KTTs can be addressed as a social fact (as certainly many would want to do), they can equally be addressed as an architectural fact (as I do in this article). This is precisely the way in which, as argued earlier, alterity lies not in the nature of reality but in how we think.

Even if it is too crude an idea to bundle the majority of anthropological thinking about built materiality as the study of social facts, this grouping is still useful for us as a ‘ladder’ that we can discard after reaching our destination—that is, noticing the extent to which the study of architectural facts is a departure from conventional anthropological thinking. Anthropological thinking about built materiality has conventionally been based on individual human scales of analysis, as well as on the presupposition that materiality participates in human society instead of the other way around. In contrast, the study of architectural facts operates on a much larger scale to look at how humans (including not just residents of KTTs but also the state apparatus) participate in the material world. The architectural fact of KTTs refers to the entirety of KTTs (inclusive of self-built structures), the ways of life that their malleability affords, and the failure of redevelopment interventions. Here, humans are not the scale of analysis but mere participants in the material world. This inside-out approach is made possible by the ‘conceptual affordances’ of KTTs’ material properties, such as malleability, self-built diversity, and boundary straddling.

On the Particularity of Architectural Fact

There are several important qualities that characterize an architectural fact. First, scalarity (i.e., the size of the analysis) is central, because only on a beyond-human scale of analysis can one start conceptualizing certain ways
in which humans live as relative beings in the larger material world of a
city. Under certain scales of analysis, we can arrive at insights that are oth-
erwise unreachable (Brahinsky 2018). With architectural fact as a new scale
of analysis, we come to realize how humans, both lay KTT residents and city
planners, participate in the world of built materialities. Importantly, here we
find ourselves capable of such theorization without anthropomorphizing built
materialities—that is, without recourse to human-centered concepts such as
psychology, affect, political economy, semiosis, or agency.

Second, the idea of architectural fact draws upon Durkheim’s conceptual
propositions about social fact, giving them a materialist inflection. Given
Durkheim’s ([1895] 1982: 60) urge to treat social facts as “things,” it is a fitting
idea to study actual things or built materialities. Here, ‘stasis’ is a constituent
part of the architectural fact of KTTs. As much as the Durkheimian notion of
social fact is afforded by the static qualities of a society as it is made out to
exist by Durkheim, the architectural fact as a reality sui generis is also afforded
by the stasis in which KTTs are locked. Stasis is a qualified term, as clarified
earlier, because KTTs are slowly transforming through self-building practices.
Yet placed on the citywide scale of an architectural fact, KTTs do exhibit impor-
tant static qualities of the city, especially if one compares them to the dramatic
transformation of the city’s peripheries (Harms 2016; see also Holston 2008;
Zhang 2010). This static quality is not incidental for KTTs: it is a kind of stabil-
ity that is inherent in certain (large-scale) material things such as buildings.
Buildings are, after all, built to last.

Third, this article’s ethnographic material lies in a context of socialist city-
making, and it does so for good reason. Murawski’s (2019) work on the Palace
of Culture in Warsaw shows that the sheer size of the Palace and the magnitude
of its functional and visual efficacy for the city life endow the building with a
capacity to sustain itself. Such size and magnitude are a product of socialist
engineering, and these buildings, as material beings, tend to endure in spite of
different symbolic meanings that are attached to them at different times (Buchli
1999; Collier 2011; van der Hoorn 2009; see also Holston 1989: 88–98). Simi-
larly, KTTs’ citywide prevalence and their sheer material size are a product of
socialist city-making, and they endow KTTs with a particular efficacy to sustain
themselves in stasis. To an extent, in short, the architectural fact of KTTs is a
function of socialist city-making.

All these particularities of the subject matter and the methodology of this
article make the idea of architectural fact a particular one, not a general one.
The aim of this article is directed not toward general propositions but toward
abstract particularity (Holbraad and Pedersen 2009). This means that the idea
of architectural fact may not be able to extend to other empirical materials
as if the idea of architectural fact is an abstract concept detached from the
thingness of KTTs. That is not the point of this article. Instead, other empirical
materials may point toward other kinds of ‘facts’. Each of these other facts will be unique and different in terms of its particularity, but also similar in terms of its capacity for showing alterity. The point of this article, in sum, has been to delineate “a methodology that might generate a multiplicity of theories” (Henare et al. 2007: 7).

**Conclusion**

Human-scale thinking about built materiality views materialities as participants in human society. This is so almost by definition, because such scales of analysis force built materialities to sit inside a human-centered epistemology. And, problematically, this human-centered theory presents itself as if it is a matter of course. From a relativist point of view that questions such anthropocentrism (Helmreich 2012; Latour 2017; Tsing 2015), scales of analysis that already predetermine our conceptual predilection toward anthropocentrism are hard to accept. We need to explore ways to approach alterity.

Following Henare and others, I take alterity to be a matter of “how we must think in order to conceive a world the way [our informants] do” (Henare et al. 2007: 15; original emphasis). Although what is at stake is how our informants (including built materialities) inhabit the world, this must be approached by transforming how we think as anthropologists. In practical terms, this means that any given ethnographic material has the potentiality to evince alterity depending on how we think, because alterity does not lie in the nature of the ethnographic material itself, but rather in our thinking about it (see Holbraad 2012).

The ethnographic case of KTTs is illuminating in this light. In this article, a comparison of two contrastive explanations about the stasis of KTTs demonstrates that whether one deploys the logics of the human or the logics of the material, issues of KTTs can be explained in more or less equal plausibility. This means that the empirical material itself does not dictate the nature of our analysis. Instead, two different ways of thinking about the same KTTs exist, as if “one is too few but two are too many” (Strathern [1991] 2004: 36; see also Mol 2002). At stake is how we think, and how we think differently. By tapping into the ‘conceptual affordances’ of the particularities of our ethnographic material, we find ourselves able to think differently. Or, we find ourselves approaching a certain alterity—that is, an understanding of how the world could be.
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Takanari Fujita is a PhD candidate in Socio-cultural Anthropology at the University of Toronto and a visiting PhD student at the National University of Civil Engineering (Vietnam). He holds an MA in Social Anthropology of Development (SOAS, University of London) and a BA in Interdisciplinary Social Sciences (University of Tokyo). He conducted fieldwork in 2013 and 2019 on housing and urban space in Hanoi, and is currently doing dissertation research on collective housing in Hanoi. In addition to topics addressed in this article, his interests include socialism, publicness, visibility and tangibility, and comparison. E-mail: takanari.fujita@mail.utoronto.ca; mail@takanarifujita.net

Notes

1. There seem to be no definitive statistics about KTTs, and existing figures do not always converge. I present here a version of such figures found in the following sources: Dinh (2019: 315), Drummond and Nguyễn (2020: 79), Nguyễn et al. (2011: 63–64, 116), and Quang (2018).
2. We usually refer to buildings and urban infrastructures as ‘built environment’. This term puts humans at the center of our epistemic framework. In this article, I intentionally use the term ‘built materiality’ in order to highlight the importance of putting buildings at center stage.
3. My point here is not to argue for a more thoroughgoing ‘symmetric’ (Yaneva 2017) approach (see also Miller 2005). I am more interested in taking the symmetry as a starting point and then seeing what my empirical materials have to say about themselves, at levels beyond the predetermined ontology of symmetry (see Holbraad and Pedersen 2017: 43–44). As it unfolds, my argument will even amount to discerning moments of asymmetric relationship wherein humans may have a lesser place in the world than material things do.
4. Dinh (2019) presents fine architectural sketches to show what radical structural transformations were brought about to KTTs by self-built works.
5. In fact, this trend of self-mobilization is precisely what pressured the government to embark on the đổi mới marketization policies in the 1980s (Dang 2004; Furuta 2009; Kerkvliet 2005).

6. Again, there seems to be no definitive statistic available for how many KTT apartment buildings have been rebuilt in Hanoi. State media usually state that only 1 or 2 percent have been rebuilt (Tùng Tuấn 2019; Vương Trần and Cao Nguyên 2020). Although the actual rate is probably higher than this, it is likely lower than 10 percent. According to my satellite image analyses in conjunction with the original area plans, Giang Vo KTT, Nguyen Cong Tru KTT, Thanh Xuan Bac KTT, and Trung Tu KTT have had 20.4 percent, 13.3 percent, 4.7 percent, and 0.0 percent, respectively, of their residential buildings rebuilt as of May 2020. For the original area plans of these KTTs, see Đặng (1985) and Dinh (2019). Giang Vo KTT and Nguyen Cong Tru KTT are among the earliest targets of redevelopment plans in Hanoi, and they are likely to have some of the highest rates of redevelopment. Thus, the rate for all of the KTTs in Hanoi should be much lower than 20.4 percent and 13.3 percent. This limited success of KTT redevelopment is in contrast to the situations on the fringe of the city, where new urban development projects, operating on the same model as KTT redevelopment, are rapidly remaking the landscapes. This contrast is the reason for referring, in this article, to the non-implementation of KTT redevelopment as ‘stasis’.

7. I usually address her as ‘chị Ngọc’ (Elder Sister Ngoc), but I simplify here to fit the English convention. This is also a pseudonym. In what follows, the name ‘Thao’ is also a pseudonym, and it omits honorifics for the same reason. Likewise, Tropical Metropole and Bui Dong KTT are also pseudonyms.

8. To be more precise, relocation to a different place (tái định cư) is only one of two options. The other option is to live for a short period in temporary housing during the demolition and construction, and then move back to the new condominium apartment that stands in place of the KTT apartment that one used to live in (tái định cư tại chỗ). The second option, in theory, does not involve relocation to a faraway place, unless the demolition and construction take longer than expected (which is also a common phenomenon). However, it is often difficult for the residents to choose the latter option. The new condominium apartment that one is to occupy will have a much larger area than the KTT apartment that one occupies now. While the resident is entitled to an area equivalent to one’s current KTT apartment (adjusted by a coefficient), one has to purchase the surplus area beyond one’s entitlement. Many do not have the money to meet this requirement. For more details, see Dinh (2019).

9. I am intentionally avoiding other related terms such as ‘affordance’ or ‘power’, because these words are too loaded with meanings to allow for a new conceptual opening that I aim to develop in this article.
References


