EFFECTIVE CYNICISM: Waste, Power, and the Negotiation of Urban Decay and Renewal in Ulaanbaatar

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The harsh sound of metal scraping on concrete resonated throughout the ground floor of an old two-story socialist-era apartment building in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, one cold day in May, 2016. Jargal,[1] a man in his sixties, was busy scraping up decayed, accumulated domestic rubbish with a metal spade and depositing the rubbish on a sheet in the doorway. We then took turns lifting the sheet and carrying the rubbish outside to deposit it into a large pile on the side of the road. First built to house migrant construction workers from China during the height of a 1950s socialist-era construction boom, this residential building was in a severe state of dilapidation. Many of the empty one-room apartments on the ground floor had missing windows, and much of the internal heating infrastructure (pipes and radiators) had been removed. The building, which I call Building No. X, had never been connected to water. It sat within an overlapping area between the city's apartment blocks and Ulaanbaatar's large, sprawling *ger* districts—fenced land plots containing self-built housing (*baishin*), or *ger*—the collapsible felt dwellings used by Mongolia's mobile pastoralists. Like those in the *ger* districts (as they are colloquially called), residents of Building No. X were required to collect water from a nearby water kiosk for a small fee. Public toilets to the left of this building serviced this and other apartment blocks built in the socialist era. In 2014,

Building No. X was slated for redevelopment. A construction company had received municipal approval to demolish it and redevelop a brand-new apartment building in its place. This new building was to be connected to core city plumbing and heating infrastructure. Building No. X residents described how other resident owners, who had previously bought apartments in this building, had signed contracts with the construction company and were going to be provided apartments in the new building constructed in its place. They had been urged by the company, it was rumored, to begin removing internal piping to sell for scrap in anticipation of the future redevelopment.

This state of dilapidation, Jargal explained, was cumulative. Once Building No. X had been marked for redevelopment, he said, departing residents and others started dismantling components of its internal infrastructure. Vandals then started breaking windows and stealing remaining piping under the cover of night. The anticipated redevelopment began through these incremental processes of deliberate ruination. By now, thanks to this removal of pipes, the building's internal heating system no longer worked. This was a serious matter in Ulaanbaatar, the world's coldest capital city, where temperatures can reach -35 degrees Celsius overnight. It meant that residents would need to find alternative housing that year before the winter months began. However, redevelopment had failed to take place. It was rumored that residents from other buildings had been gradually depositing their additional household rubbish anonymously at night into the empty, windowless apartments on the street-level floor of this building.

Stemming from inconsistent municipal rubbish collection and the increasing ruination of Building No. X, rubbish had been accumulating in this building for some time. By early 2016, a layer of old, decayed rubbish covered many of the empty, one-room apartments on the ground floor. Some of the remaining residents, living in identical one-room apartments on the floor above, met that day in May 2016 to clear the rubbish out of the lower floor and to deposit it in a large pile on the street outside. As we sat and took a break, Jargal reflected on figures and events that, in his opinion, had shaped the Ulaanbaatar landscape around him for some time. Jargal linked the transfer of power in national parliament between Mongolia's two main political parties as a key reason as to why some private redevelopment projects had stalled while others had been completed:

> There was a plot of land north of here. A foundation for a new multi-story apartment building was laid there while the Mongolian Revolutionary People's Party [a right-leaning major political party in Mongolia] was in power.

. . . After they lost the national election in 2012, the planned development was canceled, and the foundation was abandoned. A different private company took over the development, but then the money invested [into this redevelopment plan] was spent elsewhere.

Jargal's politico-economic imaginary (Appel 2014) included the speculative social mapping of different political and business figures who he believed to be shaping the landscape around him. These characters loomed large in residents' conversations but could rarely be located and were never fully identified by residents. They weren't only limited to Mongolian politicians. One construction company director involved in the failed scheme of Building No. X was rumored by residents to be sick in hospital. The director of another company involved in the scheme was believed, by some, to be in jail. Residents felt uncertain about who was involved, where they were, and even if they were in fact the same person. This uncertainty gave rise to speculation over the reasons for the failure of this and other urban redevelopment schemes. This speculation contained a recurring theme: people involved in this and other redevelopment schemes had absconded with investment money, leaving residents and others to wait, frustrated, burdened with envisioned futures that had failed to materialize. Within these speculations, these apparition-like figures were hazily described, and of uncertain location, foregrounding and retreating within peoples' circulating narratives.

As we continued talking, Jargal turned to the topic of the rubbish:

People would throw this rubbish away [into the empty rooms of Building No. X]. Other residents of this area from [nearby] buildings would throw it away in here too. There is a five-story building on the north side, those residents would also throw their rubbish into our building. . . . I must remove the rubbish, there are no other options.

In fact, just the week before, residents had held a heated public meeting over who was responsible for the removal of the anonymously disposed rubbish. Yet no matter who had put it there, Jargal pointed out, it had to be removed. The residents' efforts to remove the rubbish helped, albeit momentarily, to stave off ruination of this decaying building. The cleaning formed an attempt at partially holding the building *in place* within unpredictable, changing urban surrounds. Within this context of shifting property relations, the building itself was not stable—the rubbish, its broken windows, and a lack of workable heating infrastructure were gradually

wearing away the building's status as a distinct, fixed structure. Removal of the rubbish proved generative: It became a way for residents to rearticulate their own and their building's value (Nguyen 2018, 2) in a time of accelerated postsocialist urban transformation.

Following a period of speculation-fueled economic growth between 2009 and 2013, Mongolia experienced an increase in foreign investment in the extractive sector and urban construction. Accelerated processes of urban expansion and redevelopment in Ulaanbaatar soon followed, made possible through outsourced construction. Underlying this construction of commercial and residential real estate was an intermingling of business and political interests that implicated municipal and national governance. However, after 2014, economic growth severely declined, leaving many construction projects stalled. Building No. X now sat in a state of semi-ruin. For residents, the daily, intimate staving off of disrepair was interwoven with attempts to advocate for a type of redress—the resumption of the redevelopment project, or the provision of municipally provided alternative housing. The presence of flexible land tenure, and slippage in the bureaucratic documentation of possession and ownership, meant that holding onto land through processes of dwelling are fundamental ways that residents maintain access and ownership over land in Ulaanbaatar (Plueckhahn 2017, 2020). The residents of Building No. X felt the need to stay in their apartments to ensure that their existing ownership remained legally recognized if the building were demolished.

During this period of economic downturn, I conducted twelve months of ethnographic research, the majority of which I did in 2015–2016 as well as shorter visits in 2017 and 2019. I researched among residents attempting to hold onto or gradually own property (both apartments and land) during this period of urban transformation. I found many Ulaanbaatar residents grappling with truncated expectations of opportunities that had failed to come into existence (Empson 2020). They engaged in an acute moral questioning of the potential equitable (or inequitable) portioning of larger urban wholes and the rights of Ulaanbaatar residents dwelling within them. I spent much time in 2016 with residents of Building No. X, meeting, talking, drinking tea, or walking in the neighborhood. They shared with me their experiences as part of a larger goal to highlight (and have me document through my ethnographic research) the lived experience of Ulaanbaatar residents during this period of transformation. I attended informal public meetings and joined residents as they met with local stakeholders, conducted cleaning days, and attended court hearings of legal cases related to the failed redevelopment. Residents described, to me and to each other, their impressions of the processes that

had led to this point. I expanded this ethnography through tracing media articles and conducting wider interviews with people in the district. During this time, residential engagements with waste were revealed as intimately implicated within processes of ruination, flexible land tenure, and outsourced processes of urban redevelopment.

Navigating these interlinked spheres required residents to develop savvy abilities in deciphering the opaque relations of power influencing redevelopment processes. I noticed how residents engaged in the critique and moral questioning of different, hard-to-locate figures that often gave rise to frequent cynical reflections. These reflections were evoked in a narrative, storytelling style, in which residents speculated on the supposedly real, self-serving motivations of politicians, municipal officials, and developers. The cynical reflections were not just a way to express frustrations or points of despondency (Steinmüller 2011, 22). Rather, they were utilized as a diagnostic tool to understand relations of power.

This essay expands on other anthropological work that examines cynicism as a conceptual frame that can generate dynamic modes of action (Daswani 2020; Allen 2013), and can form part of political mobilization and the production of hope (Hermez 2015). This previous work illuminates cynicism as containing critique, critique that forms part of searching for alternatives to a situation (Allen 2013, 27). Drawing from this prior work, I expand on this discussion by examining how generative cynicism can manifest among those experiencing time-sensitive, pressing material conditions and insecure housing. Here, cynical reflections, while containing despondency and frustration, became an effective tool that was utilized pragmatically. This cynicism was not necessarily experienced alongside an underlying hope (Hermez 2015, 520–21), but formed a productive, wry, pragmatic deciphering amid difficult conditions. Cynical reflections became a space within which residents could seek clues of who best to approach and how to figure out which course of action to take. This article unpacks this effective cynicism by drawing from a three-pronged analytical approach that interweaves in a "trans-paradigmatic way" (Navaro-Yashin 2009) the negotiation of waste, the utilization of cynicism, and manifestations of power within outsourced redevelopment. I discuss how this cynicism forms a necessary and effective tool, allowing residents to trace relations of power to find alternatives to their difficult circumstances within the very processes that gave rise to them.

A BUILDING IN BETWEEN

Building No. X is emblematic of several material processes shaping urban transformation in Ulaanbaatar. These processes span both the socialist period that ended in 1990 and the subsequent rapid market economy and democratic transition that followed. This building was not ever meant to be a vision of socialist "timelessness" or a material representation of the "city of tomorrow" (Schwenkel 2020, 232–33). Instead, it formed part of the sociopolitical processes of socialist construction itself. It is emblematic of a kind of temporariness that underpinned processes of urban improvement during socialism and ongoing postsocialist transition.

Following the onset of socialism after 1924, steps toward "modernizing"' socialist Mongolia saw attempts to transform nomadic practices to more sedentary ones in urban spaces (Billé 2015, 121).[2] This was largely done through efforts to "transform people's living arrangements" from felt *gers* to apartments (Sorace 2021, 240–41). Here, corporeal practices including considerations of health and cleanliness became part of an expanding ideology of urbanization aligned with a dominant Soviet political culture (Billé 2015, 123; Sneath 2009, 73). It included the implementation of Soviet-designed "bundled" infrastructures (Collier 2011), such as the implementation of a centralized heating system in 1959 that to this day provides heating to apartments and commercial buildings in the central areas of Ulaanbaatar. The legacies of this bundling have since left a lasting infrastructural divide between Ulaanbaatar's apartment areas that are connected to water, sewerage, and heating and the now expansive *ger* district land plots that are not.

Spurred by Ulaanbaatar's rapidly growing population during socialism, Soviet ideologies of urban planning influenced new, anticipated urban configurations. Yet in the 1950s, Mongolia initially lacked the labor power needed to construct a socialist capital city. A labor-sending agreement with China resulted in about 26,000 construction workers being deployed to Mongolia between 1955 and 1964 (Sorace 2021, 246). Yet many workers arrived to find that housing for them had yet to be built (Sorace and Zhu 2022, 257). Building No. X was one such building meant to house them, constructed as one of several identical buildings in a district containing markets for construction materials. Materially, this building makes for the very manifestation of the interstices between Ulaanbaatar's main urban configurations of *ger* districts and apartment areas. Its lack of running water, plastered latticed wooden frame, and one-room homes resemble not so much an apartment building as a transitional, sedentarized space to house workers tasked with building larger apartments elsewhere. From the outset, Chinese laborers in this district

were plagued by poor living conditions, with cracked walls, poor heating systems, and leaking ceilings (Sorace and Zhu 2022, 259). Now, Building No. X forms a "lasting condition" of ongoing construction, teetering between having been part of an engine for construction elsewhere and already being a ruin (Ssorin-Chaikov 2016, 694).

The building's disrepair in 2016 was thus not necessarily a failure or an endpoint, but a fluctuating feature of its very construction (Ssorin-Chaikov 2016, 694). The ruination of Building No. X thus moves beyond a type of socialist-era "unplanned obsolescence," as noted by Christina Schwenkel when discussing the ruination of East German–designed apartments in Vietnam (Schwenkel 2020, 233). Building No. X was always meant as a building in between—in between temporary housing and a ruined building. Its contemporary residents were often forced to embody this in-between state.[3] While many Chinese laborers had long left by 1964, Building No. X residents in 2016 were sometimes described by non-residents as people who may have Chinese ancestry, a weighty label given high instances of Sinophobia in Mongolia (Billé 2015). Residents described how non-residents sometimes mocked their lack of running water. Rather than take on this racial and infrastructural stigma (Plueckhahn 2022), however, residents deftly reframed this in-betweenness to articulate a contrasting positionality. Several described to me that they had bought their apartment in this building exactly because they anticipated it would be knocked down, their ownership status making them eligible to receive a new apartment if one were to be constructed in its place.

The residents viewed this building as an asset that could be speculated on, rather than solely as a ruined space. This reflected an ongoing conversion of ideologies of urban transformation taking place in postsocialist Mongolia (Sorace 2021). Mongolia's recent experiences of economic growth between 2009 and 2013 resulted in extensive construction. In keeping with post-1990, outsourced, atomized processes of urban construction, this transformation was made possible through the municipality sectioning off parcels of land and granting temporary possession rights (*ezemshil*) to private construction companies. However, these processes did not represent a clear temporal juncture away from a socialist-era ideology of urban modernization, but instead constituted a *conversion* of it (Sorace 2021, 242). Building No. X shifted from being solely a ruined construction-worker dormitory to an (albeit dilapidated) asset sitting atop access to core urban infrastructures. Living in disrepair created numerous challenges for residents, as well as the discomfort of perceived and felt stigmatization. Yet the building's disrepair was simultaneously malleable and could be adapted, reconfigured, and incrementally reversed

by residents themselves (Schwenkel 2020, 261). The ruined space of the building proved both precarious *and* productive (Schwenkel 2020, 235).

PRODUCTIVE WASTE WITHIN POSTSOCIALIST URBAN TRANSFORMATION

It was through residents' interactions with the accumulated domestic waste on the ground floor that a large part of the building's incremental reconfiguration occurred. Situated in an area of uneven municipal waste collection, Building No. X became a space denoted as semi-illegitimate, a "liminal zone of disrepair" (Chu 2014, 364). Cleaning it out became a visible task that put residents face to face with both the redevelopment processes that contributed to the building's ruination and the failure of municipal waste infrastructures that resulted in the waste being deposited and left to decay. Additionally, cleaning the waste required residents to intimately engage with the multifaceted forms of pollution it engendered.

The waste proved polluting in both a "manifestly concrete and cosmologically abstract" way (High 2017, 87). In Mongolia, pollution, or *buzar*, is considered filthy and disgusting, a substance that divides the "orderly from the wild" (High 2017, 87). It can "inflict harm on those present" (High 2017, 87) including misfortune and illness (Empson 2011, 283). The rubbish had the affective quality of stigmatizing the building's residents, but it also had the added potential of causing misfortune for those needing to continually associate with it. Cleaning it required one to accept the risk of multifaceted forms of pollution. At the same time, doing so allowed residents to denote the cleaner inside and dirtier outside of their building. It gave the opportunity for them to reinforce the building as an independent asset in a context in which redevelopment-induced disrepair and unevenly distributed waste infrastructures threatened to undermine it.

In different parts of Ulaanbaatar, accumulated waste can occur in areas of uneven domestic waste collection. Municipal districts (*düüreg*) enlist the services of private waste-collection companies. Resident-comprised apartment owners' associations (*suuts ömchlögchdiin holboo*) ensure the provision of large waste containers outside apartment buildings that municipally funded waste collection companies then empty (Byamba and Ishikawa 2017, 7). Building No. X and the three identical buildings surrounding it did not have an overly effective apartment owners' association and lacked large-enough central collection points. In such situations, waste can often be left in front of apartments or on roads (Byamba and Ishikawa 2017, 7). Residents explained that the municipality only collected waste deposited outside, in designated public areas. Yet because the garbage remained inside Building

No. X, residents needed to remove the rubbish from the building themselves before the municipality agreed to collect it.

When discussing waste workers in Hanoi, Vietnam, Minh T. N. Nguyen (2018) notes how engagements with waste can come to shape peoples' quests to live a "moral life" in unpredictable contexts (Nguyen 2018, 166). For instance, waste workers turn waste collecting into profitable businesses that support extended families, shaping familial relationships. This zone of redevelopment in Ulaanbaatar similarly reveals residents attempting to resituate their sense of moral personhood in relation to waste. For residents, the presence of domestic waste in their building represented municipal neglect and failed redevelopment. Negotiating opaque networks shaping processes of redevelopment resulted in residents undertaking a moral questioning, not only of themselves but also of the people shaping the landscape around them. Within this "political economy of [urban] remaking" (Nguyen 2018, 166), residents not only reshaped their building by cleaning out waste but also repurposed cynical reflections as a diagnostic tool. Rather than constituting a point of despondency or foreclosure, cynicism became a generative conceptual frame that allowed for the re-examination and attempted deciphering of networks of influence.

EFFECTIVE CYNICISM

Cynical reflections questioning the moral characters of developers, politicians, and municipal officials helped residents map changes in a flexible landscape largely beyond their control. These reflections formed attempts to map and understand shifting relations of power that were difficult to determine and did not always emanate from state or municipal apparatuses. During the 2010s, the Ulaanbaatar municipality relied increasingly heavily on outsourcing urban development to a myriad number of construction companies (Plueckhahn 2020). Some municipal politicians, often intertwined with national parliamentary political factions, were rumored to have vested interests and familial ties in the construction sector. This overlapping of political interests and construction reflects an increasing comingling of entrepreneurship and political spheres in Mongolia emerging since 1990. This comingling of social and business networks includes postsocialist Mongolian government bureaucracies, where there exists "an often unresolvable tension" between fulfilling workplace duties and "local-personal obligations" toward one's personal networks (Zimmermann 2012, 86).

Networks of alliance and mutual assistance are thus viewed as forming an important part of how power and influence are constituted in Mongolia. These

are relations of power that move both across, within, and beyond forms of state authority or governance, and they intertwine business, politics, and governance (Roitman 2004, 191). The intertwinement of business and governance has only increased during recent periods of economic flux. During Mongolia's period of dramatic, speculation-driven economic growth from 2009 to 2013, spheres of business and governance increasingly overlapped (Radchenko and Jargalsaikhan 2017, 1040–1041). Several key business figures successfully campaigned during this period and beyond as reliable political candidates on the platform that their business acumen would benefit the effective managing of Mongolia's economy (Bonilla and Shagdar 2018; Radchenko and Jargalsaikhan 2017, 1039–1041). Paying attention to these relationships reveals the way in which capitalism in postsocialist Mongolia is being shaped, allowing us to "unevenly…understand capitalism in the present moment" in Mongolia (Appel 2014, 603). Since the end of socialism, when uneven processes of large-scale privatization occurred, Mongolia experienced an increasing entrenchment of economic practices within politically powerful networks that indelibly shape the way capitalist enterprises are made possible and unfold (Plueckhahn and Bumochir 2018; Chuluunbat and Empson 2018). This can be further understood through how *kapitalizm* (capitalism) and *ardchilal* (democracy) are popularly viewed as being two sides of the same coin (Plueckhahn and Bumochir 2018). This conflation of democracy and capitalism is viewed in polarizing ways: those with business acumen can obtain considerable political success, but on the other hand, a democracy and economy that is "too free" is viewed as potentially containing corruption and abuses of power.

The power to influence construction outcomes thus dwelled within the opaque networks that made construction possible, networks that were often viewed as politically linked. Cynical reflections revealed the residents of Building No. X thus having particular engagements with and imaginations of the state (Anjaria 2011, 67), ones that differed from other modes of municipal governance and bureaucratic reach (Das 2006, 162). Residents attempted to approach the municipal officials within their subdistrict local office (*horoo*) to seek redress to the failed redevelopment of their building. However, they found themselves sent away, having been told that they'd simply made a bad deal with a bad company and that the municipality was under no obligation to assist. Residents viewed this municipal manifestation as an absent presence, differing from more top-down experiences of state and municipal authority experienced by Ulaanbaatar residents (e.g., those seeking welfare payments) (Fox 2019). Yet just as this deliberate absence produced meanings (Anand 2015, 309) of personal responsibility amid ruination, so too did

it produce subjectivities among residents that implicated the material environment (Anand 2015, 310). Residents realized that rather than approaching subdistrict or even district municipal offices, that they instead needed to negotiate opaque social networks of comingled business and politics that moved "beyond a fixed state/non-state divide" (Truelove 2021, 296). Cleaning anonymously deposited waste became an essential place where diffuse and decentred forms of wider networks of power were contested (Truelove 2021; Elinoff 2016). The urban material space became "a *political terrain* for the negotiation of moral-political questions" arising in this period of economic flux in Mongolia (Von Schnitzler 2013, 671).

Here, cynical reflections played a particular role. Cynicism became an *effective* tool that allowed for an attempted deciphering of the opaque and fluid relations of power shaping the surrounding landscape. The presence of a political landscape that blurred distinctions between social relationships, business, and state administrative authority, I argue, gave rise to a particular form of cynicism that invites a reconsideration of definitions of cynicism as previously discussed by Peter Sloterdijk (1987) and Slavoj Žižek (1989). This article joins other ethnographic analyses of the appropriateness of applying philosophical definitions of cynicism to diverse ethnographic contexts (Steinmüller 2011, 2014; Daswani 2020; Allen 2013; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Hermez 2015; Molé 2013). In Mongolia, the cynicism among residents of Building No. X demonstrates a conflation between the two types of cynicism outlined by the German philosopher Sloterdijk. On the one hand, residents of Building No. X demonstrated the role of the older concept of the kynic (arising from ancient Greek philosophy)—the popular, "provocative…individualist" (Sloterdijk 1987, 3). This kynic sits at a distance from those in power and represents a ridicule "of the ruling official ideology" (Žižek 1989, 26). Building No. X residents were also technically with comparatively much less power or influence and critiqued those with power from a distance. However, they also sat within the material vestiges and decay that resulted from the unfolding of these power relations. The residents had a pressing need to find a way to hold onto their existing land tenure and receive alternative housing. In doing so, they needed to *both* decipher and subsequently take an active part in the very processes they were cynical of.

In his influential text *The Critique of Cynical Reason*, Sloterdijk (1987) also described what he viewed as a knowing and complicit cynic in middle-upper class Germany in the 1970s. This cynicism arose within a conservative political turn and a climate of disillusionment following the failure of leftist uprisings in 1968 (Shea 2010, 146). This *cynic,* Sloterdijk (1987, 5) writes, has a "realistically attuned

way of seeing things." They view the world with a "detached negativity . . . that scarcely allows itself any hope" (Sloterdijk 1987, 6). However, rather than constituting a public and outright rejection of the status quo, Sloterdijk's *cynic* resigns themself to maintaining their cynicism as a "private disposition," a "mediated alienation," which does not challenge their context and is complicit with it (Sloterdijk 1987, 7). As Žižek (1989, 25) observes when discussing these definitions of cynicism, expanding from a Marxist approach to ideology (Navaro-Yashin 2002, 159), this cynic's perspective might be: "They know very well what they are doing but still, they are doing it." Yael Navaro-Yashin (2002, 160; italics mine), in her ethnography on political life and secularism in Turkey, extends this explanation further, writing that "people take actions upon the world *as if they did not know*, *as if they were deluded by ideology*," forming a knowing, cynical pretence.

Aspects of the "modern cynic" as outlined by Sloterdijk and discussed by Navaro-Yashin resonate with the cynicism of the residents of Building No. X. Yet this context in Mongolia offers a reframing of this latter definition of cynicism when considering the predicaments of people in pressing material circumstances that require a swift solution. These were people who have little economic or political clout or state support. Given residents' precarious situation, they could not afford a "detached negativity" (Sloterdijk 1987, 6). Rather than pretending they didn't know how things really are, as Navaro-Yashin discusses above, residents of Building No. X *do* know, and could not afford to pretend that they somehow do not. Their cynicism was a type of realism (Sloterdijk 1987, 4), utilized up front as a diagnostic tool in an open, pragmatic way, allowing them to persevere and find appropriate courses of action. A Mongolia-informed contextual revision of Žižek's summary above might be "they know very well what they are doing, they don't overly like it, but they don't have much choice but to openly persevere and find a path through it." Indeed, it is the open, realistically attuned, nature of this critique that allowed residents to better decipher the relations of influence surrounding them.

This refocuses our attention to the effective potentialities within cynicism. While residents' cynical reflections revealed moments of resignation, frustration, and despair, this cynicism moves the focus away from cynicism as something ultimately ending in "indifference" (Navaro-Yashin 2002, 164), resignation, or, as Hans Steinmüller (2011, 35) notes when discussing cynicism and irony in China, closure and denial. These residents were living in highly insecure material circumstances and could not afford detached resignation. But theirs was also not a kind of cynicism that worked in tandem with a wider political mobilization (Hermez

2015) or humorous critique (Daswani 2020). Instead, this cynicism provided an avenue through which residents could attune themselves to the reality surrounding them (Hermez 2015, 520), to confront and work within the nuances of power and authority. Rather than working alongside hope (Hermez 2015, 521), this cynicism gave rise to weariness and a wry savviness. Cynical reflections assisted residents in understanding and challenging fluid power relations as they protected their *höröngö*—a Mongolian term that encapsulates property, wealth, or a generative stake in the urban landscape.

However, rather than this be solely a diversion away from definitions of cynicism that emphasize despondency, residents' utilizations of cynical realism allow the casting of a different perspective on Sloterdijk's definitions. Viewing Sloterdijk's writing through a Mongolia-informed perspective, these effective, generative capabilities, while underemphasized, can already be seen. They become most apparent when considering the kinds of realism that underpin Sloterdijk's description of cynicism, where the cynic knows themself "to be without illusions and yet to have been dragged down by the 'power of things'" (Sloterdijk 1987, 6). The residents found themselves in an intricate predicament—their building was dilapidated, the heating no longer worked, and they were facing the reality of a fast-approaching cold winter in housing increasingly filled with domestic rubbish. In this instance, cynical realism was not an end but a tool to accept and engage with things as they really are.

POTENTIAL HIDDEN MOTIVATIONS: Cynicism and Suspicion

The residents of Building No. X attempted to trace and understand shifting relations of power that spanned municipal governance, urban development, national politics, and local powerbrokers. Cynical reflections allowed them to understand the different people involved, the nature of their authority, and their motives. These reflections centered around whether figures—such as the heads of construction companies or municipal and national politicians—were acting in the interests of a public (*niitiin*) good, or whether they were seeking their own interests and profit (*ashig*).

Cynicism emerged within speculation over a person's possible hidden intentions that differed from an altruistic-seeming public persona. Rather than there being one direct, equivalent translation of *cynicism* into Mongolian that applies in this context, for residents of Building No. X, cynical perspectives manifested when they expressed doubt about the veracity of people's public personas or their publicly stated intentions. Cynicism became apparent in the belief that some people

with power secretly pursued private profits to the detriment and exclusion of others. It could be seen when residents critiqued local officials' or politicians' actions as only driven by the desire to show the "appearance" (*tsarai*) of good deeds to increase their prestige (*ner hünd*). This was coupled with a coexisting belief in such people potentially being a *huvia boddog hün*, a person who prioritizes their own interests (Højer 2019, 753). The belief that someone could be professing one thing publicly but working to pursue their own interests can be seen in the following characterization of someone being an *ashig sonirhlyn zörchiltei hün*, literally, a "contradictory, profit-interested person." This description refers to a person who publicly professes altruism but secretly acts in their own interest.

Cynically viewing the motives of people with power and authority has formed part of the Mongolian postsocialist experience since 1990. Uneven processes of privatization after the end of socialism in 1990 saw property and ensuing wealth sequestered into the hands of a growing elite (Ichinkhorloo 2018). People increasingly believed that bribery forms part of arrangements between wealthy businesspeople and politicians, informing "widespread notions of 'moral decay'" (Sneath 2010, 255). Linked in the "popular imagination…[to] the age of the market," or *zah zeeliin üye* (Sneath 2010, 255), this has given rise to forms of suspicion and conspiracy narratives about those holding power and authority (Højer 2019). These narratives often center around whether certain powerful people (often politicians or those politically connected) may or may not be corrupt (Sneath 2018), fueled by perceptions of a "political class meshed together by myriad private understandings and arrangements" (Sneath 2012, 157). Alongside this growing mistrust in forms of authority is a concomitant continued reliance on mutual help, gifting, assistance, or information-sharing within social networks (Sneath 2010, 255). Such assistance can occur between networks of people from the same rural districts, provinces, workplaces, kin relations, or businesses (Chuluunbat and Empson 2018). As David Sneath notes (2006), clear distinctions are made in Mongolia between corruption and forms of gifting and mutual assistance, where forms of gifting and assistance are viewed favourably (Chuluunbat and Empson 2018; Humphrey 2012). Categorizations of exchanges as gifts and assistance, or bribery and corruption, exist on a moral spectrum of exchange (Sneath 2006), although in practice, into which category an exchange might fall is a matter of perspective and is sometimes difficult for people to determine (Plueckhahn and Bayartsetseg 2018). Understanding these exchanges and social processes thus requires continued assessment and speculation. Residents attempting to decipher relations of power within their district and

beyond also meant morally assessing the types of assistance that occurred within them, however opaque these processes are to those outside these networks.

When undertaking ethnographic research in 2015–2017, and again in 2019, I noticed an increased moral questioning about the private, secretly self-interested motives of those in power. While a wealthy few benefited from the 2009–2013 speculation-driven growth in investment, most Mongolians did not. Many I spoke to felt intensely disillusioned over Mongolia's subsequent economic downturn, sentiments only bolstered by subsequent political corruption scandals (Sorace and Jargalsaikhan 2019). For residents of Building No. X and others, there appeared a chasm between, on the one hand, those who "eat money" (*möngö ideh*; i.e., misappropriate funds) and, on the other, those attempting to make an honest living within this context of unevenly distributed wealth. One elderly Ulaanbaatar resident, living elsewhere, summed up this general attitude to me at the end of 2019. Visiting her in her home in the *ger* districts, she lamented what had happened since the economic downturn in 2014. Stretching her observations back to the end of socialism, she said: "Our *höröngö* [wealth/property] was supposed to be distributed equally; instead, rich people build luxury apartments in protected national parks, while I need to still live in a *ger* on a land plot. Since the end of socialism, we have lost our shared *höröngö*."

By using the term *höröngö*, this resident was referring to the material, physical nature of property. However, she was simultaneously alluding to the generative potential encapsulated in this polysemic term that underlies a wider Mongolian theory of property. *Höröngö* translates to an item or thing that has the capacity to cause something to grow, expand, and be of benefit to others' growth, flourishing, and expansion. This can be seen in how the word *höröngö* is also the term used for a starter spoonful of yoghurt placed in heated milk to create more yoghurt, and is also a term for yeast, used for baking bread. For property to constitute *höröngö*, it must have this expanding, generative capacity—encapsulated perhaps most distinctly in Mongolian pastoralist emphases on the generative capacity of a herd of animals that can breed and grow in number (see also Plueckhahn 2020, 74–75). In urban Mongolia, one's *höröngö* in the form of an apartment or land can prove generative in multiple ways: it can allow one's family to live and grow safely. Real estate can also be used as collateral when qualifying for additional loans. The curtailing of a person's ability to hold their *höröngö* in place, as seen through the presence of waste and deliberate disrepair in Building No. X, would deny resident-owners of their property's generative potential in which they had invested so much time and money. Residents needed to reclaim this future potential, even

in a yet unanticipated form. To do this, they needed to engage in a "collective, realistically attuned way of seeing things" (Sloterdijk 1987, 5), resulting in them becoming both despondent *and* proactive.

LOCATING POWER IN THE PRODUCTIVE ANTICOMMONS

One day some residents and I met in the late afternoon at one of the apartments in Building No. X to rest, drink tea, and talk. As we sat, two of the residents began describing their interpretations of some of the events leading up to that moment. They showed me numerous newspaper articles on the failed redevelopment venture, as well as a photocopy of one of the construction company's land-possession documents that was soon due to expire. "I heard the work here [redevelopment plans] will be ceased," claimed one resident; "this place is being taken under state [*tör*] protection." "Well, [the state] couldn't protect it when it was intact!" another quickly countered. "Yes," others murmured in agreement. A third person added, "Do you really think they can protect it after it no longer has an owner/holder [*ezen*]?," referring to the construction company that had had rights to build on it. "Can they? Probably they will burn it down!" a fourth joked.

This conversation alluded to some significant ways that residents were conceptualizing relations of power shaping the surrounding landscape. Reflecting on what might happen once redevelopment ceased, the residents speculated that the *ezen*, or owner/holder, would lose access to this section of land. Here, the term *ezen* refers to the person or company who had previously gained temporary possession rights to build on this block of land. One resident commented that, technically, their building and the surrounding land would revert to state (*tör*) protection. However, as seen above, the group viewed this with skepticism. The land was too valuable, they described, jokingly anticipating the state would likely wish to burn the old building down to "release" the valuable land underneath it and facilitate private construction companies to build upon it. This cynical perspective contained disillusionment, but it was also diagnostic. It revealed crucial facts about the underlying political economy of land management in Ulaanbaatar. Flexible systems of land tenure had allowed municipal authorities to provide copious amounts of land parcels to private construction companies. Because of this, residents viewed (whether accurately or not) municipal authorities as having a vested interest in making valuable land available for construction.

The outsourcing of development to myriad private companies formed part of urban governance during this period. This emphasis was echoed in other forms of economic messaging that municipal and national politicians directed at

Ulaanbaatar residents. Politicians giving public speeches in the district had urged residents to seek out construction companies themselves to redevelop the district. Government officials, both municipal and national MPs, had espoused the virtues of this type of economic governance, forming an example of the state shaping neoliberal urban economic policies (Bumochir 2020, 7). In the right-leaning daily newspaper *Ödriin Sonin* in March 2016, a municipal politician declared when interviewed about a *ger* district redevelopment program (the redevelopment of fenced land plots into apartments), that all owners of property, including those living in fenced land plots, could decide the value of their own land (Enkhbold 2016). This redevelopment was, as Christian Sorace (2021, 254) writes, "not viewed as a political project, but as part of a pervasive logic of neoliberal governmentality" in which residents were responsible "for individual futures."

Fast rates of urban expansion were made possible not only through a free-market ethos espoused through municipal redevelopment policies and governance. Ulaanbaatar land-tenure regimes and wider temporalities of land access also formed legal and conceptual frames. These stemmed from Mongolian pastoralist land use and made urban for-profit redevelopment more possible. Urban land-tenure regimes were influenced by Mongolian pastoralist usufructuary access in the development of Mongolia's 1994 Land Law. These allow individuals to gain temporary possession rights, or *ezemshil*, of a small, fenced urban land plot (see Miller 2017, 11). Construction companies can also gain access to a plot of land for up to five years to build a building through a similar type of *ezemshil* temporary possession. Temporary possession rights, plus overworked bureaucracies, often result in delays between the physical holding of land "in place" and its bureaucratic recognition (Miller 2017). Because of this, processual acts of *dwelling*, by having someone live on the land, or remain in a dilapidated building, and incrementally holding land *in place* through fences or concrete bases, constitute pivotal ways Ulaanbaatar is configured (McFarlane 2011, 651). Here, residential dwelling and the attempted construction of new buildings both work together in frictional ways to subtly reconfigure the city from within as people attempt to acquire and keep *höröngö* (Plueckhahn 2020). The surrounding landscape was thus viewed as something extremely malleable by residents and municipal authorities alike, as a space of fluctuating access and exclusion.

In unpacking this interrelationship between free market ethos and flexible land access, I draw on a concept I have expanded on elsewhere, which I call the "productive anticommons" (see Plueckhahn 2019, 2020). Drawing from Carol M. Rose (2004) as she expands on Michael Heller's (1998) analysis of the "tragedy

of the anticommons," the anticommons arises when there is too much privatized property, where "multiple owners are each endowed with the right to exclude others from a scarce resource, and no one has an effective privilege of use" (Heller 1998, 624). Ulaanbaatar has indeed seen a proliferation of atomized private access to land for commercial gain. However, the political economy of urban development in Ulaanbaatar—and the ways residents attempt to access land—presents a different substantiation of the anticommons that I argue may not be quite so "tragic" or exclusionary. Instead, while the landscape is often changing, and temporary access could be considered precarious, this landscape is productive of different kinds of shifting and overlapping ownership due to its flexibility (Plueckhahn 2020, 14).

While residents struggled with the challenges of a decaying home and attempted to read opaque political and business relationships, this landscape and the networks of power that shaped it were also innately flexible. Politicians' networks were shifting and subject to changes in the crucial national election year of 2016. Political factions and alliances crisscrossed political parties, national parliamentary MPs, and the Ulaanbaatar Municipal Citizen's Representative Assembly. Power became vested in those who had the ingenuity, resources, and political connections to try and shape this flexible landscape to their advantage. However, who those figures were was open to change; the dichotomy between peripheral and powerful was not fixed but malleable (Bumochir 2020, 14). Residents knew they needed to assess and understand the political possibilities opening up within their district, which formed an interstitial space of "breaking-points ripe for mobilization and rearrangement" (Chaflin 2017, 665). Holding land in place through processes of dwelling and cleaning out rubbish allowed residents to hold onto, however tenuously, their *höröngö* amid the "multitude of different faces [and] agents" (Pedersen 2011, 67) that formed the shifting relations of power around them.

THE ENTWINEMENT OF WASTE AND CYNICISM

Here lies one of the ironies of the manifestation of urban power in this postsocialist context of profit-driven urban development. The flexible systems of power that attempted to covet land and channel it into forms of development also gave rise to a flexible material environment that residents attempted to manipulate. Engaging with the materiality of the building itself and cleaning out accumulated domestic rubbish became a direct engagement with the politics that had brought this ruination into existence. The waste only reinforced residents' cynicism, but this cynicism ultimately proved productive. The lack of previous municipal intervention in the waste removal meant that the waste itself had become

"active political matter" (Chaflin 2017, 667), forming a "passive-aggressive zone of encounter between state actors, land developers and citizens" (Chu 2014, 352). This sentiment was summed up to me on the cleaning day in 2016 by another resident, Uranhishig. Standing in a newly cleaned room, a mask on her face to protect her from the dust, she stated:

> This building's doors and windows need to be bolstered and secured. This area must not collapse. We now need to fix this up, or otherwise, what are we to do? In the short term, we can clean and repair. . . . From the most local municipal district official to the highest national MP, they have all left us and gone . . . . Thus, no decision has been made for the past three to four years.

Here, Uranhishig "recast the political" to something much more domestic in a space where the state seemed out of reach (Navaro-Yashin 2002, 2). The context of Building No. X requires us to move beyond a binary representation of power, of, say, between residents and the state, to pay attention to "how power actually travels through . . . social relations" (Shagdar 2023), in this case, through shifting political alliances, material processes, and modification.

The residents' public, visible cleaning of rubbish, visits to elected political officials, and attempted deciphering of networks of influence eventually paid off. In June 2016, during the height of this impasse, the then-ruling Democratic Party faced national elections. The politically appointed Democratic Party city mayor had come under severe critique following the recent downturn in the economy and what was viewed as overlapping familial and business interests in city politics. In the lead-up to the elections, plastic banners adorned Building No. X and its surrounds, picturing a smiling male political candidate from the then-main opposition party. As I walked past these banners with Saraa, a resident, she pointed to this poster saying, *he* would be able to help them, unlike the other political figures or municipal officials they had previously approached. The opposition Mongolian People's Party won the election by a landslide. Several months later, residents of Building No. X were granted temporary rights to live in new municipal housing for two years because Building No. X had become uninhabitable. One resident felt certain that this move had been made partly possible because of the newly elected national MP. She evocatively described how the newly elected municipal citizen representative assembly member of the area was a childhood friend of the national MP, and that together they had collaborated to make this move possible (see also

Plueckhahn 2020, 76). To her, the most significant and ultimately effective instigator of change stemmed from the mobilization of networks of influence—networks that spanned decades, came from childhood connections, and traversed nodes of national and municipal governance.

Residents successfully sought a (albeit temporary) solution through the very political networks they believed shaped and influenced urban development processes (Foucault 1997, 545). Their "economic imaginaries" ultimately posited the state as complicit in urban development processes and business. They believed the answer to their problems lay in the types of business and political networks that they simultaneously cynically viewed as being motivated by self-interest. These networks were diffuse, and the kin, friendship, and/or business networks that underpinned them required continual deciphering. This view reflects wider perceptions of politics in Mongolia, where politics is often discussed "as rumours about the motives of politicians and businessmen, rather than discussion about policy" (Empson 2020, 54). Cynical reflections, rather than constitute a foreclosure, became effective in that they formed vehicles through which to gain better insight into how these networks of influence worked.

Waste and the types of cynicism this context of ruination gave rise to both hold a similar, innate contradiction. A redevelopment zone of "continuous becoming" (Schwenkel 2020, 261), the waste consolidated this building's ruination, further justifying its demolition (Schwenkel 2020, 239). With municipal governance prioritizing outsourced redevelopment to construction companies, the waste became an agent of disrepair discreetly allowed to do its work "through the fraying materials of the built environment" (Chu 2014, 364). However, by cleaning this waste, residents simultaneously recast themselves as people with ownership over this property, consolidating a multifaceted "stake" (*höröngö*) in the urban landscape. The waste turned their keen attention and analytical gaze to the processes that had brought it there in the first place. Waste and cynicism both formed points of potential ruination and resignation, yet faced with extremely difficult material circumstances, the residents reconfigured waste and cynicism into dynamic sites of action (Daswani 2020, 107), zones of encounter (Nguyen 2018, 166), and effective tools that could be utilized along the path toward a potential solution. Their cynical reflections ultimately proved generative. In so doing, residents were, ironically, becoming the very kinds of actors that these networks favor—people who subtly attempted to work within relations of power and modify material landscapes to their advantage, for as long as these entanglements would allow.

CONCLUSION

Cynical reflections among residents of Building No. X on the motivations of politicians and developers worked in a temporally unfolding relationship with material processes of decay and repair. Waste and cynicism are phenomena that can give rise to foreclosure and senses of despondency. However, within this interstitial space, residents productively reworked them to create incremental forms of renewal and provide insights into the opaque processes shaping the landscape. This was not an easy process for residents to navigate. Living beside encroaching, decaying waste and experiencing the insidious nature of ruination makes for an arduous and chronic challenge. For residents, such a way of life coexisted with a strong sense of being forgotten, of attempting to decipher and understand forms of state authority that appear hidden and extant within realms beyond well-known state apparatuses and administration. However, residents' slow repurposing of waste and cynicism became a way in which this experience of "endurance and exhaustion" was slowly made "affectively and cognitively sensible" (Povinelli 2011, 5).

Waste formed an agentive by-product of processes of capital-driven urban decay and renewal. Ongoing processes of decay worked to further erode Building No. X from within. Yet the removal of the waste formed an incremental, partial reversal of this process. So too did cynicism arise as a pervasive analytical framework that residents utilized to navigate the agentive by-products of failed redevelopment and seek outcomes from within opaque political networks. Residents cynically reflected on people's motivations to decipher the state when it appeared unintelligible, and to work flexibly within shifting relations of power. This allowed them to protect their respective "stake" in the urban environment, their *höröngö*, or capital, as a form of wealth that is potentially generative and expands over time. In this, the residents knowingly engaged in the same networks they critiqued (Žižek 1989). Yet the expansive capacities within Mongolian theories of ownership and generativity, combined with living amid waste in insecure housing, required a flexible solution. Here, residents, while remaining critical, cannily repurposed cynical realism and a rejection of naïveté (Sloterdijk 1987, 5) into an effective diagnostic tool generative of new solutions that best worked within this shifting yet productive anticommons.

Here, cynical reflections become a "conceptual lens" through which we can understand how urban residents positioned themselves in relation to diffuse relations of power shaping the landscape (Hermez 2015, 507). The residents of Building No. X took this one step further, demonstrating how such a conceptual lens can become a speculative, generative space that they utilized to seek out different

kinds of incremental strategies. Drilling into these ethnographic specificities reveals what cynicism can become when people's options are limited and they are experiencing pressing, precarious material circumstances and insecure housing. These residents could ill afford resigned indifference and acceptance of the status quo. Nor did this cynicism necessarily work alongside hope (Hermez 2015, 520–21), but was accompanied by a productive, wry pragmatism amid difficult conditions. An additional irony is that challenging the limits and potentials within these network of relations constitutes an inherent quality required of those navigating these networks in the first place. Because it worked, the residents found their negotiation of this context successful. However, it did not detract from their overall cynicism; rather, it reinforced for them the need to remain wary and savvy (Allen 2013, 4). These experiences demonstrate the dynamic, dialogic effectiveness of cynical reflections and engagements with waste amid pressing material circumstances. The productive anticommons of Ulaanbaatar is generative of an unpredictable interplay between forms of incremental exclusion, the freeing up of space, movable fences, the reclaiming of legitimacy, and shifting alliances (Chu 2014, 365). While the everyday often proved challenging, cynicism opened opportunities to understand and negotiate the shifting nature of this material and political landscape.

ABSTRACT

In this article, I show how "effective cynicism" allows residents to decipher unequal power relations in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Ethnographic analysis of the myriad ways residents hold onto dilapidated housing in a failed redevelopment scheme reveals how residents' cynical reflections assist in their efforts to decipher and mobilize state authority. Residents undertake this while simultaneously negotiating the insidious decay of waste accumulated as a by-product of failed redevelopment processes. Throughout, I focus on the presence of waste and cynicism as phenomena that both foreclose and open possibilities. I argue that residents' repurposing of cynicism as a diagnostic tool, rather than producing detachment, presents a reframing of Peter Sloterdijk's (1987) discussions of cynical realism, where such realism holds generative potential. Considering the lived experience of urban decay through the three-pronged analytical framework of cynicism, power, and waste reveals subtle residential reconfigurations emerging within the materialities of for-profit redevelopment. [cynicism; waste; power; redevelopment; anticommons; Ulaanbaatar]

ХУРААНГУЙ

Монгол улсын Улаанбаатар хот дахь эрх мэдлийн тэгш бус харилцааг хотын оршин суугчид үр дүнтэй "хэрсүү ухаан"-аар *(effective cynicism)*

хэрхэн тайлж, ойлгож байгааг энэхүү өгүүлэлд хэлэлцэх юм. Иргэд өөрсдийн хуучин орон гэрээ сүүлийн үед бүтэлгүйтэх болсон дахин төлөвлөлтийн үед хэрхэн хадгалж үлдэх гэж хичээж байгааг этнографийн үүднээс задлан шинжилж, улмаар өөрсдийнх нь хэрсүү ухаан төрийн эрх мэдлийг ойлгож, хөдөлгөхөд яаж тусалж байгааг илрүүлэн гаргав. Мөн үүний хажуугаар дахин төлөвлөлтөөс бий болж, муудан овоорч буй хог хаягдалыг иргэд хэлэлцэн тохирох шаардлагатай болж байна. Өгүүлэлийн турш хэрсүү ухаан, хог хаягдал гэх зүйл нь боломжийг нээх, хаадаг үзэгдэл гэж үзэв. Иргэд аливаа асуудлыг өөрөөсөө холдуулалгүйгээр бодитой хандахад энэхүү хэрсүү ухааныг ашиглаж байгаа нь Питер Слотердижкийн *(1987)* дэвшүүлсэн бүтээх чанар бүхий хэрсүү ухааны реализмын тухай ойлголтыг өөрчилж байна гэж би үзэж байна. Хот хуучиран доройтож байгааг хэрсүү ухаан, эрх мэдэл, хог хаягдал гэх гурвалын хүрээнд задлан шинжилж, ашгийн төлөөх дахин төлөвлөлт дэх материаллаг зүйлсийн нийгмийн нөлөөлөл дотор үүсэн бий болж буй иргэдийн үл ажиглагдам тохируулга өөрчлөлтийг илрүүлэн гаргав. [хэрсүү ухаан, хог хаягдал, эрх мэдэл, дахин төлөвлөлт, нийтийн эсрэг, Улаанбаатар]

NOTES

1.   All names in this article are pseudonyms.
2.   Mobile pastoralism was extensively collectivized in Mongolia in the 1950s (Kaplonski 2004, 9), where it remained a major feature of rural socialist Mongolia. Urban spaces became contexts in which sedendarist ideologies became manifest through the construction of buildings connected to core infrastructure.
3.   For a nuanced, wider analysis of urban residents' inhabiting in-between states within the *ger* districts of Ulaanbaatar, see Fox 2019.

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