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Speculative fictions and green fantasies:
Constructing Forest City, Malaysia as a model eco-city from scratch

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Renderings of Forest City, Malaysia, a planned new city for 700,000 people being built across the water from Singapore. (Source: Sasaki 2015)

Abstract

Urban mega-developments have proliferated across the Global South over the past two decades, seen by private and public sector actors as strategic vehicles for accruing profit, developing green technologies, diversifying the economy, and attracting international investment. Simultaneous global trends including the financialization of housing and the dramatic growth in Chinese foreign investment are intertwined with the story of urban mega-development in many places in the world, notably in Malaysia. In the Special Economic Zone of Iskandar Malaysia in the state of Johor, there are at least eight Chinese-financed, -planned, and -constructed real estate developments since 2012 with a gross developmental value of over U.S.$1 billion each. This thesis examines Forest City, a new master-planned 'green' city being built on four artificial islands off the south coast of Malaysia by Country Garden, the largest property developer in China. In contrast to the notion that new cities are constructed on a 'blank slate', I use Forest City as a case study to examine the contested implementation process of a master-planned megaproject, and the evolving strategies its foreign developer pursues to generate confidence, attract praise, and counter criticism. First, I outline the speculative nature of Forest City's planning and development, including how the developer's marketing of the project has evolved in response to local and transnational dynamics. In doing so, I explore the precarious nature of a Chinese-financed project abroad, as its developer is forced to navigate the local context and adapt the project's branding and strategy. Second, I further unpack Forest City's green identity as a key marketing tactic and publicity strategy. More specifically, I examine how this green identity is shaped and reinforced by the global urban awards industry, and outline the implications of Forest City's awards for the global trend of building eco-cities from scratch. Throughout this thesis, I endeavour to ground the new city and its claims to the local context in which it is situated, and identify the impacts of its construction on villagers in the area, whose culture and livelihoods depend on the ecosystems Forest City disrupts and drains resources from.

Résumé

Les méga-développements urbains ont proliféré à travers le Sud global au cours des deux dernières décennies, considérés par les acteurs des secteurs privé et public comme des véhicules stratégiques pour la réalisation de profits, le développement des technologies vertes, la diversification de l'économie, et l'attraction des investissements internationaux. Des tendances lourdes à l'échelle mondiale, telles que la financiarisation du logement et la croissance spectaculaire des investissements étrangers chinois, sont imbriquées dans la genèse des méga-développements urbains dans de nombreux endroits du monde, notamment en Malaisie. Dans la zone économique spéciale d'Iskandar Malaysia dans l'État de Johor, il existe au moins huit projets immobiliers financés, planifiés, et construits par des acteurs chinois depuis 2012, totalisant une valeur estimée à plus de 1 milliard de dollars U.S. Cette thèse analyse Forest City, une nouvelle ville « verte » qui s'étend sur quatre îles artificielles au large de la côte sud de la Malaisie et conçue par Country Garden, le plus grand promoteur immobilier de Chine. Contrairement à l'idée que les nouvelles villes sont construites sur une « ardoise vierge », j'utilise Forest City comme étude de cas pour examiner le processus de mise en œuvre contesté d'un mégaprojet planifié, et les stratégies poursuivies par son promoteur étranger poursuit pour générer la confiance, attirer les éloges, et contrer les critiques. Tout d'abord, je décris la nature spéculative de la planification et du développement de Forest City, y compris la façon dont le marketing et l'image de marque du projet ont évolué en réponse aux dynamiques locales et transnationales. Ce faisant, j'explore la situation précaire d'un projet financé par des acteurs Chinois, alors que son promoteur est contraint de naviguer dans le contexte local et d'adapter l'image de marque et la stratégie du projet. Ensuite, j'aborde l'identité « verte » de Forest City en tant que tactique de marketing et stratégie publicitaire clés. Plus précisément, j'analyse comment cette identité verte est façonnée et renforcée par l'industrie mondiale des Prix Urbains, et je souligne les implications des reconnaissances et distinctions attribuées à Forest City pour la tendance mondiale de la construction d'éco-cités. Tout au long de cette thèse, je m'efforce d'ancrer la nouvelle ville et ses revendications dans son contexte local et d'identifier les impacts de sa construction pour la population villageoise de la région, dont la culture et les moyens de subsistance dépendent des écosystèmes desquels Forest City draine les ressources.

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ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations

BRI – Belt and Road Initiative (formerly called One Belt One Road)

CDP – Comprehensive Development Plan (in reference to Iskandar Malaysia)

CGPV – Country Garden Pacificview

CGRE – Country Garden Real Estate

DEIA – Detailed Environmental Impact Assessment

DOE – Department of Environment

FC – Forest City

FDI – Foreign Direct Investment

IM – Iskandar Malaysia

IRDA – Iskandar Regional Development Authority

MM2H – Malaysia My Second Home

MSR – Maritime Silk Road

MSC – Multimedia Super Corridor

JAKOA – Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (Department of Orang Asli Development)

KPRJ – Kumpulan Prasarana Kerajaan Johor (Johor Government Infrastructure Group – the investment arm of the Johor State government)

SEZ – Special Economic Zone

UMNO – United Malays National Organisation

VEEP – Village Enhancement and Empowerment Program

1MDB – 1Malaysia Development Berhad

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Chapter 1. Introduction: Selling a fantasy

"We learned from [Forest City] that the visuality is very important to attract people. We thought the standard of the services, the standard of facilities were important. But actually for human beings, the attraction of the visuality is more important rather than the secondary things."

"Real estate is not [one of] our promoted sectors, but real estate is just like an ant. Where you put sugars, it will go around it. So actually it's just like that. When […] your economic sectors [are] doing very well, in that place automatically real estate will come."

– Iskandar Malaysia VP (interview, June 24, 2020)

1.1. Setting the scene: Two stories of Chinese-financed urban mega-development

Figure 1.1. Before (left) versus after (right) land reclamation and construction beginning at Forest City (Source: Google Earth 2012; 2021).

In 2006, the Malaysian federal government established a new Special Economic Zone (SEZ) called Iskandar Malaysia in the south of Johor state, which, at the time, occupied an area three times the size of Singapore (Rizzo and Glasson 2012). Iskandar Malaysia's primary goals were to compete and integrate with neighbouring Singapore, with the Malaysian government imagining the region as the next Shenzhen. To entice foreign investors and to set up operations in the SEZ, Malaysia introduced a number of tax incentives and identified nine key investment sectors[1], opening the doors to an influx of foreign investment and in particular, Chinese capital. As the quote above indicates, although housing itself is not a sector that Iskandar Malaysia has intentionally promoted, real estate development and construction have increased dramatically in the region over the past decade and a half, with Chinese developers playing a central role.

[1] The nine promoted sectors are: Electrical & Electronics, Petroleum and Oleo-Chemical, Food & Agro-Processing, Logistics, Tourism, Creative, Healthcare, Education, and Financial & Business Process.

Between 2006 and 2012, real estate investment in Iskandar Malaysia totaled U.S.$9.2 billion – representing a third of the total investment capital in the SEZ (Lim and Ng 2022).

In the early 2000s, around the time Iskandar Malaysia was launched, China initiated a 'go out' strategy, encouraging domestic firms to seek business opportunities abroad (Cheng 2016; Yeoh, Chang, and Zhang 2018). This strategy culminated in the launch of President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 – a new state-led vision to increase trade, economic development, and connectivity among over 70 countries in Africa, Asia, and Europe (World Bank 2019). In Malaysia, the BRI set the stage for unprecedented levels of Chinese investment, with China surpassing Singapore to become the largest foreign investor in Malaysia in 2016 (Lim 2018). Since 2009, Chinese actors have built, financed, and initiated over 60 projects in Malaysia with a gross developmental value of over U.S.$1 billion[2]. Although Chinese investment in Malaysian megaprojects spans many sectors, the greatest number of recent projects fall under the category of real estate, with a significant concentration in Iskandar Malaysia. Forest City, the primary subject of this thesis, is the largest such project in Malaysia – and likely the largest foreign Chinese-financed urban megaproject worldwide.

I begin this thesis by drawing inspiration from the introduction to Ananya Roy's seminal paper, 'Why India Cannot Plan its Cities'. I wish to borrow from Roy's (2009) structure to describe two scenes of urbanization in south Johor, Malaysia. Although these two scenes do not paint a complete picture of Malaysian urbanization as a whole, I suggest that they illuminate the sharp contrasts and uncertainties associated with the planning, construction, and financing of Chinese-financed urban megaprojects in Malaysia, and particularly in south Johor.

1.1.1. Scene 1: Rapid landscape transformation and large-scale urban construction

Kampung Sungai Temon is located across the water from Singapore, along the Malaysian coast of the Johor Strait. The village is home to around 60 Orang Seletar[3], an Indigenous group that has lived in the area since the nineteenth century (Cai 2022). Today, only around 1,600 people in Malaysia identify as Orang Seletar. Most of the Orang Seletar live in a total of nine villages, seven of which are located within Iskandar Malaysia, including Kampung Sungai

[2] This number is based on forthcoming research conducted by the New Cities Lab.

[3] The Orang Seletar constitute around one percent of the total Orang Asli population in Malaysia (Cai 2020). The term Orang Asli translates to 'original people', and is a broad term encompassing at least 19 culturally distinct groups of Indigenous peoples in Peninsular Malaysia (Aiken and Leigh 2015).

Temon (Cai 2020). For generations, the Orang Seletar have travelled by boat along the Strait to catch fish and wild boar. Residents of Kampung Sungai Temon also make a living farming mussels in the waters just off the shore (interview, Sept. 9, 2020). But the waterfront has changed rapidly in the past decade.

Since around 2012, when the Chinese developer Country Garden began its Danga Bay luxury real estate development, land reclamation has expanded dramatically along the southern Malaysian coastline, often with no warning to local villagers – and even to Singapore itself (Cai 2020; Moser 2018; J. M. R. Williams 2016). In Iskandar Malaysia, developers have been reclaiming land primarily to build new mixed-use real estate projects and integrated high rises. Many of the largest new developments are planned, financed, and constructed by Chinese companies, who were encouraged by the Chinese state to seek contracts abroad, and who saw an opportunity to meet demand among Chinese nationals for waterfront properties, cleaner air, proximity to Singapore, and an avenue to transfer money out of China (Moser 2018; Moser and Avery 2021). Meanwhile, Malay and Orang Asli residents in the area must adapt to the damaging environmental, social, and economic effects of large-scale land reclamation and construction of new condo towers: the impacts include illegal waste dumping, pollution and sediment in the water from land reclamation, noise and ever-present construction trucks, navigational dangers, and the destruction of mangrove ecosystems, natural sites, marine life, and fishing habitats that villagers used to frequent (Cai 2022; Ourbis and Shaw 2017; Rahman 2017b; Schneider 2018; The Star Malaysia 2019) (interview, Sept. 21, 2020). These harmful environmental impacts make it harder for local fisherfolk to earn a livelihood, as marine species face habitat loss and are suffocated by sediment from land reclamation. Now, villagers must spend more money on gas and have to travel further afield to catch fish. Eddy, the eldest son of the Tok Batin (village headman) explained:

> The impact is big. In terms of development and its effects, our livelihood, now it is difficult to earn an income [….] Putting food on the table is not as easy as it was before [….] For example, in terms of mangroves, there is very little left. Before, everywhere where there were mangroves, even near the beaches, we could easily catch fish or shrimp, but now there is nothing because all the mangroves have been cut down. (interview, Sept. 21, 2020)

Figure 1.2. A massive pile of sand to create reclaimed land for new real estate has been dumped in the waters near Kampung Sungai Temon, an Orang Seletar village. (Source: Sarah Moser, 2018)

Since the creation of the SEZ, state actors have been selling waterfront land and even ocean space in the Danga Bay area and all along the coast of the Johor Strait to private real estate developers. In 2012, the villagers happened upon the unannounced clearing of the land where their ancestors' graves are located and learned that their land had been sold without their permission. In response, Eddy and two others began a class action lawsuit against the state in an effort to prevent new real estate development – which they were never consulted on – from happening on their customary lands and waters (Cai 2020). Drawing from legal precedents set in land rights cases across the Commonwealth – the lingering impacts of British colonial law have united a transnational struggle for Indigenous title in which lawyers from Malaysia invoke landmark rulings from as far away as northern British Columbia (Aiken and Leigh 2011; Cai 2020; Munang 2015) – the Orang Seletar of Kampung Sungai Temon won their case, with the Johor Bahru High Court determining in 2017 that they hold customary rights to their land and ordering the state government to provide compensation for the loss of these lands (T. Tan 2017). However, the Orang Seletar chose to appeal the decision, as the compensation did not address their primary concern – the guarantee of a village site where they could continue practicing their culture and carrying out their marine livelihoods (Cai 2020). Due to the lengthy appeal process, the Orang Seletar '[asked] the Court to adjourn the matter to try and resolve the matter amicably

with the Johore State Government' (personal communication, Sept. 24, 2020). However, at the time of writing, over five years since the Court first recognized the Orang Seletar's customary land rights, the villagers have not yet managed to reach a settlement with the state. As a result, they are still waiting for a Court of Appeal hearing (personal communication, July 11, 2022).

The SEZ's planning, governance, and development is supposed to be facilitated and overseen by a federal body called the Iskandar Regional Development Authority (IRDA). Although Iskandar Malaysia's Comprehensive Development Plan (CDP) and 'circle of sustainability' concept claim to balance social, environmental, and economic goals (interview, July 2, 2020), the widespread environmental destruction and eviction of local villagers to make way for large-scale urban megaprojects suggests these aims are applied selectively, or that IRDA itself has limited capacity to enforce them. Further, because housing and real estate are not a 'promoted sector' in Iskandar Malaysia, developers have no obligation to consult IRDA on their plans (interview, Iskandar Malaysia VP, June 24, 2020). Although Indigenous customary land rights have been recognized by the courts in Malaysia, they are not entrenched in law, meaning that the Orang Asli are 'tenants at will' who can be removed from their land at any time (Idrus 2010; 2011). This is the situation that the Orang Asli in Iskandar Malaysia find themselves in, as the master plan for the area does not protect their rights to remain in their villages[4].

During my interviews with IRDA planners in charge of overseeing village preservation in the SEZ, I asked about the Orang Asli villages in the area, and whether they were included in IRDA's Village Enhancement and Empowerment Program (VEEP) (interviews, June 30, July 9, 2020). The officials I spoke with explained that Orang Asli concerns were not under their jurisdiction but rather under JAKOA, the Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli or Department of Orang Asli Development, and so were not included in IRDA's cultural preservation programs unless they lived in a village that also had Malay residents[5]. In the Kampung Sungai Temon lawsuit, IRDA withdrew as a defendant from the case because it was determined that the organization

[4] Subramaniam (2015, 118) uses the term 'land grab' to describe 'the taking of Orang Asli land, not just in violation of a statutory provision, but [...] the act of appropriating Orang Asli inhabited or used lands with impunity, that is without adequate consultation, consent or compensation'. He argues that in Peninsular Malaysia, the state's legal control over Orang Asli lands – and the lack of recognition of Orang Asli customary lands by federal and state-level governments – facilitates and legitimizes government land grabbing with relative impunity.

[5] In Malaysia, there is a long history of tensions between the special rights the government has granted to Malay citizens since independence to reinforce their status as the dominant and original inhabitants of the country, and the Indigenous Orang Asli, who are often treated as backwards, lazy 'failed subjects' in need of 'development' and 'modernization' by Malays (Aiken and Leigh 2011; Idrus 2011).

'was merely a planning agency appointed to develop the lands and did not have any ownership or fiduciary duty over the management of the land' (Cai 2020, 107). The Chinese developer similarly was not held to be responsible, with the Court ruling that the fiduciary duty to uphold the rights and wellbeing of the Orang Seletar fell exclusively to the Malaysian federal and state governments, Land Office, and JAKOA (Cai 2022). The end result is that the federal body that is supposed to ensure coherent planning and development in the region does not admit to having any responsibility for the wellbeing of the Orang Seletar, despite the fact that they are the original inhabitants of much of the land IRDA is responsible for.

1.1.2. Scene 2: Urban speculation gone wrong

In the fall of 2021, concerns began circulating surrounding China Evergrande Group – one of China's largest property developers – and the possibility that it might default on payments for a total of U.S.$300 million in debt, triggering fears that the same fate might befall dozens more Chinese developers that had similarly expanded at a fast pace through debt-fueled growth (Stevenson and Li 2021a). As Beijing looked to cool China's housing market and reign in excessive debt among property developers, investors sought to cash in to avoid losses as borrowing rates increased. In late September 2021, fears materialized as Evergrande failed to make interest payments to bondholders. Not long after, another Chinese developer, Fantasia Holdings Group Co., similarly defaulted on debt payments in early October (Yoon, Webb, and Yu 2021). The crisis led to social unrest, as investors who bought financial products sold by Evergrande demanded to see their money returned (Kirton 2022). Meanwhile, those who purchased properties prior to construction by the developer face a worrying predicament: the homes that many have already paid for are currently no more than unfinished construction sites (Stevenson and Dong 2021). By one estimate, Evergrande has 800 unfinished projects across China, with up to 1.6 million people waiting to move into new homes from the developer (Stevenson and Li 2021b). Elsewhere, Evergrande was ordered to destroy 39 condo towers it had built on a new artificial island in the South China Sea (Gibson 2022).

In October 2021, in what a *Wall Street Journal* article called 'Evergrande contagion', another four Chinese developers failed to meet interest payment deadlines and defaulted on their dollar bonds, sending property markets into turmoil as the share prices of Chinese developers plummeted. Understandably, real estate sales dropped too, as potential home buyers felt

increasingly nervous about purchasing units before they had been built. This hesitancy only fed into the crisis further, as many real estate projects had previously relied on real estate sales as a source of revenue for financing the construction of yet-to-be-built homes (Yoon, Webb, and Yu 2021). Although Evergrande was not a major Chinese player in Malaysia, other Chinese developers that were building urban megaprojects in Iskandar Malaysia and beyond have since defaulted on payments and suffered major losses. Notably, Greenland Holdings Corp Ltd., a Shanghai-based, state-owned Chinese developer nearly defaulted on a U.S.$500 million offshore bond in December, until it was saved by the intervention of Shanghai authorities, which ordered local state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to buy up Greenland's debt (Tham and Yu 2022). Greenland is one of the largest Chinese players in Iskandar Malaysia, having planned and built two major waterfront real estate projects in the SEZ. The website for both of these projects is currently down, suggesting that both are likely facing challenges.

More recently, there are growing concerns surrounding the resilience of Country Garden, China's largest private property developer, and subject of this thesis. Although the developer has so far survived, and has been successful in raising bonds as recently as January 2022, uncertainties remain. In March 2022, Country Garden's Hong Kong-listed shares dropped 19% in one day (Kumar and Kawase 2022). It remains to be seen how Country Garden fares this year. Some analysts suggest that Country Garden may further suffer due to the fact that it largely operates in 'lower-tier' cities, which typically feel the worst of the effects when real estate sales take a downturn (Kumar and Kawase 2022).

Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic has not helped Chinese developers like Country Garden that operate subsidiaries abroad in Malaysia. Country Garden previously relied on flying in investor tourist groups from China to purchase properties in Johor, rather than developing projects that are sustainable or affordable within the context of the local housing market. Johor in particular has the worst property overhang in Malaysia, with 23,224 units worth 19.29 billion ringgit (U.S.$4.6 billion) of new units sitting currently unsold and empty – the vast majority of which are high rises (Kumar and Kawase 2022). According Hamzah's (2020) pre-pandemic analysis, new units constructed in Iskandar Malaysia by mainland Chinese developers represented around seven percent of Johor's total housing stock. Of these units, around 75 percent are estimated to be unsold. The fact that sales and tourism have only slowed further since 2020 does not bode well for these unfinished and unsold Chinese-constructed units: at least two

multi-billion-dollar Chinese-financed projects in Malaysia – Melaka Gateway and Bandar Malaysia – have collapsed during the pandemic (Anonymous 2021; Kumar 2020b). The recent defaults of a handful Chinese developers shows how some investors are finally seeing the consequences of debt-fueled housing construction, and what happens when it fails. For years, Chinese developers flourished in Malaysia, planning ever more ambitious projects. Now, many face doubts over whether they will be able to complete their bold plans.

Figure 1.3. Tourists from China visit the Forest City Visitor Gallery in Malaysia, where they are shown a 3D model of the future city and encouraged to purchase properties on site. (Source: Sarah Moser, 2018)

1.2. Introducing Forest City: A model eco-city for the future

This thesis examines Forest City, a new master-planned 'green' city being built on four artificial islands off the south coast of Johor, Malaysia by a subsidiary of Country Garden Holdings, the largest property developer in China (Cohen 2014; Huang and Choong Wilkins 2022). Located just across the water from Singapore in the narrow strait separating the two countries, the project began in 2014 and is slated for completion in 2035. The development will span over 30 square kilometres and plans to accommodate up to 700,000 residents. The developer behind Forest City is Country Garden Pacificview (CGPV), a joint venture majority-owned by Country Garden, a private developer based in Guangdong, China. The remainder is owned by Esplanade Danga 88 Sdn Bhd, a Malaysian state company and associate company of

Kumpulan Prasarana Kerajaan Johor (KPRJ). The Sultan of Johor owns an 80% stake in KPRJ, which acts as the state of Johor's investment arm and sovereign wealth fund. Forest City is Country Garden's second major real estate project in Johor, the first being Country Garden Danga Bay, the new development visible behind Kampung Sungai Temon (Figure 1.2.).

Figure 1.4. The planned size and locations of Forest City's four artificial islands. (Source: Sasaki 2015)

As its name suggests, Forest City's unique selling point is its green identity. CGPV advertises a 'smart and green futuristic city' with a 'forest-like environment' that 'will bring the symbiotic coexistence between city and nature to a new height' (CGPV n.d.). Forest City specifically reflects Country Garden's signature style of 'green everywhere' (Koh, Zhao, and Shin 2021a), bringing together urban entrepreneurialism and environmentalism (Ren 2012) and buying into the notion that green real estate can fetch a premium in the market (Moser and Avery 2021; Tateishi 2018). According to the project website, Country Garden Chairman Yeung Kwok Keung's dream is to create 'The city with the perfect climate, sea views, clear blue skies and fresh air all year round. The city covered with idyllic parks and no vehicular traffic, forming an ideal environment where everyone can enjoy the sun, a swim or a carefree stroll.' The vision of green urbanism that Forest City promotes is far from understated, similar to how many eco-cities

within China have conflated the green with the spectacular in efforts to increase urban competitiveness (Ren 2012): buildings throughout the project are covered head-to-toe in vines, and there are meticulously maintained, manicured lawns and gardens everywhere. Beyond the sheer number of plants covering the surface of the first island, Forest City advertises a number of green features, including rainwater recycling, an Industrialized Building System (IBS) plant, environmental education initiatives, smart technology to monitor energy usage, a car-free podium that has yet to materialize, and more. In sum, Forest City's green vision is a spectacular fantasy, offering buyers the chance to 'realise the dream in reality' (CGPV n.d.) while making heavy use of the words 'future' and 'futuristic'.

Despite its utopian vision of idyllic city life, Forest City has been mired in controversies from the start – both environmental and political. When construction began in January 2014, the developer did not inform local residents or even the Singaporean government. Media only became aware of the project after residents of villages along the coast noticed that sand was being dumped without warning for a new development on their fishing grounds. Further, the new city is located within the largest seagrass field in Malaysia – an ecologically sensitive site that was supposed to be under environmental protection as a habitat of diverse and endangered marine species. In June 2014, the Malaysian federal government issued a stop-work order, just six months after construction had begun, for the developer's failure to complete an environmental impact assessment. Construction restarted in January 2015, with the project split into four islands instead of one in order to allow seagrass to regrow in the channels between the islands (J. M. R. Williams 2016). Regardless, the project's massive scale and construction on artificial islands has had detrimental impacts on local villagers and ecosystems. It has paved over and destroyed mangroves and seagrass habitats, and contributed to heavy depletion of local fish, seahorse, and mussel populations, among others (Moser and Avery 2021).

Currently, only part of the first island has been built, with sales and construction slowing in recent years due to capital controls imposed by China in 2017 (S. M. Tan and Yong 2017) and the COVID-19 pandemic (Rafee 2021; Yusof 2021). Though the project is largely empty of people, over 200 villas and 65 condo towers have been completed. There is also an international school, a hotel, mall, water park, extensive gardens including a hedge maze, office space, and an eco-museum. However, as of July 2022, the only hotel on the island is shuttered. The only open store is the duty free shop, which people frequent to purchase alcohol – a product that is highly

taxed and not widely available in the rest of Malaysia, a Muslim-majority country (Descalsota 2022).

In this introduction, I seek to contextualize Forest City within the region of Iskandar Malaysia and within the broader global trends of urban mega-development and new cities built from scratch, in which Chinese investors and developers are playing a prominent role. Forest City is one of over 150 new cities that have been planned or built since the 1990s, largely in the Global South (Moser and Côté-Roy 2021). These projects often draw inspiration from one another, as their developers seek to build pilot projects and templates for green urbanism that can be sold and exported to other contexts around the world. Given Forest City's aspirations to become a global model for future green and smart cities, it is essential to critically interrogate the aims and impacts of Forest City, and explore the project's lessons and implications for similar new city developments springing up across the globe.

Figure 1.5. Forest City's first island is partially constructed. (Source: CGPV n.d.)

1.3. Research questions and significance

With an estimated gross developmental value (GDV) of over U.S.$100 billion, Forest City is likely the largest Chinese-financed and -constructed new city project outside of China. Forest City is therefore an extreme example of international Chinese-financed urban mega-

development, but it is not an isolated incident. In Iskandar Malaysia alone, there at least 11[6] Chinese-financed urban megaprojects planned, financed, and built by Chinese developers since 2012. This thesis tells the story of a developer's speculation, and the fictions and fantasies a new Chinese city in Malaysia is built on – both financial and environmental. On the one hand, swift and dramatic Chinese investment in real estate and megaprojects in south Johor has transformed the coastline and ushered in an unprecedented amount of construction at lightning speed. In its wake, local villagers – particularly Orang Asli, but also Malay – are not consulted on new projects, pushed off their land and fishing grounds, and must navigate the consequences of destruction to the natural environment and marine habitats. On the other, Chinese developers sell dreams of clean air, a luscious green environment, waterfront views, and a cosmopolitan setting, simultaneously disrupting the local environment while producing a development that appears 'green' to consumers who can afford to live in the new city. Yet, as Country Garden's recent troubles and the Chinese property crisis have shown, these dreams are precarious.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, developers like CGPV primarily sold their spectacular visions to Chinese nationals – often before any construction had even been completed. But as the current crisis among major Chinese property developers shows, there are cracks in the façades they are selling, and the future is uncertain. The crisis has also shed light on the limits of the Chinese state's willingness to step in and save giant Chinese companies – an assumption that many investors had previously banked on when lending large sums of money (Stevenson and Li 2021a). In this way, the debt crisis among Chinese property developers shows signs of the limits of Chinese state and corporate economic power. Even the largest and most powerful developers have struggled, contrary to common narratives that foreign Chinese-financed megaprojects are unstoppable, and that Chinese developers operating abroad have the full weight of the state behind them (Oakes 2021). As much media coverage of the property crisis has pointed out, the story of Evergrande shows that there is no such thing as 'too big to fail' when it comes to Chinese developers (Z. H. Ng 2021; SCMP 2021). If even just a handful of the Chinese companies that have instigated large-scale urban real estate developments in Malaysia and beyond cannot stay afloat, or cannot complete construction, it will be a waste of resources at an unimaginable cost and scale.

[6] I have identified this number based on extensive online research conducted with the help of a research assistant. The 11 identified projects are presented in Table 1.1 in the following Section, 1.4.

In the context of this uncertainty and risk, this thesis explores the connections between Chinese foreign investment, green development discourses, and speculative urbanism in Southeast Asia through a close examination of the Forest City project in Malaysia. Drawing from literature in geography and urban studies, I aim to contribute to a better understanding of the contingent ways in which top-down, master-planned urban megaprojects are implemented, exacerbate geographies of exclusion, and fragment the landscape along ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic lines. Specifically, this thesis is based on two manuscripts:

1. In my first manuscript, I use Forest City as a case study for examining how master-planned megaprojects evolve as they are implemented, and explore how urban speculation continues throughout a new city's construction. My primary research questions are, *How are plans for a Chinese-financed new city disrupted and negotiated by Malaysian actors, as the foreign developer navigates the local context?* I suggest that despite its status as a top-down, foreign-owned project, Forest City illuminates how Chinese-financed projects may change course, deviate from their original plans, and rethink their branding and marketing as they navigate local criticism and global crises.

2. In my second manuscript, I interrogate Forest City's 'green' rhetoric, drawing attention to the dozens of awards it has received for sustainable urban planning and design and contrasting these awards with the environmental damage that the project's construction has caused. My guiding research questions are, *How does the developer use awards to push back against criticism and generate positive publicity, and what role does the urban awards industry play in promoting and legitimizing a project like Forest City?* Specifically, I conceptualize the urban awards industry as a crucial yet unexamined actor in promoting and legitimizing a particular mode of entrepreneurial eco-city development, and outline some of the socioeconomic and environmental implications of praising Forest City as a global leader in sustainable urban development.

I use Forest City as a case study for three main reasons. First, it is China's most expensive foreign urban project, and one of the most ambitious new master-planned cities under

construction today worldwide. Second, the project has been under construction since 2014, has an established online social media presence, and has attracted significant local and global media attention, which offered a rich array of online sources for remote analysis. Third, it advertises itself as a model green and smart city for future cities to emulate, and offers a distinct green identity. Its green branding is inspired by Country Garden's domestic projects, and sets it apart from other Chinese-financed real estate developments in Iskandar Malaysia (Koh, Zhao, and Shin 2021a; Moser and Avery 2021). I suggest that what ties the themes of each of my two manuscripts together – 1) Chinese-financed speculative urbanism and 2) greenfield eco-city development – are the speculative fictions and fantasies at the root of both trends. The two manuscripts complement each other by demonstrating the seductive appeal and PR strategies that a speculative new city with a highly uncertain future attempts to use to generate praise, international attention, and profits – and guarantee survival. Further, both manuscripts demonstrate the contradictions and speculation involved in building a new city from scratch, including the messy and contested process of implementing a master plan, despite the fact that proponents go to great lengths to portray plans as seamless, total visions for a tightly contained geographic area and set of residents (Cugurullo 2018).

Although this thesis research is based on a detailed examination of the Forest City project, including its main actors, drivers, discourses, and developmental phases, I draw from literature on similarly 'green' and speculative megaprojects in other contexts and endeavour to identify points of similarity and contrast. I suggest that Forest City exemplifies many dynamics associated with urban megaprojects and new cities built from scratch, which are worth unpacking and exploring further in terms of the ways in which they manifest themselves, are interpreted and negotiated, and influence the development trajectories of projects in other contexts. A rich body of scholarship explores the transnational circulation of green urban models and policies (McCann 2013; 2017a), and offers evidence that developers of greenfield eco-cities seek to sell their models across the globe (Bunnell and Das 2010; Chang 2017; Chang, Leitner, and Sheppard 2016; Cugurullo 2013; Rapoport and Hult 2017; Shwayri 2013). Consequently, I argue that there is a need to critically examine projects like Forest City that position themselves as models of 'future cities', particularly given the documented harmful social and environmental impacts similar speculative eco-cities built from scratch (Ajibade 2017). While the question of whether such speculative and entrepreneurial mega-developments should continue to be built from

scratch is outside of the scope of this thesis, Forest City provides a cautionary tale for private developers and state actors looking to pursue this type of urban development as a means to solving environmental challenges, and demonstrates the necessity of scholarship that pushes back against the uncritical praise many of these projects receive.

1.4. Context: Situating Forest City within Iskandar Malaysia

Forest City is located within Iskandar Malaysia, a U.S.$28 billion Special Economic Zone (SEZ) of 4,749 square kilometres that is located in south Johor directly across the water from and within commuting distance of Singapore (Benjamin 2019; Cai 2020; Rizzo and Glasson 2012). Malaysia built its first SEZ, the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), in the 1990s, including the 'intelligent' new cities of Cyberjaya and Putrajaya (Bunnell 2004). The country was an early pioneer in new city building and state-driven urban mega-development; however, since the construction of the MSC over two decades ago, the involvement of the private sector in new city building has increased significantly (Moser and Côté-Roy 2021). Urban mega-development in Malaysia has since rapidly expanded around Kuala Lumpur and along the coasts of Johor, Melaka, and Penang, where extensive land reclamation projects are underway (Beech 2020b; Low 2019; Shepard 2018). This thesis focuses specifically on the recent concentration of urban mega-developments in Iskandar Malaysia in south Johor, across the water from Singapore.

The malaysian federal government created Iskandar Malaysia in 2006 as the country's second SEZ with the intention of attracting large-scale foreign investment. Special Economic Zones in 'peripheral regions' can be understood as zones of sharp contrasts and magnified urban transformations (Barau 2017) built around economies of 'anticipation' (Cross 2015). The creation of Iskandar Malaysia sought to transform the region into the next Shenzhen, introducing a number of tax and economic incentives for foreign investors and corporations (Hutchinson and Rahman 2020). The SEZ set rapid landscape change and urbanization in motion, driven by both state-initiated projects and a dramatic influx of foreign investment, particularly from China, but also Singapore, and a number of other countries in Asia and beyond. Though the federal tax incentives and location next to Singapore are undoubtedly appealing, in many cases, Johor state officials and the Sultan of Johor himself actively recruited wealthy Chinese real estate corporations to the region (Lim and Ng 2022). In part due to real estate investment and construction, the creation of the SEZ has transformed south Johor from a predominantly forested

and agricultural region into the third most urbanized area in peninsular Malaysia. Between 2006 and 2010 alone, urban land use nearly doubled, increasing from 13 to 24 percent of Iskandar Malaysia's total area, while the proportion of land for protected ecosystems, forest sites, and mangrove swamps all decreased (Yasin et al. 2020).

Over the past decade, Chinese foreign investment in Johor has been concentrated particularly in real estate and public-private partnerships to build megaprojects (Avery and Moser 2020). Since 2012, nearly a dozen multi-billion-ringgit projects have been planned or constructed by Chinese actors in Iskandar Malaysia alone (Table 1.1). The increase in Chinese real estate developers and buyers in the region is highly controversial: Forest City made headlines in 2017 and 2018 as the project became a focal point for former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad's re-election campaign and complaints that the BRI – and the control of Chinese actors over the financing and construction of Malaysian megaprojects – constituted a 'new version of colonialism' (Jaipragas 2018). Though it is difficult to determine the exact number of Chinese-financed urban megaprojects worldwide, it is estimated that China invested nearly U.S.$900 billion in BRI countries from 2013 to 2021 (Green Finance & Development Center, 2022), demonstrating the scale and power of Chinese actors worldwide.

Table 1.1. Chinese-financed urban megaprojects identified in Johor, Malaysia.

	Name	Year started	Value[7] (MYR)	Chinese developer	Malaysian partner	Description	Status
1.	Country Garden Danga Bay	2012	18 billion	Country Garden Holdings Ltd.	Country Garden Danga Bay Sdn Bhd (subsidiary)	Integrated high rise development advertising waterfront living. Includes a marina and yacht club, commercial area, private beach and pool, green space, and residences.	Completed, but significantly behind schedule. Website is currently down.
2.	Paradiso Nuova Medini	2013	1.5+ billion	Zhuoda Group	Medini Iskandar Malaysia Sdn Bhd Zhuoyuan Iskandar Sdn Bhd (subsidiary of Zhuoda Group)	Luxury condo project being developed in three phases.	Unclear. Some buildings are complete and condos are listed for sale, but the website no longer works.

[7] Values are estimates of the total Gross Developmental Value (GDV) of a project, and are likely underestimates in many cases due to a lack of data on the expected value of future project phases.

3.	R&F Princess Cove	2013	24.5 billion	Guangzhou R&F Properties Co. Ltd.	Unclear, likely a subsidiary.	116-acre 'ultra residential development' and 'city within a city' with 7,000 units. Includes a hotel, offices, shopping mall, club house, apartments.	Completion targeted for 2020 (phase 1), and 2022 (phase 2).
4.	Forest City	2014	415 billion	Country Garden Holdings Ltd.	Esplanade Danga 88 Sdn Bhd	New city planned for four artificial islands.	Under construction.
5.	Macrolink Medini	2014	Unknown	New Hualian Group, New Hualian Cultural Tourism Development; China Construction Third Bureau	Macrolink International Land (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd	Integrated development including several condo towers built around a park. Also appears to include hotels and commercial space in the plan.	Hotel is open and some properties are listed for sale. No news published on developer's site since 2016.
6.	Greenland Jade Palace, Danga Bay	2015	2.2 billion	Greenland Group	Greenland Danga Bay Sdn Bhd (subsidiary)	Resort hotel and residential development.	Scheduled for completion in 2018 but appears to be stalled. Website is currently down.
7.	No name	2015	4 billion	Vanke	N/A	Chinese developer Vanke spent 4 billion MYR to purchase a seafront lot in Johor Bahru in 2015 to develop.	Stalled. Vanke stated in April 2019 that it does not currently have any plans for the project.
8.	Central Park Tampoi	2016	4.6 billion	Country Garden Holdings	Damansara Realty Bhd	53-acre development including single-family homes, high rises, and commercial space.	Phase 1 completed in 2019.
9.	Greenland Helios Cove	2016	20 billion	Greenland Group	Iskandar Waterfront City Bhd	Phase 1 includes condos, a snow world theme park, opera house, hospital specializing in Chinese medicine, and a school. As of Feb. 2019, it appears only the mall has been built.	Unknown. Website is currently down.
10.	Robotic Future City	2017	15 billion	Siasun Robot Investment	Johor Corporation	Development of a 404-hectare site into a commercial hub for the robotics industry, as a 'multi-purpose robot city'.	Unknown.
11.	No name	2021	8 billion	MCC Singapore (subsidiary of Metallurgical Corporation of China Ltd.)	Danga Heights Development (subsidiary of Iskandar Waterfront Holdings [IWH])	Metallurgical Corporation of China and IWH formed a joint venture to purchase 148 acres of commercial land in Skudai.	Scheduled to be developed over the next 10 years.

Much of the large-scale urban development in Iskandar Malaysia is not attainable for local residents, as units in new projects like Forest City are too expensive even for Malaysian government officials (CBC News 2019; Lim and Ng 2022; Schneider 2018). Rather, new developments filled with luxury condos and waterfront villas are built for investment purposes, driven by the financialization of housing and the emergence of real estate as an investment vehicle for a new class of foreign homeowners (Koh 2021). Forest City has primarily sold units to Chinese nationals, many of whom purchase these units as second homes or vacation rentals, and most of whom do not intend to live there full time (Moser and Avery 2021). Despite the lack of consideration for existing residents in the region, it is important to note that this wave of Chinese-backed urban mega-developments is in many ways facilitated by Malaysian state actors and monarchs. In particular, as Scene 1 demonstrated, Orang Asli communities are afforded the least amount of consideration and protection, stemming from Malaysia's long history of ethnic tensions, colonially imposed hierarchies, and perceptions that the Orang Asli are 'primitive' or 'backward'. As Cai (2022, 9) notes,

> The presence of the Orang Seletar villagers in the Danga Bay area is deemed a form of transgression, ideologically inappropriate and aesthetically 'out-of-place' with the Iskandar Malaysia's and the Country Garden's grand vision of a trendy waterfront city for tropical living. Hence, they have to be evicted to conform with the appropriate moral order and aesthetic judgement associated with the grand vision.

This thesis aims to provide an in-depth account of the challenges and contradictions that Forest City, a foreign-owned model 'green' city, has faced during its construction in Iskandar Malaysia since 2014. Using Forest City as a case study, I seek to contribute to a greater understanding of how Chinese foreign investment in real estate, as a growing global trend, plays out in a particular context, with potential for lessons from Iskandar Malaysia to be applied in other regions that are also experiencing unprecedented inflows of Chinese foreign investment, or are experimenting with speculative eco-city planning and construction. Finally, I investigate the social exclusions and environmental damage that may result from a large-scale, top-down megaproject like Forest City, as certain segments of the population are left out of imagined and master-planned green urban futures.

1.5. Thesis structure

This thesis is structured as follows. First, I have laid out the context in which Forest City is situated and my guiding research questions and objectives in this introduction. **Chapter 2** provides a review of the three main bodies of literature that inform my research on Forest City as a new master-planned urban megaproject: scholarship on Chinese foreign investment in Southeast Asia, speculative urbanism, and eco-cities. **Chapter 3** outlines my research process and the methods used to conduct this research, and includes a reflection on my positionality and the challenges of conducting research remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 4, my first manuscript, explores how Forest City – a project built by a wealthy Chinese developer and with the backing of the Sultan of Johor – has nonetheless been forced to shift its strategy and rhetoric in order to survive, in response to pressure from high-level Malaysian government officials and global economic trends. Further, it illustrates the roadblocks that privately-owned and -planned new cities may face in implementation, and challenges the assumption that host countries have no influence over the trajectory of Chinese-financed urban mega-developments on their soil. At the same time, I demonstrate that the project's evolution likely only reflects the criticisms of Malaysian political elites rather than responding to the concerns of local villagers, who face the most severe threats to their land and livelihoods due to the project's construction.

Chapter 5, my second manuscript, examines the environmental claims of Forest City in contrast to the large number of awards it has received for sustainability and green urbanism. Specifically, I explore the role of urban awards in lending credibility to the developer's eco-claims, and promoting a particular mode of spectacular, profit-driven development.

Chapter 6 concludes by drawing the findings from each of my manuscripts together and offering reflections on the particular mode of profit-driven, speculative green mega-development that Forest City embodies and what its implications are for local residents and environments. Finally, I outline directions for future research both on Forest City, as the project continues to develop, and scholarship on speculative urban mega-development more broadly.

Chapter 2. Literature review

2.1. Introduction: New master-planned cities and urban mega-development in Southeast Asia and beyond

Forest City is part of a broader trend of urban megaprojects and new cities built from scratch. This thesis uses Forest City as a case study to explore several dynamics that are instigating and shaping rapid and large-scale real estate construction in Johor, Malaysia. Acknowledging that Forest City and similar Chinese-financed projects Iskandar Malaysia are not isolated incidents of urban mega-development, it is important to situate them within existing scholarship on the trend, particularly in Southeast Asia, a region that is rapidly urbanizing (Moser 2011). In this chapter, I provide an overview of the contemporary wave of new master-planned cities – and urban mega-development more broadly – that has emerged since the late 1990s. Following this introduction, I outline the major bodies of scholarship and conceptual categories that have informed my research on Chinese-financed urban mega-development in south Johor. Specifically, I pay attention to three main focus areas: 1) the rise of Chinese foreign investment in urban megaprojects; 2) the rapid growth in self-proclaimed eco-cities built from scratch; and 3) the entrepreneurial, speculative mode of urban development that has enabled the inception of such megaprojects. I conclude by outlining some of the gaps in this literature, and how a close examination of the Forest City project can inform scholarship beyond Malaysia in places that are also experiencing the speculative development of new (eco-)cities from scratch.

Cities of the Global South have typically been studied from a Western perspective, viewed as 'under-developed', crowded mega-cities (Roy 2009). In this view, it is assumed that the twin processes of globalization and (neoliberal) capitalism have unifying effects on all cities (Ong 2007), forcing them to adopt entrepreneurial strategies (Harvey 1989) to climb the hierarchy of 'global cities' – processes that ultimately lead all cities to converge around a Western model of urbanization and modernity (Shatkin 2007). Consequently, urban studies scholars of Southeast Asia and the Global South more broadly have pushed back against the mapping of Western theory onto all cities (Bunnell 2015; Samara, He, and Chen 2013), and the teleological and ethnocentric underpinnings of the notion of 'convergence' (Shatkin 2007; 2008). Without denying the influence of globalization, urban studies scholars demonstrate that global trends and outcomes are negotiated and re-interpreted in different settings (Ong 2007; Shatkin 2007). In Asia, scholars have traced processes of 'inter-referencing' among aspiring

metropolises, with cities like Singapore and Shanghai increasingly seen as desirable models of urbanization for other Asian cities to replicate (Bunnell 2015; Roy and Ong 2011; Shatkin 2011).

In particular, research on new master-planned cities demonstrates how Asian urban actors have been pioneers in developing new types of urban models and megaprojects that draw inspiration from other Asian contexts and cannot be explained solely through Western understandings or patterns of urbanization (Datta and Shaban 2016). Currently, over 150 new cities have been planned or constructed in over 40 countries worldwide (Moser and Côté-Roy 2021). This unique wave of new city building is characterized by its unprecedented speed and scale (Datta 2016), and has proliferated across the Global South over the past two and a half decades, beginning primarily in Asia in the late 1990s and early 2000s but expanding across the continent throughout the Middle East, Africa, and beyond. In analyzing Forest City, I follow Moser and Côté-Roy's (2021, 2) definition of new cities as 'urban mega-developments built from scratch on a tabula rasa that are designed to be both geographically and administratively separate from established cities, while projecting a distinct brand, architectural identity, and vision of the future'. In broad terms, the authors suggest that motives for building new cities include economic growth, experimentation in new forms of governance, and nation-building. Many of these projects remain unbuilt, while those that are constructed struggle to meet population targets (Datta 2016). As a result, research on new cities is as much, if not more, about the 'aspirations of their builders' as it is about their built form once – and if – they begin construction (Moser and Côté-Roy 2021, 2). In contrast to the post-war new towns and post-colonial capital cities of the mid-1900s, new cities today are largely public-private partnerships, enabled and influenced by global dynamics including the financialization of real estate, the transformation of housing as an investment vehicle, the growing influence of tech companies in the world of urban planning, and more (Moser and Côté-Roy 2021).

This literature review, however, draws from scholarship on urban megaprojects more broadly than what may be strictly defined as 'cities'. Koelemaij and Derudder (2021) use the term 'transnational real estate development projects' (TREDs) to capture the common aspects of large-scale, mixed-use urban developments that are facilitated by international investors. Developers generally market these projects to transnationally mobile elite or upper middle class consumers, and use eye-catching imagery to sell their projects. While not all TREDs can be defined as new cities, many new cities fall under the TRED umbrella, including Forest City.

Both terms capture many of the same dynamics, including undercurrents of authoritarianism, growing urban inequality and segregation, the ability to bypass legal requirements and regulations, and the corresponding adverse impacts on local residents who tend to be left out of profit-driven, urban megaprojects (Koelemaij and Derudder 2021).

To date, there are few scholarly articles written on Forest City[8], and much of the existing literature on Iskandar Malaysia focuses on the SEZ's environmental impacts as opposed to questions of urbanization and cultural politics[9]. Though I aim to situate Forest City first and foremost within the trend of urban mega-development in Malaysia, I draw from scholarship in other contexts in Asia and Africa when it informs an understanding of phenomena that have not been discussed in much depth in the Southeast Asian context. As Roy (2009, 820) argues, theoretical insights grounded in other contexts can be 'borrowed, and remapped', provided that scholars consider and incorporate contextual specificities.

2.2. Chinese foreign investment in Southeast Asian megaprojects

In this thesis, I suggest that Forest City is an illustrative case study in the global trend of Chinese foreign investment in (urban) megaprojects. Chinese investment worldwide has grown dramatically over the past decade, spurred in large part by the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. The BRI is a Chinese state-led vision to increase trade, economic development, and connectivity among over 70 countries in Africa, Asia, and Europe (World Bank 2019). The rise of Chinese foreign investment in recent years has made it difficult to ignore China as a major player in international geopolitics (Flint and Zhu 2019), housing markets (Fauveaud 2020; Hamzah 2020; Ley 2017; Lim and Ng 2022; Rogers, Lee, and Yan 2015), and international development (Escobar 2012). In particular, Chinese state actors and public and private corporations have financed, planned, and built new cities and urban megaprojects in Malaysia, the Philippines, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Oman, Egypt, and beyond.

[8] At the time of writing, there are five articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals that I have found through keyword searches that deal with Forest City in a significantly detailed manner (Hamzah 2020; Koh, Zhao, and Shin 2021b; Liu and Lim 2019; Moser 2018; Moser and Avery 2021), while a handful of others have been published in institutional or organizational publications (Rahman 2017a; 2017b; J. M. R. Williams 2016).

[9] Exceptions include Barau (2017), Lim and Ng (2022), Rizzo and Glasson (2012), Rizzo (2019), and Hamzah (2020), who all study aspects related to real estate, landscape change, and cultural dynamics.

Malaysia has seen some of the most dramatic and expensive Chinese-financed and constructed megaprojects in the past decade, in large part because it occupies a strategic geographic location within the BRI (Chen 2010; Lim 2018; Liu and Lim 2019; Moser 2018; Yeoh, Chang, and Zhang 2018). In 2016, Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in Malaysia climbed to over U.S.$1.8 billion, with China surpassing Singapore to become the largest foreign investor in Malaysia (Figure 2.1.). A World Bank (2019: 40) report estimates Malaysia to be one of the top four recipient countries of BRI investment worldwide, while Malaysia has been China's greatest Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) trading partner since 2008 and is presently its third largest in Asia (Yeoh, Chang, and Zhang 2018). The main difference between Chinese investment in Malaysia within the past decade versus pre-2013 is largely the unprecedented pace and scale at which it is taking place. Chinese FDI in Malaysia tripled after the launch of the BRI in 2012 and increased dramatically in 2016. A slight decrease is notable after the election of Mahathir Mohamad as Malaysian prime minister in 2018; however, overall levels of Chinese FDI remain high in Malaysia relative to 2012, when the BRI was launched.

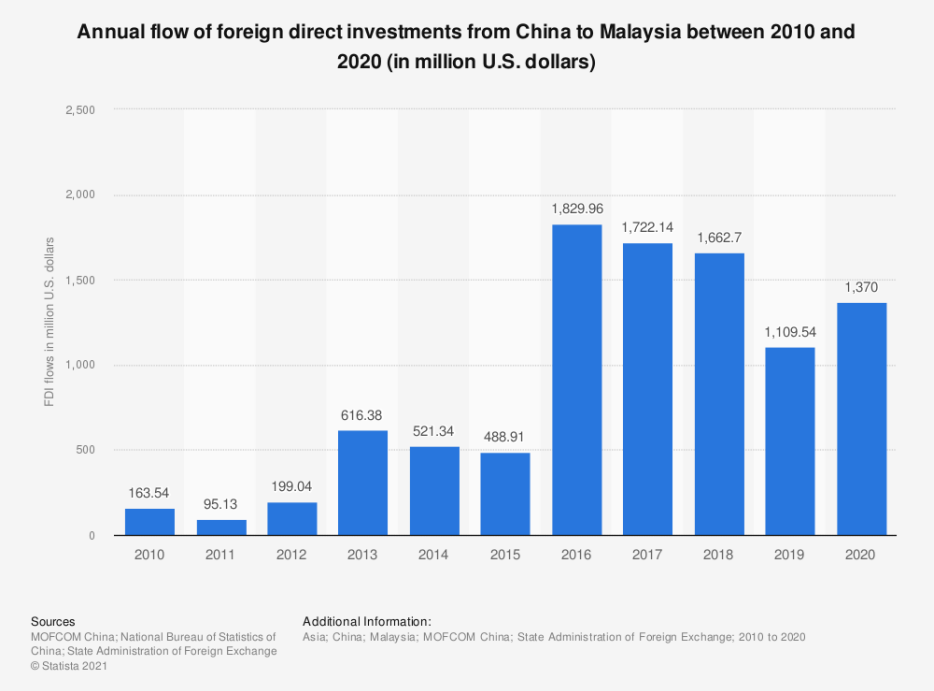

Figure 2.1. Chinese FDI in Malaysia has risen dramatically since 2012. (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2021).

Significant press and scholarship have analyzed the expansion of BRI projects, with emphasis on the rapidly increasing scale of Chinese overseas investment from state-owned and private enterprises. Much literature seeks to identify China's geopolitical and economic motives for constructing and financing BRI projects (Lin, Shimazu, and Sidaway 2021), many of which are industrial, energy, and transportation infrastructure-focused (Arase 2015; Chen 2010; Cheng 2016; Du and Zhang 2018; Flint and Zhu 2019; Gan and Mao 2016; Klaver and Trebilcock 2011; Pantucci and Lain 2016). Consequently, urban geographers have called for greater attention to urban dimensions of the BRI, arguing that the existing focus on geopolitics, economics, and nation states fails to consider the nuanced scales and typologies of urban development emerging through the BRI (Bunnell 2021), and the 'significant socio-spatial restructuring of global capitalism based on nodes and infrastructure corridors that connect new sites of accumulation to extractive landscapes' (J. Williams, Robinson, and Bouzarovski 2020, 129).

It should be noted that Chinese foreign investment is not limited to the BRI, with real estate comprising a major area of investment at both individual and corporate scales (Avery and Moser 2020). Although many urban projects, including Forest City, are not officially part of the BRI, they may serve geopolitical aims through the cultivation of soft power (Büdenbender and Golubchikov 2017) or by creating a 'neocolonial outpost' in foreign territory, as Moser (2018, 939) argues is the case with Forest City. Even though Forest City, like many Chinese foreign projects, is not run by a state-owned enterprise (SOE) and is not officially part of the BRI, salespeople advertise it as a BRI project (Moser 2018). The line between private and public entities in China is often unclear, as private sector actors often follow the government's directives to fulfill national goals (Du and Zhang 2018; Z. H. Ng 2021). At the same time, it is important to examine the unique dynamics and variations among individual Chinese-financed projects, rather than attributing all projects to a monolithic China (Oakes 2021). As Zhang (2020) notes, motives and perceptions of Chinese investment in Malaysia vary significantly according to business sectors.

Finally, few studies examine recipient states' roles in actively seeking out and negotiating the terms of Chinese investment, in contrast to the majority focusing on China's power and motives (Liu and Lim 2019). Over the past few decades, Malaysia has engaged in a number of explicit strategies to attract FDI and construct dozens of mega-developments (De Micheaux 2019; Juego 2018; Lim 2018; Liu and Lim 2019; Rizzo and Glasson 2012). In Iskandar Malaysia

specifically, Lim and Ng (2022) explore how the recent rise of Chinese-financed megaprojects is more nuanced and complex than narratives of 'neo-colonialism' or 'neo-imperialism': rather, the authors suggest that Johor officials – especially the Sultan – have strategically courted Chinese real estate developers in order to increase the state government's power and influence relative to the federal government in Iskandar Malaysia, which is supposed to be jointly managed by the Prime Minister and the Chief Minister of Johor. Outside of government initiatives to attract investment, Hamzah (2020, 1) examines the 'interscalar interactions between market and actors' related to unprecedented FDI flows from China into Johor real estate, and the 'bamboo network' that helps facilitate these investments. Still, there remains a knowledge gap in regards to how the economic conditions and socio-political institutions of host countries such as Malaysia can facilitate such enormous FDI flows (Lim 2015), and how recipient states and their citizens can influence the development trajectories of powerful Chinese-financed megaprojects. Accordingly, this thesis seeks to provide a nuanced picture of Chinese investment in Malaysian urban megaprojects through a detailed case study of Forest City.

2.3. Greenfield eco-cities: Solving the climate crisis or greenwashing enclave urbanism?

Along with the emergence in the 1990s of the current wave of new cities built from scratch came a subset of projects branded as 'eco-cities'. As I outline in more detail in Chapter 5, these projects claim to preserve and enhance the natural environment, and seek to create models of green urbanism that can be sold and exported to different regions, countries, and climates around the world (Chang 2017; Mullins and Shwayri 2016; Rosol, Béal, and Mössner 2017; Shwayri 2013). The term 'eco-city' was originally coined by architect and activist Richard Register in the 1987; however, there is no single or accepted definition of an eco-city, as anyone can apply the 'eco' label to their project (Rapoport 2014). Despite the origins of the concept in the grassroots environmental movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Caprotti 2015; Rapoport 2014), the current wave of greenfield eco-cities involves largely top-down, large-scale projects built through profit-oriented, tech-focused public-private partnerships with entrepreneurial motives. Eco-city proponents suggest that a blank slate is necessary for innovation, arguing that the creation of living laboratories is the only way to pioneer and test truly revolutionary new green technologies. Today's eco-cities are sites of experimentation and share utopian aspirations (Rapoport 2014; Cugurullo 2018). However, the majority remain unbuilt or unfinished, and there

is limited evidence that this current wave of eco-cities has succeeded in reducing urban ecological footprints (Joss, Cowley, and Tomozeiu 2013; Cugurullo 2016a).

A robust body of critical eco-cities scholarship has identified a number of contradictions and problematic aspects to greenfield eco-city projects planned and under construction in a wide range of contexts, from Nigeria, to the UAE, to Malaysia. Broadly, critiques are levelled at the way eco-cities use green features and rhetoric to obscure economic and political motives (Cugurullo 2016a; Koch 2014; Pow 2018; Rapoport 2014; Rizzo 2017); the way they promote urban segregation and enclave urbanism (Ajibade 2017; Brill and Reboredo 2019; Caprotti 2014b; 2015; Hodson and Marvin 2010) or 'engineer social exclusions' (Moser and Côté-Roy 2021); their overwhelming focus on technology (Cugurullo 2013; Griffiths and Sovacool 2020; Joss, Cowley, and Tomozeiu 2013; Mullins and Shwayri 2016); their neglect for economic and social dimensions of sustainability in the pursuit of profit (Cugurullo 2013); and their detrimental impacts on local environments due to large-scale construction from scratch (Moser and Avery 2021; Brill and Reboredo 2019; Tateishi 2018). Instead of thinking holistically about how urban design and planning can learn from natural ecological systems to function more sustainably – a key tenet of ecological urbanism (Lorrimar-Shanks and Owen 2016) – today's eco-cities are conceived of as bounded laboratories for controlled, profit-driven experimentation with green technologies. Caprotti (2014a, 1287) elaborates, referring to the eco-city as 'a hollowed-out vision of the city–nature nexus, as the urban becomes devoid of human and political potential while being elevated to the role of stage on which the interplay of technology and green capitalism can be unleashed in a time of constructed crisis.'

Many contemporary eco-city projects and models originated in China, which shifted its 'growth first' economic development strategy to a 'sustainable development' model in 2005. Local levels of Chinese government have pursued an expansive eco-city development agenda, as municipalities compete to obtain a 'National Model City for Environmental Protection' status from the Chinese state, involving carbon emissions, air, and water quality standards (Ren 2012, 20). Chinese developers – including Country Garden, the developer behind Forest City – have played a significant role in exporting eco-city norms, ideals, and models outside of the country. Normative green ideals shaped by the builders of greenfield eco-cities can be seen in both domestic Chinese new city projects (Chang 2017; Chang, Leitner, and Sheppard 2016; Pow 2018), as well as in smaller-scale gated communities and residential compounds outside of large

urban centres (Pow and Kong 2007). In the case of Forest City, Koh, Zhao, and Shin (2021b) examine how the project draws from Country Garden's signature 'green everywhere' style that typifies its real estate developments within China, as the developer deems 'green' features to be highly profitable and refers to its green landscaping as its 'nuclear weapon'.

What is interesting in the circulation of normative eco-city rhetoric, ideals, and models (McCann 2013; 2017b; Rapoport and Hult 2017), is the way in which success – in terms of project completion, the attraction of new residents, and the overall sustainability of a project – is not necessarily a determining factor in which models get picked up, sold, and held as standards for innovation in eco-city development and green urbanism. Rather, a key measurement of 'success' is whether an eco-city model – regardless of its actual environmental performance – can be profitably reproduced and sold elsewhere (Hodson and Marvin 2010). Scholars have documented how unrealized plans for spectacular megaprojects generate attention (Colven 2020; Wade 2019) and influence eco-city development in other contexts, despite the fact that the project may not exist in reality in any recognizable form (Chang 2017). As Datta (2016, 18) argues, master plans are presented by developers as technical solutions; however, they wield a form of social power through 'mythmaking'. Produced by 'experts', master plans legitimize mega-urbanization strategies and 'fast cities' as rational solutions to global crises, including climate change. Despite Forest City still being in early stages of construction, the ongoing circulation of unproven eco-city models demonstrates a need to critically examine the project's environmental claims, including how it may influence eco-city development elsewhere in Malaysia and in other countries.

2.4. Speculative urbanism

Broadly, this thesis frames speculative urbanism as a high-risk and uneven process by which developers, governments, and other city-building actors invest large amounts of capital to plan and build spectacular megaprojects. New eco-cities and urban megaprojects are highly speculative, in that they are based on expectations of increased future value or, 'the making present and materializing of uncertain futures' for profit (Bear, Birla, and Puri 2015, 387). Correspondingly, urban speculation involves development undertaken for 'primarily political or economic purposes, rather than to meet real […] demographic or market demand' (Marcinkoski 2016, 10). Speculative urban development is premised on the assumption that upfront investment

in megaprojects will pay off in the long run by increasing competitiveness, attracting international investment, and elevating an urban area to 'world city' status (Goldman 2011; Phelps and Miao 2020; M. Zhang 2020). Scholars studying urban mega-development and housing financialization across Asia have explored how speculative urbanism transcends national boundaries, while exhibiting particular variations associated with local contexts (Goldman 2020). This thesis uses speculative urbanism as a framework through which to understand the trend of urban mega-development in Malaysia, and Asia, more broadly. In Chapter 4, I expand more on this literature, and suggest that the concept of speculative urbanism can be productively extended to examine how projects like Forest City are conceived of and evolve as they are implemented.

Goldman (2011) coined the term speculative urbanism in his research on 'world-city making' in Bengaluru, India, using the concept to describe a transformative mode of urban development and governance that has resulted in massive land dispossession among people living in the rural periphery. He argues that speculative urbanism involves the convergence of five key features: new forms of finance; new governmental reforms; transnational networks of policy experts; inter-referencing campaigns; and the financialization and assetization of public goods and services, such as land, housing, and infrastructure (Goldman, 2020: 1252). Goldman (2011) draws from existing 'world city' or 'global city' literature but argues that such theories do not fully capture the complex dynamics of speculative urbanism in Bangalore. He characterizes ongoing urban development in Bangalore as a temporary 'state of exception' – in which civil and human rights are suspended and institutionalized into government practices – reflecting 'a shift into new forms of "speculative" government, economy, urbanism, and citizenship' (555)

Speculative urbanism is inextricably linked to transnational processes of housing financialization, in which housing is built primarily as a commodity or good to invest in, rather than as homes for living in (Fauveaud 2020; Marcinkoski 2016). Many contemporary new city projects are economically motivated and profit-driven at their core (Cugurullo 2013; 2016b; Moser, Swain, and Alkhabbaz 2015; Moser and Côté-Roy 2021; Mullins and Shwayri 2016). Many projects, including Forest City, see the development of new real estate on previously 'untapped' land as a highly profitable endeavour, as real estate construction allows for the monetization of land through the construction of housing as an investment vehicle (Koelemaij and Derudder 2021; Shatkin 2016; Shin 2016). In the case of Forest City specifically, Koh, Zhao,

and Shin (2021b, 21) connect Forest City's speculative mode of development to its green identity, which is strategically cultivated 'for marketing and branding purposes'.

A central aspect of large-scale, top-down, speculative urban development involves the uneven nature of the monetization of land, and the resistance that emerges in response to attempted evictions and land grabs, often by state actors (Bunnell and Nah 2004; Kundu 2016; Leitner and Sheppard 2018; Upadhya 2020). In many cases, the potential 'rent' to be made on the speculative sale and development of untapped land (Shatkin 2016) means that all other land uses that do not maximize potential profit in the way real estate does are seen as unworthy of protection by the government. Goldman (2020) argues that financialization not only results in but *is predicated on* dispossession, as rural farmers of lower class or caste status were evicted by the state in order to free up land at low or no cost for foreign investment and the construction of urban megaprojects, including the new Bengaluru international airport. More specifically, his examination of the plight of rural villagers illustrates how the term 'dead land capital' (561) obscures the meaning and livelihoods that people draw from their land, such as through agriculture. Though occupying a different context, Forest City displays similar characteristics of speculative urbanism and embodies a similar tension: its developer and the Sultan of Johor are willing to overlook the adverse impacts construction has on local villagers in pursuit of profit through the urbanization and monetization of the ocean. This type of foreign-driven speculative urban development is not only damaging to local livelihoods, but has also been shown to harm local economies and government agencies as profits flow overwhelmingly out to foreign investors rather than strengthening local economies (Fauveaud 2020; Goldman 2020).

2.5. Conclusion: Gaps in the literature

This literature review has examined three primary areas of scholarship as they relate to urban mega-development and new cities: Chinese foreign investment, eco-city construction, and speculative urbanism. Despite a wide range of critical scholarship in each of these areas, several gaps remain, particularly given the relatively recent nature of contemporary new master-planned cities, and the fact that they are being studied in real time as they are planned, built, and shift strategy in response to local and global dynamics.

First, there is a relative lack of scholarship on the urban dimensions of Chinese foreign investment over the past decade, in comparison to the significant number of studies on the

economic and geopolitical dimensions of this trend (Lin, Shimazu, and Sidaway 2021; J. Williams, Robinson, and Bouzarovski 2020). While national statistics offer a surface-level sense of the volume of FDI outflows from China, a thorough understanding of the exact projects currently underway – including how they shape subnational or 'more-than-national' urban landscapes, nodes, and infrastructure (Bunnell 2021, 271) – is more nebulous. A detailed study of Forest City can push back against the common conception of an all-powerful China (M. Zhang 2020) that is unaccountable to local concerns, by examining to what extent Malaysian political actors have exerted influence over the direction of the project, and how even wealthy and well-connected Chinese developers are forced to navigate local politics and criticism. Similarly, there is limited research on the ways in which urban megaprojects evolve (Cugurullo 2018; Kundu 2016; Upadhya 2020) or encounter 'frictions' (Colven 2020) as they are planned and implemented, an area this study aims to contribute to through a detailed account of Forest City's development. In Chapter 4, I elaborate on the literature presented in this chapter and suggest that speculative urbanism offers a productive framework through which to trace the adaptations and changes in Forest City's plans and branding over time.

Second, there is a need to examine the social, economic, and environmental implications of Chinese-financed urban megaprojects like Forest City, particularly as CGPV claims to be building 'a model to emulate in terms of planning a future city' (press release, Nov. 29, 2017). Although a more ethnographic study of local resident perceptions and the impacts of this project on local livelihoods was not possible within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, I seek to outline some of the most troubling environmental and social impacts of the project and suggest directions for future research in this area. Critical eco-cities scholarship has examined many harmful aspects of speculative new eco-cities, and shed some light on the actors that are shaping and circulating normative eco-city ideals (Rapoport and Hult 2017). However, scholars have paid less attention to the role of transnational actors and organizations in legitimizing this entrepreneurial mode of greenfield eco-city development in spite of all its documented harms, and in particular, the role of the urban awards industry in rewarding and lending credibility to large-scale 'eco' projects like Forest City.

Although I have presented this literature review through three conceptual categories, this thesis seeks to integrate all three to demonstrate the interlinkages between Chinese foreign investment, eco-city construction, and speculative urbanism. In the case of Forest City, I suggest

that what ties the each together are the fictions and fantasies – environmental, economic, and social – that the project is built on, and which the developer uses to garner praise from the urban awards industry and attract prospective buyers.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Research design

This research project began with the intention to investigate the impacts of Forest City and other urban mega-developments in Johor on local coastal villagers, whose perspectives tend to be overlooked in media coverage, and are only examined in a limited number of academic articles and books (Cai 2020; Rahman 2017b). Initially, I had planned to write a largely ethnographic thesis and spend three months visiting various sites in Iskandar Malaysia to gain a better understanding of urban transformations in the region. I had intended to spend a week at Forest City, and several weeks each at a local Malay village (Kampung Sungai Melayu) and an Orang Asli village (Kampung Sungai Temon), where I hoped to get acquainted with community members, participate in community life and activities, and conduct interviews and participant observation. My first manuscript would have examined the differential impacts of mega-developments in Iskandar Malaysia on the Malay village compared to the Orang Asli village. The second planned to explore how the plans, branding, and strategy of Chinese-financed mega-developments in Malaysia evolve in response to criticism from locals and the Malaysian government, using Forest City as a case study. An understanding of local perceptions of urban mega-development in Iskandar Malaysia would have complemented and informed my analysis of the evolution of the Forest City project, as I sought to understand the extent to which local concerns were being accounted for in the planning and construction of urban megaprojects in the region. In order to carry out this work, I began studying Malay during the first year of my Master's degree in Montreal, and had planned to spend my first three weeks in Malaysia completing an intensive language course.

However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated travel restrictions in early 2020 forced me to rework my original research plans, as I was no longer able to travel or complete fieldwork in Malaysia. As a result, I adapted my original research questions and developed new ones that did not depend on fieldwork-based methods. Specifically, I broadened the scope of my project to examine urban mega-development in Johor primarily from a policy level, aiming to understand the drivers behind and discourses of urban mega-development in the SEZ and outline the potential implications of such projects for people in the region. Although I was able to largely maintain my original research questions and plans for my manuscript on

Forest City's evolution and adaptations over time, I shifted the focus of my second manuscript to examine Forest City's green identity and the awards it wins for sustainable urbanism. In particular, I was interested in understanding how urban awards for green features reinforce Forest City's green branding and marketing and lend credibility to a project that has been significantly criticized by media (Ourbis and Shaw 2017; Schneider 2018), local residents (Anonymous 2014; 2015; Aw 2014), and scholars (Moser and Avery 2021; Rahman 2017b; J. M. R. Williams 2016) for causing significant environmental damage.

This chapter discusses the methods of data collection and analysis used during my thesis research. Due to the pandemic, I chose to shift my research scope significantly. Consequently, I came up with new research questions that could be explored entirely through online and remote methods, which are ultimately quite different from my original fieldwork-based plan. Specifically, my methods of data collection included extensive analysis of online documents, including official press releases, plans, and promotional materials from government agencies and private developers; online news coverage; and social media commentary. I also attended webinars hosted by the Iskandar Regional Development Authority (IRDA) and Forest City, conducted semi-structured interviews over videoconference, 'walked' around on Google Street View, and explored Google Earth imagery to visualize landscape change over time. Both manuscripts involved a combination of all of the above methods. Together, the following two chapters offer a case study of Forest City that examine the project from two different but complementary angles and areas of scholarship: 1) speculative urbanism, and 2) eco-city discourses. Using Forest City as the focus for each manuscript allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of how an ambitious master-planned urban development is unfolding in south Johor, the diversity of actors involved along the public-private continuum, and the social exclusions that are arising as a result. Due to the remote nature of my research, I primarily interviewed professionals – project planners, developers, and government officials – as they were easier to access remotely and online than local residents. I interviewed three local residents from one Orang Seletar village in the area; however, my understanding of local resident perceptions of urban transformation in the region is significantly informed by the perspectives I saw reflected in online news coverage and social media commentary. I conclude this chapter with reflections on the research context, my positionality, and the methodological challenges I encountered related to remote research and the study of urban mega-developments emerging in Johor.

3.2. Data collection: Remote and online research methods during a global pandemic

3.2.1. Analysis of documents and online materials

To begin my process of data collection, I conducted extensive document analysis of text-based and visual materials available online, falling under two main categories: materials from official government or corporate websites, and information about projects from news media, social media, and Google Earth and Street View. I also used social media and news articles to better understand local resident perspectives.

As a first step, I analyzed all official plans, guidelines, promotional materials, and social media accounts publicly available online from Forest City, IRDA, and other relevant government entities, planning firms, and organizations. This online work continued throughout my entire research process from data collection, to analysis, to thesis writing, as I continued to regularly examine any new and notable press releases or updates from Forest City throughout the writing of my thesis, given the ongoing and constantly evolving nature of the new city's development and strategy. Other official documents that I analyzed during my research included slide decks, photos, and plans sent to me by people that I interviewed, including IRDA planners and an external consultant who had worked on Forest City for the international planning firm Sasaki. Finally, I analyzed all the available press releases published by CGPV since the project began in January 2014 until June 2022, to understand how the developer's rhetoric had changed over time in response to changing political, economic, and social circumstances. In total, this amounted to over 100 press releases from Country Garden and its subsidiaries.

I supplemented my analysis of official materials by using Google and the online Press Reader database to search online media coverage from local Malaysian and international news outlets. News coverage provided me with additional information about the projects' implementation processes and timelines, including local and international perspectives on Forest City, critical commentary, and coverage of local resistance to proposed and constructed urban development projects in Iskandar Malaysia. I also examined publicly available social media content from local residents and various other NGOs and business organizations, including Facebook posts, Trip Advisor reviews, and Instagram and Twitter feeds. Finally, in lieu of being able to visit my field sites, I conducted extensive research and 'walk throughs' using Google Maps and Street View, as well as Google Earth Pro to examine land(scape) change over time. Examining online content from non-governmental and non-corporate sources provided me with a

more complete and nuanced understanding of the development processes of Forest City and other similar projects in Iskandar Malaysia, as official PR sources are careful to spin updates in a positive light and avoid mentioning any negative impacts or opposing viewpoints.

3.2.2. Online webinars

As one of the goals of my research was to understand the discourse and drivers of urban mega-development in Iskandar Malaysia, I continued my data collection by watching and attending webinars hosted and streamed on Facebook by IRDA. Due to my research focus on discourse and rhetoric, what officials communicated to the public, and how they framed development in the region, was of particular interest. The opportunity to attend webinars arose as a direct consequence of the pandemic, opening up a new and fruitful source of information and increasing my ability to hear from IRDA officials – in real time – how the SEZ was navigating the pandemic and what changes were occurring, particularly due to the border closures and resulting decreases in tourism, income, and investment. In total, I attended and watched the recordings of nine webinars, eight of which were hosted by IRDA, and one hosted by a local university featuring the CEO of Iskandar Malaysia as a panelist. I also watched one online webinar hosted by Forest City for local school kids, which focused on education about conserving the local ecosystem. The IRDA webinars covered themes including the digital economy, smart cities, sustainability, resilience, tourism, and investment, with a particular focus on the state and challenges of each of these issues in Iskandar Malaysia within the context of the pandemic. They typically featured government officials with a range of portfolios as panelists, as well as stakeholders from other partner organizations and institutions, including university professors and corporate executives.

In a region strategically built around foreign investment and tourism – especially visitors from Singapore – Iskandar Malaysia and Forest City faced several challenges due to the border closure between Singapore and Malaysia between early March 2020 and late November 2021. I found that government officials in these webinars spoke relatively candidly about the challenges they were facing in their roles, the solutions they were identifying, and their reasons for pursuing various pandemic recovery strategies. Although IRDA is not directly responsible for its development, Forest City is the largest urban mega-development in the region, and directly benefits from IRDA's policy and planning decisions, including tax incentives and the promotion

of tourism and economic growth in the region. The webinars were therefore helpful in providing a broader understanding of the context in which Forest City operates, and how the project does or does not complement IRDA's vision. In these webinars, I took notes throughout and transcribed the segments that were relevant to my research questions. I attended two of these webinars live in the early hours of the morning; however, I watched most as recordings after the fact, due to the 12-hour time difference between Montreal and Johor.

3.2.3. Semi-structured interviews: Participant recruitment

To complement my data collection from web-based documents and sources, I decided to conduct several semi-structured interviews to gain more information, ask questions about the material I had seen online, and hear perspectives that were not as evident in online materials. I primarily recruited interview participants over email and LinkedIn. I had mixed results with these platforms and rather limited success on LinkedIn, reflecting several challenges associated with conducting remote research during a pandemic. Because my research questions focused on the discourse and drivers behind urban mega-developments in south Johor, the majority of the people I sought to interview were elite officials, managers, or planners, employed either by Country Garden Pacificview (CGPV, Forest City's developer), or the Iskandar Regional Development Authority (IRDA, the Malaysian federal statutory body facilitating the planning and governance of the Special Economic Zone). CGPV is a joint venture company and public-private partnership controlled largely by Country Garden, a private Chinese developer, while IRDA is a public Malaysian state agency. With both organizations, I first submitted an enquiry through the official contact form on each of their websites, explaining my research and requesting interviews. As official contact forms were not immediately successful, I shifted to purposive sampling to contact potential interview participants: I began by researching relevant employees and management online and reaching out directly – over LinkedIn and email – to individuals that I believed would have perspectives and experience relevant to my research questions.

While this method yielded some positive responses, I generally had much more success in recruiting interview participants from IRDA, where my supervisor has a pre-existing professional relationship with the CEO. This contact facilitated further connections within the organization and helped me to get my foot in the door. Contacting Forest City officials was much

more difficult, as I did not have any existing connections with employees or management – and all of my supervisor's prior contacts at CGPV have since resigned or been let go from Forest City. Also, as a private company with limited transparency, CGPV may have felt less obligation to participate in interview, in comparison to a federal agency like IRDA. I attempted to recruit interview participants from Forest City by searching employees on LinkedIn and sending cold messages to over a dozen who indicated on their public profiles that they were employees of CGPV. While several accepted my invitations to connect, and some initially agreed to speak with me, all ultimately stopped responding or changed their minds. In particular, one employee agreed to speak with me, but later decided that he needed permission from management before doing so. I then had an email exchange with his supervisors, who asked me to send the list of questions I wanted to ask. I provided them with a brief list of questions – all of which were only aimed at gathering more information about CGPV's green initiatives, rather than asking the employee's opinions about anything related to Forest City. Despite the informational nature of my questions, I was subsequently informed over email that management had denied my interview request.

Consequently, to gather official information from CGPV, I had to rely on online sources and transcripts of interviews my supervisor had conducted with CGPV management prior to the pandemic, as I was not permitted to conduct interviews with Forest City employees and none wanted to speak with me. To gather more information, I emailed external consultants employed by international firms who had worked various aspects of Forest City. I can only speculate that CGPV's unwillingness to discuss any green initiatives with me stemmed from several factors, including but not limited to risk management, concerns over bad press or criticism of the project's environmental damage, a possible lack of any meaningful plan for environmental protection at Forest City or fear that this plan would not hold up to scrutiny, and internal disorganization due to the pandemic and Country Garden Malaysia's recent 'restructuring exercise' in January 2020, in which it laid off 60% of Forest City's staff (A. L. Tan 2020).

Finally, I conducted one video interview and exchanged several WhatsApp messages with the lawyer who is working on the land rights case for Kampung Sungai Temon, an Orang Asli village in Iskandar Malaysia that is facing eviction due to real estate construction. My supervisor had previously met the lawyer and spent time in the village he works for, and so passed me his email address. As he knows the Kampung Sungai Temon community well, he also asked the three village headman's sons to join the video call. All three agreed to participate in the

interview, and provided me with their WhatsApp contact information. Given that I could not travel for my research, and had to complete everything remotely from Montreal, undertaking this research and conducting interviews with people in Iskandar Malaysia would have been significantly more challenging had my supervisor not had existing connections in Johor.

3.2.4. Semi-structured interviews

My interviews took place over the span of 10 months, beginning in June 2020, with the last one taking place in March 2021. I continued communications over email and WhatsApp with some interview participants until the time of writing, in July 2022. In total, I conducted six videoconference interviews with nine different people, as some interviews had more than one interviewee present. In the cases where more than one interviewee was present, the interviewees already knew each other well or worked closely together and requested to participate in the interview together. My interview participants included four Iskandar Malaysia planners and officials, one urban planner who worked for the external consultant Sasaki on Forest City's second master plan, the lawyer working on the land rights case for the Orang Seletar village, Kampung Sungai Temon, and the village headman's three sons. I had originally planned to conduct closer to 10 interviews; however, given that my interview recruitment relied significantly on cold emails or messages to people with whom I had no prior connection, I often did not receive a response or the person did not agree to be interviewed. I found it difficult to establish a personal connection over email or direct message, and correspondingly, a sense of trust. I imagine that the physical distance between myself and the people I hoped to interview added to the challenges in building trust or connections, as people likely had not heard of McGill University, and could easily ignore, delete, or stop responding to my messages.

I opted for the semi-structured interview format, preparing a set of questions in advance but adapting them as the conversation progressed and shifted in direction (Dunn 2010). An open-ended approach is beneficial in understanding the ways in which people interpret and assign meaning to their lives and social relationships. Though I began each interview with a list of questions prepared in order to gain the necessary information to conduct my analysis, I allowed the conversation to follow the interviewees' responses and train of thought, as allowing my interviewees to express their opinions added valuable nuance to my understanding of urban development projects in the region and their motives. Semi-structured interviews are commonly

used when interviewing elite professionals, as the open-ended format can encourage more flexible discussion and allow the interviewee to express their interpretations and concerns (Ward 2014). This freedom was important for my interest in the discourse that officials employ in their discussions of new master-planned cities and megaprojects, as their interpretations of these projects may vary. With the participants' consent, I recorded and transcribed all my interviews so that I could analyze the text for common themes and key words (Dunn 2010).

Because I primarily spoke with government employees and professionals, all interviews took place in English, with the exception of the interview with the lawyer and villagers of Kampung Sungai Temon, as the headman's sons were more comfortable speaking in Malay. The lawyer translated the questions I asked in English into Malay, and the villagers who were present then responded in Malay. With their consent, I recorded the interview audio, and then had it translated by another graduate student in my lab who is fluent in Malay. Upon their request and due to the sensitivity of the subject, I shared a version of the transcript with my interview participants from Kampung Sungai Temon so that they could review it, to ensure that I had their consent to use any quotes from the interview.

Through speaking with the Orang Seletar village's lawyer and the headman's sons, I was able to gain a greater understanding of the extent to which Forest City and Iskandar Malaysia have taken rural villages into consideration in their planning and development schemes, and what the primary concerns of this village are in regards to their future and livelihoods. This interview and subsequent WhatsApp communications complemented my analysis of villagers' perspectives in local news articles about resistance to Forest City and similar urban projects in the region. This perspective was helpful because I found that IRDA officials were generally hesitant to discuss the situation of the Orang Asli in the SEZ with me: IRDA itself does not mention the Orang Asli in most of its online materials, and the employees I spoke with explained that Orang Asli concerns were not under their jurisdiction but rather under JAKOA, the *Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli* or Department of Orang Asli Affairs. For example, Iskandar Malaysia's Village Enhancement Empowerment Programme (VEEP) only applies to rural Malay villages in the region, and the Orang Asli are only included in the program if they live in a village that has a mix of Malay and Orang Asli residents. One employee described the challenges and complexity associated with providing economic development programs to the Orang Asli, due to their "different" lifestyle:

> For villages [where] only Orang Asli staying there, it's not an easy thing to improve because the Orang Asli lifestyle are a bit different. We are trying to encourage them to be part of the economic activities […] but until now we cannot get their buy in [….] We need to handhold. The mentality is a bit different. So what we currently provide is only the infrastructure improvement for them to have a better place to play, for the children to have a place to play with their friends and proper garbage bins so that the place is not too messy. Because the Orang Asli, if you know, their lifestyle is a bit different. Their house is not like our house, how their life is a bit different. Before we conduct any initiative with the Orang Asli we need to engage the agency [JAKOA], because they understand their culture, the life of the Orang Asli. (IRDA planner, interview, July 9, 2020)

IRDA employees were also reticent to discuss any potential harms to rural villages as a result of Iskandar Malaysia's development, instead portraying their projects in a positive light. This reticence could have been because they believe that the projects they are working on implementing are genuinely beneficial for all residents in the region, because they do not regularly engage or interact with the Orang Asli and thus have a limited understanding of their perspectives, because they are conscious of the fact that they are speaking on behalf of IRDA and that criticizing the government may compromise their job, or all of the above. Although I would have liked to include a greater focus on local residents' perceptions, this was difficult to achieve remotely and without having any pre-existing contacts with other village members. Ultimately, I chose to pursue research questions that focused on the official rhetoric and discourse of urban development in the region, and so focused the majority of my efforts on arranging interviews with elite officials and planners. Where possible, I sought to outline potential impacts on local villagers based on my interviews and the concerns I saw represented in online media coverage and scholarship. However, more research is needed to understand the full implications of projects like Forest City on nearby coastal villages.

3.3. Methods of analysis

Due to the remote nature of my research, I opted to analyze the discourse behind urban mega-development in Iskandar Malaysia, as the language of developers and planning authorities was highly accessible online. This approach begins from the premise that the use of language is not neutral, but rather entangled with ideology and power dynamics (Ward 2014). Discourse connects language, knowledge, and power by building 'regimes of truth' that dictate solutions to problems, and contributes to the construction of identity and material realities (Lees 2004, 102–

3). In seeking to identify the drivers behind the growing global trend of new city building and urban mega-development (Moser and Côté-Roy 2021), scholarship on projects in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa examines how discourses of sustainability and eco-cities (Cugurullo 2016a; Koch 2014; Rapoport 2014), smart urbanism (Das 2020), economic development (Wong and Bunnell 2006), and nation-building (Côté-Roy and Moser 2019) influence new city plans as well as the material outcomes of urban megaprojects. Though discourse is not the sole driver behind urban mega-development, it is mobilized for strategic reasons by different actors and can have a powerful influence on the plans, goals, and vision for a given new city project (Koch 2014). Further, discourse may produce and sustain unequal social relations (Ward 2014). In Iskandar Malaysia and elsewhere, proclaimed green and smart goals are used to justify a range of developments – often to the detriment of existing residents. In my data analysis, I focused significantly on the social, cultural, political, and economic contexts in which urban mega-development is taking place in Malaysia, in order to interpret the strategic use of discourse by planners, developers, and government officials (Lees 2004).

To understand the drivers and rhetoric of urban transformations in Iskandar Malaysia, I analyzed language and imagery from two main sources: people, who I interviewed and who spoke at IRDA and Forest City webinars; and documents, both text-based and visual. To analyze the language that planners and government officials used when speaking about urban development in the region, I first transcribed the audio from each interview and webinar recording before beginning to analyze its contents. While transcribing each discussion in Microsoft Word, I reflected on what I had heard and began a preliminary analysis of key themes (Dunn 2010). Many of the themes I identified during this process were expected and related directly to my research questions, while others emerged from new information gathered during interviews and were surprising and unexpected. The transcription process took place concurrently with data collection, as I often had time between scheduled interviews to transcribe, and found that listening to my previous conversations helped me improve my questions and approach for subsequent interviews. Once all my transcripts were complete, I began ‘latent’ content and thematic analysis by rereading each one and highlighting words that related to different themes in different colours (Bowen 2009; Dunn 2010). I reread each transcript multiple times, and sought to tie the themes to the literature, examining where they aligned and diverged from scholarship on urban mega-development and Iskandar Malaysia. Because I conducted all

research remotely, my data analysis often overlapped with data collection, as the online accessibility of the people I interviewed meant that I could follow up several months later with additional questions if I needed to. Further, because I did not have a limited time in the 'field', there was less of a rush to cram all my interviews into a short period of time. I found this iterative process helpful, as reflecting on and rereading interview and webinar transcripts often generated new questions.

In my research, I focused on text-based and visual documents as primary sources of information that provide insight on how 'individuals, groups, social settings, institutions and organizations represent and account for themselves' (Coffey 2014, 367). Urban studies scholars have argued that master plans function as 'performative objects' as they circulate, producing affective responses, generating symbolic power, and providing 'a new vocabulary of futurity and aspiration' for local residents, planners, and government officials (Wade 2019, 163–65). The documents I analyzed informed questions for my interviews, in which I often asked people directly about information I had read or seen online, and aided in interpreting the context that my interviewees were operating in (Bowen 2009; Coffey 2014). I applied thematic analysis methods to analyze the discursive meanings of relevant documents, paying attention to the purpose and context in which each document was produced rather than taking its contents as passive or objective truths (Bowen 2009).

Through a detailed analysis of the language and imagery used in Forest City and Iskandar Malaysia's official documents, plans, and promotional materials, I sought to identify the rhetoric that private developers and government bodies use to legitimize their development plans and interests, including the extent to which they promote urban mega-development as necessary and unavoidable, invalidate opposing perspectives in the process (Dittmer 2010), and illustrate selectiveness in what information they communicate (Bowen 2009). In addition to official plans and promotional materials, my analysis of media coverage and online commentary surrounding urban megaprojects in Malaysia informed an alternative perspective to the rhetoric of government officials and private developers, highlighting the social, political, financial, and environmental controversies these projects and their mode of development are often entangled with – issues that official discourses, plans, and press releases from developers and governing bodies neglect to address. Finally, my interviews complemented textual analysis, as they offered a more nuanced understanding of how actors involved in the planning and construction of urban

mega-developments in Iskandar Malaysia interpret their social realities and the nature of their plans, and the ways in which reality is 'constituted in and by discourse' (McDowell 2010, 160).

3.4. Reflections and challenges

3.4.1. Positionality and reflexivity

In many ways, the pandemic exacerbated feelings of imposter syndrome and methodological questions about being a Western-born researcher producing knowledge about the East, as I had not been to Malaysia or Southeast Asia before starting this project, and due to travel restrictions, was not able to spend the three months in Malaysia that I had planned. Though I had heard stories and fond memories from family about living in Malaysia – I am half Chinese, and my grandmother spent much of her childhood living in Singapore and Malaysia – I was born and raised in Canada, have spent little time in Asia, and study at a Western university often perceived as elite or prestigious. Indeed, part of the reason why I chose to conduct research on new cities and urban mega-development in Malaysia was a desire to spend time getting to know the country, and to feel closer to the part of myself that has never felt entirely at home in Canada. At the same time, my Chinese grandmother had a relatively privileged upbringing, was well-educated and mobile between countries, and likely experienced the country quite differently from both the residents of rural and Indigenous Malay villages and the Malay government officials and planners who oversee development within Iskandar Malaysia.

Due to the British colonization of Malaysia, during which the Chinese were favoured for commercial jobs in cities while Malays were relegated to rural areas (Moser 2012), the current ethnic and social tensions within Malaysia inherently influence the controversies surrounding Forest City as a Chinese-owned project on Malaysian territory (Moser 2018). The new city has been the subject of immense criticism from various levels of Malaysian government, with former prime minister Mahathir Mohamed complaining about how projects like Forest City were akin to 'selling the country to China' (Lee 2018). In the one-off, remote interviews I conducted I was not forced to confront these ethnocultural tensions or 'political cleavages' (Aiken and Leigh 2011) in the same way that I might have had I been able to travel and spend time in the area, where I imagine I may have emphasized different parts of my identity and cultural background differently to different stakeholders, residents, and planners. As a mixed-race woman, I tend to be perceived as ethnically ambiguous, which can be an advantage in some settings because I am

not seen as fully 'other', and so I have become adept at code-switching in different contexts, as many racialized immigrants and their children are. However, in the context of a single video interview, I believe that my positionality had less of an influence compared to if I had spent several months in the 'field', as spending more time with people would allow them to make more complex assessments of my positionality. Further, several of the markers of positionality, such as 'language, bodies, clothes, gender' (McDowell 2010, 156), are less visible when viewing someone in low resolution on a screen and only from the shoulders up.

The gender split of my interviewees was roughly even between men and women. I do not believe my gender significantly impacted the outcomes of my interviews over videoconference, as I found them to be fairly formal, business-like interactions and did not notice any differential treatment. In some of my interviews, through small talk and questions about where I was from, whether I had been to Malaysia before, and why I had chosen to study Malaysia, I mentioned to interview participants that part of my interest came from my own family connections to Malaysia. I believe sharing these aspects of myself both positioned me closer and simultaneously differentiated me from my interviewees. In particular, one asked if my grandmother was Malay, and I responded that she is Chinese. Her follow up response indicated that she perceived this as a very different category from herself. All the IRDA employees that I spoke with are Malay, reflecting the Malay control of governance in the country and the pro-Malay Bumiputera policies that have entrenched this hierarchy. My identity as a Canadian also provoked curiosity from my interviewees, many of whom were curious to learn how urban development takes place in Canada and whether there are similarities between Canada and Malaysia. I found that these small pieces of off-topic chatter made the atmosphere more friendly, as they can generate empathy and make the exchange 'more of a collaboration than an interrogation' (McDowell 2010, 162).

3.4.2. Methodological challenges

> "They are beautiful villages, you know, in Johor. If you come to Johor we will show you the village [….] All the Singaporean will come to this place for lunch, dinner."
>
> "If you come to Johor you can actually go to this place. There's one more food you need to try there, it's called *murtabak*."
>
> – IRDA planners, interview, July 9, 2020

The primary challenge I faced in designing and carrying out my research was the fact that everything had to be conducted remotely – an unprecedented situation for which I had not been prepared. The majority of my research and date collection revolved around online, visual, and text-based materials, while my interviews took place over videoconference platforms including Zoom, WhatsApp video, Skype for Business, and Microsoft Teams, as I let all of my participants choose their preferred platform of communication[10]. All platforms include broadly similar features, and so my methodological reflections here apply equally to all of my video interviews.

Over the past two decades, scholars have begun writing about the benefits and challenges of remote and online research methods (Fielding, Lee, and Blank 2008), increasingly accepting that in-person interviews are not necessary – and sometimes not as effective – for all research projects and contexts, and more recently acknowledging that remote methods are extremely important to adapt to in the context of COVID-19 (Richardson, Godfrey, and Walklate 2021). The obvious advantage to remote interviews is that they can be conducted from and to almost anywhere in the world (Morris 2015). Additionally, researchers advocate for the usefulness of remote interview methods with certain hard-to-reach groups of participants (Käihkö 2020; Madge and O'Connor 2002).

There are several challenges associated with remote interview methods, which include everything from emails and text messages to videoconference and phone calls. Although videoconference platforms allow the researcher to see the interviewee's face while they are speaking, the digital technologies that facilitate this contact are not neutral platforms, but rather, 'create different affective sensations when compared to in-person interviews' (Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst 2017, 148). Scholars note that conducting interviews remotely removes the ability to perceive senses beyond sight and hearing, noting that this may impact perceptions of the other person as touch and bodily closeness are inextricable from social relations (152). Such 'disembodied' interviews lack 'the subtle visual, non-verbal cues which can help to contextualise the interviewee in a face-to-face scenario' (O'Connor et al. 2008, 276). Further, technical glitches, poor video quality, and delays due to internet speed or connection can impede our ability to perceive nonverbal cues, contributing to fatigue and creating potential for

[10] As recommended by the Research Ethics Board, I suggested use of Skype for Business or Microsoft Teams to my interviewees due to greater security, but offered them the option to choose any platform they wished.

misunderstandings (Bailenson 2021). Several of my interviews were interrupted intermittently due to poor internet connections, causing me to miss certain words or sentences or have to repeat things multiple times. Finally, conducting my interviews from Montreal meant that there was a 12-hour time difference, and as a result I ended up conducting several interviews between 9 p.m. in the evening and 2 a.m. in the morning, which may have had an impact on my ability to focus and interact with a stranger for the first time.

Additionally, activities such as eating and drinking together are common strategies for creating comfortable interview settings where conversation flows naturally, and 'can help prompt a multisensory experience that goes beyond just talk' (Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst 2017, 152). Several people I interviewed asked about whether I would be coming to visit Johor, and listed the places they would like to show me if I was able to travel, which included specific restaurants with different types of Malaysian food. The inability to speak more casually while doing activities or visiting sites together restricted the kinds of information I was able to gain from interviews and kinds of questions I was able to ask. I found that my conversations ended up being much more formal and transactional than I anticipated they would have been in person: each interview was scheduled as a e-calendar event, with a set start and end time. Though some went over their scheduled time, the calendar scheduling and need to be on videoconference in order to speak restricted small talk and reinforced the need to remain focused on topic and be on interview mode for the duration of the conversation. The restricting of interactions to video calls meant that it was harder if not impossible to form organic relationships and difficult to build rapport (O'Connor et al. 2008), which can influence the success of an interview (Dunn 2010): conversations were inevitably more serious and business-like, and there were no opportunities for interaction outside of the interview setting as there might have been had I been physically present in Malaysia. Nonetheless, in the context of the pandemic, I found online interviews extremely fruitful, and most of my interviewees were interested in knowing when I would be able to travel to Malaysia so that we could meet in-person then. In particular, speaking with planners and government officials provided a much greater understanding of how urban development is unfolding in Iskandar Malaysia and challenged my prior assumptions that had been based on purely online research sources.

In addition to methodological challenges I faced in remote research, there are also challenges associated with doing research in 'closed contexts' (Koch 2013) and trying to engage

with companies who operate under largely authoritarian contexts (China) or in places that display a range of democratic and authoritarian characteristics, such as Malaysia (Juego 2018). For example, I was unable to secure any remote interviews with Forest City management or staff. In my limited email and instant message interactions with Forest City staff, I sensed a hesitancy to speak with any strangers or provide any information about the project, likely stemming in part from the immense criticism that the project has received locally and internationally for its disregard for environmental protection and local livelihoods. Further, when media reports of layoffs at Country Garden Malaysia surfaced in January 2020, CGPV issued a press release threatening to sue anyone who reported misinformation about the company (CGPV press release, Jan. 23, 2020). Beyond highlighting the challenges of connecting with people remotely, I believe these roadblocks speak to the opaque institutional structures and contexts in which many new cities and Chinese-financed urban megaprojects exist, which is a significant methodological challenge for researchers of new master-planned cities.

Finally, the remote nature of my research and the fact that Forest City – like many other new city projects – has not yet completed construction and is not fully occupied forced me to be creative with the online sources that I used. As mentioned previously in this chapter, use of sources like social media and Google Street View and Google Earth and interpreting documents and visual materials as ‘social facts’ (Coffey 2014, 369) provided a fruitful avenues of investigation into the drivers and implications of urban megaprojects in South Johor.

Preamble to Chapter 4:

As described in the literature review (Chapter 2), significant scholarship examines the massive amount Chinese foreign investment that has occurred across the globe since the early 2000s. The vast majority of this scholarship focuses on the motives behind this growing foreign investment, with significant attention to how the Chinese state and companies are investing in infrastructure-related (mega)projects to increase China's geopolitical strength, soft power, and economic dominance across the historic land and maritime silk roads – what is now referred to as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Within scholarship on foreign Chinese-financed megaprojects, three related areas of research remain relatively underexamined. First, much less attention has been paid to the role of recipient states and local actors in actively seeking out and facilitating – as well as negotiating the terms of – this investment. Second, the majority of work on Chinese-financed megaprojects in Malaysia and elsewhere tends to examine industrial, energy, and transportation infrastructure, rather than urban development. Third, there are few existing accounts of the implementation processes of these urban, Chinese-financed megaprojects, including the challenges they run into when navigating diverse contexts and the extent to which their development trajectories are shaped by local pushback and criticism. This chapter provides a timely contribution that seeks to fill in these three gaps in the literature by providing a detailed case study of Forest City's development to-date, including how the developer has had to adapt the project's branding over time in response to particular, temporally grounded local and global dynamics. I suggest that Forest City is a uniquely illustrative case study for exploring some of these dynamics due to the project's scale and location within Malaysia, a country which is estimated to be one of the top four recipients of BRI investment worldwide, and which embodies many of the tensions associated with the recent increase in Chinese foreign investment in urban megaprojects since the turn of the 21st century.

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I am the lead author on this submitted manuscript. My supervisor, Sarah Moser, is a co-author. The following chapter is based on original research data collected by myself and the co-author. For this manuscript, I completed the majority of the overall work, including all of the writing. Individual author roles and contributions are outlined below:

Emma Avery (lead author): Contribution of original research material; conceptualization theoretical framework, structure, and argument; writing of original draft; review and editing of draft versions and final submission.

Sarah Moser (second author): Contribution of original research material; direction and guidance on theoretical framework, structure, and argument; review and editing of draft versions of the manuscript; assistance with revisions.

Chapter 4: Urban speculation for survival: Adaptations and negotiations in Forest City, Malaysia

Abstract

Malaysia is estimated to be one of the four largest recipients of Chinese Belt and Road Initiative investment worldwide, with China surpassing Singapore to become the largest foreign investor in Malaysia in 2016. Chinese investment in Malaysia consists largely of top-down urban mega-developments, many of which are built on reclaimed land and have faced significant criticism from locals, media, environmentalists, and politicians for their audacious plans, exclusive nature, and disregard for local people and ecosystems. Using Forest City as a case study, this paper introduces the concept of urban speculation for survival to elaborate on how – beyond their initial planning and financing – foreign-owned, master-planned megaprojects involve continual speculation as they navigate shifting political contexts and economic challenges. Specifically, we outline three main phases to the new city's development and investigate how its marketing and identity have evolved over time in response to mounting criticism and shortfalls in sales. Situating Forest City within the trend of speculative urbanism, we demonstrate how – rather than being monolithic – the outcomes of top-down Chinese investment and mega-development in a much smaller Southeast Asian country simultaneously shape and are shaped by local and transnational economic, political, and social dynamics, as corporate Chinese actors are forced to negotiate and compromise on their ambitious overseas ventures.

Key words: urban mega-development; speculative urbanism; Chinese investment; urban entrepreneurialism; new cities

4.1. Introduction

Over the past decade, Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in Malaysia has increased exponentially[11], particularly following the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013.

[11] Chinese FDI in Malaysia rose significantly in 2013 and peaked in 2016, remaining high through 2018 (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, National Bureau of Statistics of China, and State Administration of Foreign Exchange 2020). Real estate was one of the major sectors of Chinese FDI in Malaysia until 2018, but its share has since decreased (M. Zhang 2020). China remains Malaysia's top foreign direct investor in 2020 (MIDA 2021).

Malaysia has become a hotbed of Chinese investment for reasons including its natural resources, lower costs of labour, eagerness for FDI, and economically and geopolitically strategic location next to Singapore and along the Strait of Malacca (Juego 2018; Lim 2018; Yeoh, Chang, and Zhang 2018). Real estate comprises one of the major sectors of Chinese FDI in Malaysia, increasingly in the form of urban megaprojects and concentrated in the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) of Iskandar Malaysia in Johor, where we have identified at least eight Chinese-financed, -planned, and -constructed real estate developments launched since 2012 with a gross developmental value (GDV) of over U.S. $1 billion[12]. China surpassed Singapore to become the largest real estate investor in Malaysia in 2013, and the largest overall foreign investor in Malaysia in 2016 (Hamzah 2020; Lim 2018).

The largest Chinese-financed urban project outside of China is Forest City, a new master-planned city being built on four artificial islands off Malaysia's south coast, across the Johor Strait from Singapore (Figure 1a). The developer is Country Garden Pacificview[13] (CGPV), a subsidiary of Country Garden, the largest private property developer in China. Domestically, Country Garden specializes in large-scale, mixed-use developments in medium-sized cities or outlying urban areas, often including hotels, resorts, schools, and other community amenities (Cohen 2014; Kumar and Kawase 2022). Country Garden first expanded outside of China in 2012 with its relatively smaller, mixed-use, luxury high-rise Danga Bay development – located just down the coastline from Forest City in Iskandar Malaysia. However, Forest City is a much larger, more ambitious project than any that the developer has previously undertaken. Since construction began in 2014, the new 'green and smart' city has attracted significant attention for its audacious plans, expensive price tag, Chinese ownership, and dubious environmental record (Mahrotri and Choong 2016; Schneider 2018). Former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad has been one of the project's fiercest critics, announcing in August 2018 that foreigners would no longer be allowed to buy property or receive visas to live in Forest City

[12] The eight identified projects are Country Garden Danga Bay, Princess Cove, Paradiso Nuova Medini, Forest City, Central Park Tampoi, Greenland Helios Cove, Robotic Future City, and an unnamed 60-hectare development announced in Skudai, Johor. See Chapter 1, Table 1.1., for more details.

[13] Country Garden Pacificview (CGPV) is a 60-40 joint venture between Country Garden Holdings, one of the largest private property developers in China, and Esplanade Danga 88 Sdn Bhd, a Malaysian state company and associate company of Kumpulan Prasarana Kerajaan Johor (KPRJ). The Sultan of Johor owns an 80% stake in KPRJ, which acts as Johor's investment arm.

(Bloomberg News 2018). Planned for 700,000 residents and estimated to cost U.S.$100 billion, Forest City represents an unprecedented level of autonomy for a Chinese real estate developer in Malaysia (Moser 2018). Currently, at least half of island one has been reclaimed. Many buildings are complete, including 65 condo towers, over 200 villas, a private international school, luxury hotel, eco-museum, and a retail and office complex (Figure 1b). As of 2019, 15,000 residential keys had been handed over, while work on land reclamation for the second island was delayed in 2020 due to slow sales during the pandemic (Kumar 2020a).

Figure 1a-b. Forest City is built on reclaimed land just across the water from Singapore. Sources: Google Earth 2021; Authors 2019.

Globally, China's rapid rise as a major player in international construction, lending, and geopolitics has sparked concerns over sovereignty and 'debt-trap diplomacy' (J. Williams, Robinson, and Bouzarovski 2020). China has long encouraged both private and state-owned companies to seek contracts abroad as a means to secure economic and political power for the

state, beginning with the 'go out' policy in the late 1990s and early 2000s and continuing through the BRI (Yeoh, Chang, and Zhang 2018). Despite Country Garden being a private rather than state-owned developer[14], Forest City's construction was perceived by Malaysia and Singapore as a provocation with potential to upset geopolitical relations in the region (Moser, 2018), prompting Mahathir to refer to growing Chinese investment in Malaysia as a 'new version of colonialism' in October 2018 (Jaipragas 2018). The high prevalence and oversupply of luxury condo developments in Iskandar Malaysia reflects the role of Chinese companies in driving real estate speculation overseas as 'vent for surplus' (Phelps and Miao 2020, 316). Yet, the urban dimensions of the BRI and Chinese foreign investment, including the connections between real estate and geopolitics (Rogers and Koh 2017), remain relatively underexplored (Bunnell 2021; J. Williams, Robinson, and Bouzarovski 2020).

This paper explores how Chinese foreign investment in Forest City involves a unique form of urban speculation premised on the financialization of housing, wherein housing is commoditized as a good bought and sold for financial gain rather than for use as a home. Prior to the pandemic, the majority of Forest City's buyers were Chinese nationals seeking second homes, vacation rentals, or investment properties, intending to cash in on Forest City's appealing location and future real estate value. In many places in Asia, housing financialization and speculative urbanism involve significant inflows of foreign investment into real estate, characterized by public-private partnerships and, often, the outflow of profit (Fauveaud 2020; Goldman 2020). Forest City clearly functions as a vehicle for wealth accumulation by a foreign investor class, and does not address local housing needs (Koh 2021). Johor has the worst property overhang in Malaysia, with an estimated 75% of housing units by Chinese developers in Iskandar Malaysia unsold (Hamzah 2020), while management expects only 30% occupancy of Forest City at any given time (tour guide, personal communication, May 2017). In a 2018 press conference, Mahathir highlighted these concerns regarding the uneven distribution of benefits, stating, 'Our objection is because [Forest City] was built for foreigners, not built for Malaysians. Most Malaysians are unable to buy those flats' (Schneider 2018).

[14] While Country Garden is a private developer, scholars caution against imposing a Western public/private dichotomy on China, as the state absorbs certain functions typically associated with private enterprise and many types of corporate ownership exist along the public-private continuum (see for example, A'Zami and Liu 2020). Forest City's former director of strategy has publicly stated, 'If you are a Chinese company, wherever you may be, you will bend the knee if China's government wants you to' (Z. H. Ng 2021).

Situating Forest City within the trend of speculative urbanism, this paper demonstrates how political and financial challenges have forced the project to adapt its branding and identity throughout its implementation. Specifically, we outline three phases to the project's eight-year history, chronicling Forest City's progression from a Chinese enclave, to its attempted 'Malaysianization' and internationalization, to its more recent survival strategies that position the project as an ecological steward over the surrounding area. We suggest that Forest City's developmental phases illustrate two key points about Chinese investment in Malaysia. First, through an analysis of Forest City's continuous pivots in sales and marketing strategies, we explore how speculation in a master-planned new city continues well beyond the initial planning stage, as the developer seeks to make a project in peril politically and economically feasible. Second, we demonstrate the role of Malaysian political elites in negotiating the terms of Chinese investment abroad, as CGPV has been forced to compromise on its original vision of a luxury, Chinese enclave in Malaysia in order to keep the project afloat. Taken together, these two points disrupt the notion of the blank slate or 'white canvas' that new city developers envision when planning and marketing their projects, illuminating some of the complex local and transnational dynamics that shape the outcomes of Chinese foreign investment.

This article draws on research conducted between 2017 and 2021, including interviews with consultants, urban planners, and Forest City management and sales staff in Malaysia (2017-2019) and remotely, through videoconferencing and WhatsApp (2021-2022). We conducted participant observation and site visits prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (2017-2019), and critically analyzed media coverage, official promotional materials, city plans, and press releases in order to understand CGPV's shifting public rhetoric over time. In this paper, we first situate Forest City within broader discussions of urban megaprojects as speculative urbanism and suggest that the concept can be productively extended to examine the ways in which foreign-financed, top-down master-planned megaprojects involve constant speculation as they navigate the hurdles of implementation. Second, we outline three notable phases in Forest City's development, illustrating how the project's branding and marketing and sales strategies have evolved in response to criticism from Malaysian actors and broader economic and political challenges. Third, we discuss the significance of Forest City as a case study in speculative urbanism and Chinese foreign investment, and demonstrate how Chinese-financed, overseas urban megaprojects are negotiated and facilitated by local actors. Finally, we highlight some of

the limitations of Forest City's environmental and social pivots, and assess its relevance to contexts beyond Malaysia.

4.2. Speculative urbanism and Chinese investment in Southeast Asia

In this paper, we characterize Forest City as a particular and extreme form of speculative urbanism, connecting it to scholarship on the recent rise of Chinese foreign investment in Southeast Asia. Broadly, speculation describes expectations of increased future value or, 'the making present and materializing of uncertain futures' for profit (Bear, Birla, and Puri 2015, 387), as new urban infrastructure is constructed for 'primarily political or economic purposes, rather than to meet real […] demographic or market demand' (Marcinkoski 2016, 10). In particular, speculative urbanism is a useful framework for understanding the emergence of urban megaprojects and transnational real estate developments (TREDs) (Koelemaij and Derudder 2021), including the role of local actors in monetizing land to facilitate large-scale foreign investment in local housing markets (Shatkin 2016). In his research on urban transformations in Bengaluru, Goldman (2011) conceptualizes speculative urbanism as a transformative mode of urban development and governance built on new 'alternative' forms of finance capital; new governmental reforms aimed at acquiring land for foreign housing and real estate investment; the financialization and assetization of urban land, housing, and infrastructure; and the expansion of neoliberal economic reforms, urban inter-referencing, and transnational policy experts (Goldman 2020, 1252).

Scholarship on speculative urbanism primarily examines the motivations for this high-risk, entrepreneurial mode of development, including rent seeking (Phelps and Miao 2020), 'world city' aspirations (Goldman 2011), and inter-urban competition and referencing (J. Zhang 2017). For example, Koh, Zhao, and Shin (2021b) link speculative urbanism to Forest City's green identity, arguing that the project leverages its green brand for economic purposes. Urban mega-developments are highly speculative due to their supply-driven nature (Koelemaij and Derudder 2021), uncertainty of success, and dependence on market conditions as their developers seek to extract value from real estate sales (Shin 2016) and skyrocketing land prices (Goldman 2020). Although foreign investors and private developers play significant roles in financing and building speculative megaprojects, state actors are actively involved in dreaming up, planning, facilitating, and leasing land to new, elite, large-scale real estate developments and

spaces of exception (Goldman 2011; Koelemaij and Derudder 2021; Shin 2016; J. Zhang 2017). Despite the risks associated with speculative urban development – including market crashes, uneven distribution of benefits, public debt, and environmental degradation – urban inter-referencing, aspirations to be the next 'world city', and competition to attract global finance capital and investment continue to drive the inception of spectacular and speculative urban megaprojects across Asia and beyond.

Although speculative urbanism offers a framework through which to understand the *impetus* for megaprojects like Forest City and analyze the transformation of peri-urban areas in Asia, scholars have paid less attention to what happens to speculative urban megaprojects *after* they begin construction, as master plans evolve and depart from their original top-down plans and utopian visions. This gap is partly due to the fact that most new cities have yet to move beyond early planning stages (Brill and Reboredo 2019; Moser and Côté-Roy 2021), while others are surrounded by opaque institutional structures or exist in contexts where dissent and protest are not tolerated. A handful of studies examine how master-planned urban megaprojects mutate as they are planned and built (Cugurullo 2018), as they encounter financial, legal, political, and cultural obstacles (Shatkin 2011); resistance from local residents (Kundu 2016; Upadhya 2020); or 'frictions' – a concept Colven (2020) extends to describe the ways in which global capitalism is simultaneously produced and disrupted is it expands its power and reach. For example, Songdo was originally designed as a 'non-Korean' city for international businesses and residents; however, the developer's failure to attract significant international investment led to a process of 'Koreanization', resulting in several changes to the original master plan and the physical landscape of the city (Shwayri 2013). We suggest a similar process of 'Malaysianization' is underway in Forest City, as its foreign developer navigates local criticism and constraints that were not anticipated in the project's initial plan.

A small number of recent studies analyze the implementation processes of top-down, overseas, Chinese-financed megaprojects, pushing back against narratives of a hegemonic China and emphasizing that the success of these projects is dependent on how successfully they navigate the local context. Research in African contexts demonstrates how delays, financial losses, and a developer's inability to address the social equity and environmental concerns of local government can lead a planned, luxury new city to fail (Ballard and Harrison 2020; Brill and Reboredo 2019), and how the 'Chineseness' of urban infrastructure projects is diluted as

their developers ‘set in motion infrastructures beyond their control that are subsumed into the local context’ (Goodfellow and Huang 2020, 670). In Malaysia, Liu and Lim (2019) similarly suggest that the success of BRI-related projects is contingent on the convergence of national Malaysian and Chinese interests, the alignment of Malaysian federal and state visions, and the fulfilment of Malaysia’s Bumiputera policies – all factors that have been sources of friction during Forest City’s construction. Recent scholarship provides a nuanced picture of China’s rise in Southeast Asia by expanding analysis beyond traditional state actors to examine how local government, businesspeople, and residents ‘negotiate asymmetry, circumvent hegemony, and embrace, resist, or manipulate the terms dictated by Chinese capital’ (Nyíri and Tan 2016, 5), and by examining Indigenous perspectives on Chinese real estate development in Malaysia (Cai 2022).

In the context of growing accusations surrounding China as a ‘neocolonial power’ (Nyíri and Tan 2016, 12) and intensifying urban speculation in Southeast Asia (Koh 2021; Nam 2020; J. Zhang 2017), Forest City reveals the unique vulnerability of an enormously ambitious and expensive foreign-owned, private, Chinese-financed project with an ‘interurban marketing strategy’ (Koh 2021) highly dependent on cross-border flows of investors. In this paper, we suggest that the concept of speculative urbanism can be productively extended to examine not only the forms of governance and finance that bring speculative urban visions to life, but also provides a fruitful analytical lens to understand how master-planned megaprojects evolve as they are implemented. By highlighting the dynamic and contingent implementation process of Forest City, we illustrate the influence of Malaysian state actors within foreign Chinese-financed megaprojects and demonstrate how CGPV has been forced to adapt the project’s identity to survive and to justify the project’s existence beyond a purely speculative vehicle for exclusive real estate and capital accumulation. More broadly, our analysis brings political and urban geography literature into conversation by applying the lens of speculative urbanism to the trend of Chinese investment in foreign megaprojects.

4.3. Rebranding Forest City: Survival strategies for a precarious Chinese new city

When Forest City first began construction in 2014, it was seemingly ushered through by the Sultan of Johor, Ibrahim Ismail, who controls the majority of the Johor state government’s 34 percent stake in the project (J. M. R. Williams 2016). There had been no announcement about the

new city, and media only learned of it after locals noticed sand being dumped on their fishing grounds in the Johor Strait. As the following section demonstrates, the initial aggressive action of CGPV contrasts sharply with Forest City's later, more cautious approach, illustrating how even a $100-billion new city built by China's largest private property developer and backed by the Sultan has been forced to compromise on its original vision. Below, we outline three broad phases of Forest City's development, beginning with its creation as a Chinese enclave, its subsequent Malaysianization, and, finally, its intensifying environmental rhetoric as the project faced decreased sales amid a global pandemic. We highlight how Forest City's various survival strategies correspond to different phases of the new city's development, tied to local and global dynamics that CGPV has been forced to navigate and associated with various changes in CGPV's and Malaysia's leadership[15]. By outlining different phases in the evolution of Forest City's strategy and identity, we explore how speculation for survival continues through the management and branding of the new city even after construction has begun, as the developer continues to negotiate challenges to and criticism of the project.

4.3.1. Phase 1 (2014-2016): Forest City as a luxury tropical enclave and investor haven for Chinese nationals

Forest City sells investors on 'a prime model of future cities' (CGPV, n.d.) and a 'global metropolis' (interview, Oct. 22, 2018). Like other speculative megaprojects, Forest City required a massive upfront injection of capital in order to begin land reclamation and construction, depending on private equity, debt financing, and real estate sales to bring its vision to life.

Forest City's mode of development during the early stages of construction can be characterized as an 'ask for forgiveness, not permission' approach, involving opaque processes of approval and legal and environmental concessions: CGPV began construction without consulting Singapore and local residents, beginning land reclamation on a seagrass bed that had been earmarked for environmental protection. To understand how Forest City received approval for construction in an environmentally sensitive and protected marine area without any local consultation, it is necessary to outline the role of local political actors in easing regulations and granting exceptions to the developer. In particular, Forest City depended on the Sultan of Johor,

[15] Although we include the general years associated with each phase, it should be noted that these phases and strategies overlap to some degree.

the state's constitutional monarch and an active businessman. Although the Sultan is not directly involved in Johor governance[16], multiple sources indicate that his political and economic influence led to the approval of Forest City by the Johor state government and Department of Environment (DOE). The Sultan originally came up with the idea for a new real estate development where Forest City would eventually be located, and Country Garden reportedly paid U.S.$55 million to the Sultan for the land title after he approached the company with the idea. The Sultan's significant stake in Forest City is presumably in exchange for facilitating Country Garden's expansion into Johor through the creation of CGPV as a joint venture (Schneider 2018; J. M. R. Williams 2016).

In June 2014, less than six months after land reclamation began, the Malaysia federal DOE issued a stop work order to Forest City, requiring the developer to complete a detailed environmental impact assessment (DEIA). In January 2015, CGPV received approval from the federal DOE following its DEIA, with the agreement that Forest City's area would be downsized by one third and that the project would be split into four islands instead of one, so that the seagrass could regrow in the channels between the islands (J. M. R. Williams 2016). In press releases at the time, CGPV claimed that it voluntarily stopped work on the project, though the stop work order was clearly mandated by the federal government. Shortly after land reclamation recommenced, CGPV sought out an international planning consultant to create a new master plan for Forest City, hiring Sasaki, a U.S.-based firm, in 2016. Even though Country Garden's team had already drawn a master plan for Forest City, Sasaki was brought in to create a new plan designed for the four islands rather than the one, and to bring in environmental expertise and an international perspective that could bolster the project's credibility (planner, interview, Mar. 25, 2021).

Despite a number of concessions on the part of CGPV to the Malaysian government – completing the environmental impact assessment, splitting the island into four, downsizing the project area by a third, and offering some compensation for local villagers (J. M. R. Williams 2016) – the overwhelmingly Chinese character and branding of the project did not fundamentally change in this early phase. Forest City operated with little regard for local residents and Malaysians generally, marketing itself almost exclusively to Chinese nationals, who joined free

[16] For more in-depth discussion about the complex relationship between the Sultan of Johor and the state and federal governments, see Hutchinson and Rahman (2020).

investor tours organized by Country Garden and arrived in busloads at the Forest City sales gallery to purchase one or more condos on site (Figure 2a-b). In 2016, Chinese nationals bought 70 percent of all units (S. M. Tan and Yong 2017).

Figures 2a-c. Chinese tourists visit the Forest City Sales Gallery on real estate tours organized by Country Garden (top). Forest City is marketed as a green city by the sea with freehold apartments for sale (bottom). Source: Authors.

The developer's early neglect for local regulations and nearby villagers is reflected not only in the exclusive marketing of the private, gated city to Chinese nationals, but in its disregard for environmental protection: land reclamation at Forest City contributed to increased sediment, shifting water currents, and worsening pollution, negatively impacting local Malay and Indigenous Orang Asli villagers who rely on fishing and mussel farming to make a living (Rahman 2017b). Within the new city, Country Garden replicated its aesthetic of 'green everywhere' – its signature style in its real estate developments within China (Koh, Zhao, and Shin 2021b, 14) – making little attempt to use local plants or provide spaces such as kitchen

gardens or fruit trees that are valued by Malay populations and villagers in the area (Moser and Avery 2021).

Beyond the project's marketing and design, Moser (2018, 938) characterizes Forest City as a 'neocolonial outpost' during this era, due to its strategic geopolitical location and 'extraordinary and unprecedented concessions of sovereignty from Iskandar Malaysia'. For one, Forest City was controversially selling 'freehold' properties (Figure 2c), as opposed to the 99-year leases that are common practice for foreign buyers in Singapore and Malaysia. Foreign investors could also receive fast-tracked permanent resident visas after buying property at Forest City through Malaysia's 'Malaysia My Second Home' program. Additionally, Forest City's unique status as 'an SEZ [Special Economic Zone] within an SEZ' – offering investors an additional layer of tax incentives on top of those already offered by Iskandar Malaysia – and its use of private security in the project generated confusion and uncertainty over whether Malaysian laws would apply (Moser 2018, 939). In sum, although China has never officially claimed Forest City as part of the BRI or any broader state strategy, Forest City threatened to 'disrupt and undermine regional ties' due to its provocative nature, strategic location, unprecedented autonomy, and potential to reinforce China's expansionist agenda (939).

4.3.2. Phase 2 (2017–2019): The Malaysianization and internationalization of Forest City

Despite various efforts to improve public perceptions of the project, including a botched public meeting with local villagers (Mahavera 2014), press releases attempting to clear 'misconceptions' about the project (CGPV press release, Jan. 5, 2015), and donations to local schools, Malaysians and international commentary increasingly perceived Forest City as a Chinese enclave, a threat, and a troubling concession of sovereignty (Lee 2018). Designing the private city overwhelmingly for Chinese nationals, CGPV initially made little attempt to include Malaysians. Against a backdrop of growing Chinese foreign investment in Malaysia under Najib, Mahathir emerged as one of the most vocal and high-profile critics of Chinese investment in Malaysia, repeatedly expressing concern over Forest City's Chinese ownership. In 2018, Mahathir came out of retirement to run in the general elections, promising to reconsider various Chinese projects approved by Najib if elected. In May 2018, Mahathir pulled off a surprise victory, illustrating the degree to which his anti-China rhetoric resonated with Malaysian voters amid concerns about the growing number of Chinese workers in the country and lack of benefits

and opportunities for Malaysian companies (Lee 2018; Minter 2018). Shortly after being elected, Mahathir suspended several Chinese-financed megaprojects in August 2018, including the East Coast Rail Link and a natural gas pipeline (Erickson 2018), and announced that foreigners would no longer be granted visas for purchasing property in Forest City (Bloomberg News 2018).

Under pressure due to the growing tensions surrounding Chinese-financed projects in Malaysia, CGPV hired Ng Zhu Hann, an internationally educated Malaysian Chinese lawyer, in mid-2017 as Forest City's Director of Strategy to devise a business plan that would address criticism from Malaysian officials about the exclusive nature of the project while upholding the Chinese developer's interests. In a 2018 interview, Ng explained that his role was to mediate and act as a conduit between the two boards overseeing the joint venture, one Malaysian and one Chinese. On top of strategic investment, Ng oversaw areas including media and corporate communications, government relations, and branding development, highlighting Forest City's acute attention to marketing and public relations. Forest City's shifting strategy during this second phase primarily consisted of cultural changes, in an effort to convince the Malaysian government and public that the project was not just a Chinese gated community but, rather, a multicultural new city where anyone is welcome and that provides a number of benefits to the local economy. Specifically, under Ng's leadership Forest City devised a strategy of 'Malaysianization':

> In the beginning, when [CGPV] marketed this project, that's a different range of people that we wanted to reach out to. But the proximity to both [Malaysia and Singapore], being […] along the busy Straits of Malacca, is one of the geographical strengths of this project [….] At this moment in time, Forest City is very much Malaysianize. As a result of such, the recognition from the state government in branding this project, it's not only for the local people of Johor, but Malaysia and the whole of South Asia. That is the direction we are actually moving towards. (interview, Oct. 22, 2018)

The Malaysianization strategy sought to make Forest City (appear) more inclusive of and beneficial to Malay(sian)s, such as by hiring more Malaysian workers, making plans for affordable housing, and implementing Malay cultural features in the showroom and around the project. CGPV began employing Malay musicians in the sales gallery and hired Malay drummers to greet investor tourists on the red carpet leading to the sales room (Figure 3). In press releases and in interviews with Forest City management, CGPV asserts that as of 2018, 80% of its employees were Malaysians. Ng claims that Forest City's initial targeting of Chinese citizens

was simply a function of Country Garden's existing reputation in China and connection to the Chinese market, rather than a calculated decision, affirming that the project's marketing focus has evolved in several 'phases':

> Country Garden is currently the biggest developer in China, and […] the majority of our database and customers are from China. So naturally, in any projects, when you first sell, you sell […] where your strength is. But this is only the first phase. Any project in itself, there are many phases. [Now] we have nine sales galleries across different countries, and 13 sales galleries in Malaysia [….] We know that a project cannot flourish if it relies on a single demographic from a single country of origin. There's no way it can survive. And not only that, we wanted to become a global metropolis. When you want become a global metropolis, you must attract people from all around the world. So naturally, it's part of our strategy to cater to people of different markets, and as you can see, the percentage of buyers from mainland China has reduced significantly in the past year, I would say. And other buyers from different demographics has increased, especially from Indonesia, Singapore, and Southeast Asia markets. That is the direction we should continue to move towards. (interview Oct. 22, 2018)

Figure 3. Forest City advertises customers from around the world, using stock photos and testimonials written in English and Mandarin (top). At the entrance to the Sales Gallery, Malay drummers greet investor tourists (bottom left). Source: Authors.

This narrative regarding a global set of residents departs drastically from rhetoric seen in Phase 1 and marks a significant shift in the branding of Forest City. Beyond a desire to pursue a more global class of elite investors and become a 'global metropolis', the timing of Forest City's pivot to attracting multiple nationalities of buyers is notable for two reasons. First, in early 2017, China imposed stricter capital controls in an attempt to limit outflows from the country, prompting Forest City to close its sales galleries in mainland Chinese cities (S. M. Tan and Yong 2017). The new regulations suddenly made it difficult for Chinese buyers to purchase properties abroad and prevented a number from completing purchases of flats for which they had already made down payments to Forest City (He 2017). Second, the timing of Forest City's Malaysianization strategy coincided with Mahathir's re-emergence in the public sphere as an outspoken critic of Chinese investment, his subsequent re-election as prime minister, threats to ban foreign Chinese buyers from Forest City, and attempts to shut down other Chinese-financed projects in Malaysia. Despite Forest City being granted a number of environmental and legal concessions and an unprecedented level of autonomy in Phase 1, Country Garden was nonetheless forced to navigate complex local politics, identifying the Malaysianization strategy as a solution to improve the project's image and convince Mahathir and the public that the new city would benefit the region. Ng emphasizes the need to continually cooperate with the federal government in order to secure a future for the project, a consideration that was not particularly evident when Forest City first began construction in Malaysia:

> For our company, we believe that in order to develop long term, we need to work with the government. So if the government, if there is any changes in policies, we will adapt, and more importantly, we will respect the decision of the government, not only at state, but also federal [level]. And that is the direction the company is going to take consistently moving forward. (interview, Oct. 22, 2018)

One way in which Forest City apparently complied with the federal government's requirements and sought to appear more accessible to Malaysians is through its public support of the government's affordable housing agenda, as mentioned by Ng and advertised in later press

releases from CGPV (press release, Mar. 29, 2019). Questions remain, however, regarding how meaningful this Malaysianization strategy will be. For the most part, CGPV pursued cosmetic changes to Malaysianize Forest City, such as incorporating Malay cultural features, drummers, and musicians in the sales gallery. Although hiring more Malaysian workers is a tangible benefit, there has been no further announcement of any affordable housing, nor there is any way to verify CGPV's claims about what percentage of employees are Malaysian.

4.3.3. Phase 3 (2020–): Forest City as ecological steward

> People desire to live in nature where everything is surrounded by mountains and rivers, and everything is covered with trees and flowers. Especially during the pandemic, this desire has become even stronger. Fortunately, Forest City has made this kind of living dream come true. (CGPV press release, Apr. 22, 2020)

In early 2020, two major events further altered the future prospects of Forest City. First, in February 2020, Mahathir was ousted from office as his governing coalition collapsed (Beech 2020a). Second, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 exacerbated Forest City's already precarious finances as a project reliant on real estate sales. As Malaysia closed its borders in early 2020 and implemented travel restrictions, foreign investor tourists could no longer visit Forest City, while the government suspended new applications to the Malaysia My Second Home program, with no indication of when the program would resume (K. K. Ng 2020). During this same time period, other multi-billion-dollar Chinese-financed and constructed megaprojects in Malaysia have collapsed due to financial troubles, most notably the Melaka Gateway and Bandar Malaysia projects (Kumar 2020b; Yatim 2021).

In January 2020, reports were already emerging in local media that Country Garden Malaysia had laid off 400 employees as part of a 'man power optimisation exercise' and that Forest City laid off at least 60% of its staff (A. L. Tan 2020). Although CGPV denied these reports and threatened legal action against anyone reporting 'misinformation' about the company, it did confirm that an 'internal organisational restructuring exercise' was taking place in order to 'improve the management efficiency […] and enhance the operations' (press release, Jan. 23, 2020). Further, CGPV insists that the 'cyclical' nature of the real estate industry means that employees and resources may be reshuffled 'according to the annual business development direction'. This restructuring was only the beginning of Forest City's troubles, as sales reportedly

dropped by over 90% between March and June of 2020 (Kumar 2020a). In March 2020, Country Garden Real Estate (CGRE) issued three tranches of sukuk, a type of bond compliant with Islamic finance, to raise a total of MYR 495 million, stating that 'these issuances fully reflect the confidence that Malaysian capital markets have in both Country Garden Group and CGRE's long term development in Malaysia' (CGPV press release, Apr. 21, 2020). The continued use of debt financing to build luxury real estate illustrates ongoing speculation amid and despite Forest City's financial troubles. At risk of becoming another white elephant, Forest City is operating in survival mode, facing tight finances, a lack of visitors and investment, and an empty, partially built new city.

Based on an analysis of official press releases and promotional materials, we suggest that since early 2020, CGPV has – at least through public statements and official communications – renewed its efforts to advertise Forest City's sustainability and environmental benefits, implementing and publicizing several new 'green' environmental awareness, education, and protection initiatives that coincide with the post-Mahathir and COVID-19 era. In contrast to Forest City's earlier disregard for environmental protection and subsequent backtracking during Phase 1, its more recent environmental focus represents a significant pivot in strategy and rhetoric regarding the meaning of environmental sustainability. Whereas the previous two phases focused on attracting or representing particular demographics of residents, Phase 3 reinforces a broader search for an identity that can justify Forest City's existence beyond its purpose as a speculative real estate and investment vehicle, and demonstrates the 'instrumental nature of green urbanism discourses for advancing economic interests' (Koh, Zhao, and Shin 2021b, 7). Although Forest City has always branded itself as a 'green' city, CGPV's recent announcements regarding environmental education and awareness appear to represent a renewed and somewhat reinterpreted commitment to ideas of environmental and urban sustainability, reflecting attempts to go beyond simply including physical green plants and features (Moser and Avery 2021).

Most notably, Forest City opened a new Eco Museum in September 2020 to showcase local species and marine habitats. CGPV also announced an Ecological Development Action Plan (September 2020) and a Construction Environmental Management Plan (February 2020) – neither of which are publicly available. It further claims that from 2020 to 2023, 'green and smart' are its key focus areas for its current phase of ecological development, with plans to build a second exhibition hall for the Eco Museum, a four-kilometre 'eco-corridor', and continue the

'Forest City Go Green' program, which involves environmental education programming and events (press release, Sept. 21, 2020). Forest City has also created a volunteer program for local youth in collaboration with a local NGO, which aims to 'share knowledge, give exposure to participants, raise awareness on how to protect the environment through simple actions such as reducing the use of plastic straws, planting trees, using their own shopping bags and carrying their own containers when buying food for take away' (press release, Aug. 25, 2020). Even if some of CGPV's recent environmental initiatives were planned prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the significant increase in the number of news releases publicizing the project's environmental initiatives since early 2020 indicates ongoing attempts to attract investment and ward off criticism by improving the project's public image.

4.4. Urban speculation for survival

Despite Forest City's status and reputation as a foreign-controlled Chinese enclave on Malaysian territory (Moser 2018), speculative urbanism draws attention to the local political actors who actively sought to facilitate Chinese foreign investment in Malaysia and Johor. The Sultan's backing and Forest City's skirting of environmental regulations illustrate 'the exceptional rules of dispossession enacted in the name of world-city making', as the speculative new city '[redefines] state relations, urban citizenship, rights and rules of access' (Goldman 2011, 556). The Sultan acted as a 'broker' for Forest City's development (Goldman 2011), identifying the ocean as an untapped land bank and identifying a 'new means to sell or lease state land to corporate developers' (Shatkin 2016, 142). As a consequence, local villagers face decreased access to common fishing and hunting grounds, increasingly polluted waters, and diminishing shellfish populations, while foreign investors who can afford to buy into the project received fast-tracked visas and a new luxury 'green' city with private security, education, and leisure spaces. Forest City's management notes that the proposition of building artificial islands offered significant advantages for Country Garden, as building on top of the ocean minimized possible sources of friction or resistance, including existing land rights and infrastructure:

> When you're going to build green and smart, there must be a white canvas where you can repaint it together [….] If you reclaim, you can plan it from scratch, especially if you want it to be a global metropolis attracting people from all over the world. (interview, Oct. 2018)

Yet, despite the 'white canvas' the Sultan and Country Garden envisioned, Forest City's implementation and construction processes have been neither straightforward nor smooth, as CGPV has navigated several delays and roadblocks including a stop work order, political threats, border closures, and precarious finances. Scholarship on speculative urbanism focuses primarily on the actors, financial mechanisms, and governmental reforms that facilitate the inception of such megaprojects (Goldman 2011; 2020; Koelemaij and Derudder 2021; Koh 2021), rather than the survival strategies pursued by the developers to mitigate financial risk after construction begins and properties are sold. Forest City embodies several of the key characteristics of speculative urbanism (Goldman 2020), including the exceptions to existing regulations granted by the Sultan to Country Garden to encourage foreign investment, the involvement of the Johor sovereign wealth fund (KPRJ) in Forest City, and the financialization of land and urban infrastructure. However, a key difference is that in Bengaluru, little has been built as foreign investors bought and sold shares in local developers (Goldman 2020), whereas in Forest City, the developer plans to not only build but operate the new city once and if it is completed. As speculative investments in mega-developments may take decades before returning a profit, a project at the scale of Forest City with a 25- to 30-year implementation timeline must continually 'generate confidence' in potential investors and 'create expectations of […] high future valuations to attract private capital investments' and sustain momentum (Upadhya 2020, 149).

This continual need to 'generate confidence' can be seen in Forest City's evolving survival strategies over time, as genuine threats to the project's financial and political feasibility have prompted shifts in strategy that demonstrate a unique form of speculation for survival, *in addition to* the dynamics of speculative urbanism that brought Forest City to life in the first place. Speculation for survival can be seen in how Forest City's pivots in rhetoric and marketing serve 'primarily political and economic purposes' (Marcinkoski 2016, 10), as CGPV scrambled to Malaysianize in response to Mahathir's anti-China rhetoric and out of concern that the prime minister could shut down the project entirely. Likewise, Forest City's recent environmental initiatives – such as the Eco Museum and 'Go Green' project – were implemented by the Brand Management Department, suggesting that these are first and foremost marketing tactics rather than environmental concerns. Regardless of whether such strategies succeed in keeping the project afloat, Forest City's adaptations in response to environmental, political, and financial setbacks illustrate the productive nature of 'frictions' in continuing to move the megaproject

forward in the face of uncertainty (Colven 2020). Speculative urbanism requires the developers and investors behind mega-developments to place bets on highly uncertain future returns, forcing constant speculation and shifting survival strategies as the project is constructed.

4.5. Conclusion

This article has explored Forest City as an illustrative case study of two interrelated trends in urban mega-development in Southeast Asia: Chinese foreign investment and speculative urbanism. Through an analysis of Forest City's contested implementation process and corresponding survival strategies, we make two key contributions. First, we demonstrate how a Chinese-financed new city in Malaysia – a small player in global economics and geopolitics relative to China – has been forced to adapt, negotiate, and change course in response to political and economic challenges and criticism. Second, we build on the concept of speculative urbanism to situate Forest City and understand the logic behind its developmental phases, suggesting that the concept can be productively extended to examine the implementation process of a Chinese-financed urban megaproject and demonstrate how speculation for survival continues long after the initial planning process has concluded.

Forest City exemplifies how, rather than fulfilling a grand strategy to achieve dominance or hegemony in Southeast Asia, the grounded realities of Chinese investment do not necessarily align with state policy goals or ambitions (Nyíri and Tan 2016). In contrast to the existing scholarly focus on national territory and nation-states as the primary units of BRI analysis (J. Williams, Robinson, and Bouzarovski 2020), our research offers an in-depth case study of the multiple sub- and transnational dynamics that have facilitated and shaped the development of a new Chinese-financed city in Malaysia. A close examination of Forest City's various developmental phases reveals the complex relationalities between developers and state actors (Mouton and Shatkin 2020), the role of Malaysian actors in seeking out and negotiating the terms of Chinese investment (Liu and Lim 2019), and the often messy implementation processes of master-planned megaprojects (Cugurullo 2018). Further, this case study illustrates the incomplete power of corporate Chinese actors abroad, even in economically weaker countries, disrupting 'China-centric' accounts of geopolitical and economic power in the construction and financing of megaprojects (Lin, Shimazu, and Sidaway 2021; J. Williams, Robinson, and Bouzarovski 2020, 129). This analysis could be used to foster more comparative work on how

Chinese investment is negotiated in other urban and peri-urban Southeast Asian contexts, how its scale compares to the predominant mega-developments seen in Malaysia, and how similar speculative urban dynamics facilitate the circulation of urban models and capital across space.

It remains to be seen whether the changes implemented by Forest City are truly effective in including Malaysians in the project and protecting the environment. Three points may hinder Forest City's potential to create meaningful social and environmental benefits. First, CGPV's Malaysianization and rebranding appears to stem from the criticism of high-level Malaysian politicians and international actors, rather than meaningful engagement with nearby residents and villages. Second, as we have suggested, Forest City's green rhetoric and environmental initiatives do not fundamentally challenge the premise of the project nor its speculative mode of development, but are rather calculated decisions aimed at building a better public image, and correspondingly, attracting greater attention and investment during times of financial hardship. Third, the highly speculative financing behind Forest City means that should the project succeed, the majority of profits will accrue to Country Garden and to the Sultan of Johor, neither of which are stakeholders with any direct mandate to serve the Malaysian public. Forest City may contribute taxes, create jobs, and provide donations to certain local communities, but ultimately shareholders will profit the most from the urbanization of the ocean in Johor.

In the coming years, Forest City's mode or direction of development may continue to shift according to market demand, economic realities, and political considerations. Some strategies from Forest City's earlier phases have continued into the present, suggesting an ongoing financial need for Malaysian buyers and investors, even though the threat of Mahathir has waned. For example, attempts to communicate a Malay identity for the project are ongoing, seen in advertisements for tickets to a 2021 Ramadan buffet at the Forest City Golf Hotel. However, as of mid-2022, Forest City remains largely empty, with few visitors and residents and many storefronts – and the only hotel on the island – shuttered. Throughout Iskandar Malaysia, luxury condos sit empty and foreign property owners struggle to sell units for fractions of their original value (Yusof 2021). These struggles are compounded by a lack of confidence in Country Garden following the Chinese property developer crisis that emerged in the fall of 2021 (Huang and Choong Wilkins 2022), in which several prominent Chinese developers – most notably, Evergrande Group – defaulted on bonds after missing repayment deadlines. The crisis highlights the consequences that can occur when urban speculation is left unchecked, and the limits of the

Chinese state's willingness to back over-leveraged private developers, contrary to previous perceptions that a developer like Evergrande was 'too big to fail' (Wang 2021).

Although the dire state of the Johor real estate market, the recent collapse of the Melaka Gateway and Bandar Malaysia projects, and the Chinese property developer crisis may spell trouble for Forest City, intriguingly, some scholarship demonstrates that urban speculation can continue even during times of crisis. For example, 'deteriorating fiscal conditions' apparently 'reinforced the speculative and entrepreneurial nature of Songdo City development' (Shin 2016, 86). As recently as January 2022, Country Garden successfully issued a U.S.$500 million dollar bond (Kumar and Kawase 2022), illustrating the continued use of debt financing to prop up the project. Future research can shed light on how Forest City can bounce back from its sluggish sales, whether it will need to change more than just rhetoric to survive, and what further adaptations CGPV might pursue. The environmental and cultural strategies outlined in this paper indicate some acknowledgement of a need to provide more than just new real estate to a region that is already vastly oversupplied in luxury condos, as Forest City devises new strategies to market itself in the face of pushback from people who understand the social, political, economic, and environmental problems associated with speculative urban development. Such survival strategies ultimately demonstrate the contested and negotiated nature of Chinese investment in Malaysia, and the highly precarious nature of foreign-owned, speculative urban megaprojects.

4.6. References

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Preamble to Chapter 5

Forest City's green branding and identity draws heavily from Country Garden's experience in building 'green' real estate projects within China. Broadly, the project is also inspired and influenced by the global trend of building eco-cities from scratch, in which Chinese actors have played a significant role both domestically and abroad. As such, Forest City provides an illustrative case study in the ways in which a particular mode of entrepreneurial, eco-city development is circulated abroad by Chinese real estate developers and Malaysian state actors.

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how green branding and urban greening practices are intertwined with urban speculation, and identified a noticeable shift in Forest City's increased marketing of its environmental features that coincided with slowing sales and financial troubles endured during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following chapter expands on Forest City's green identity as a key strategy to generate publicity for the new city, attract buyers and investors, and lend credibility to its green and sustainable design features. Specifically, I examine how Forest City's green features are targeted at a global discourse of green urbanism and eco-cities as solutions to the global climate crisis, and demonstrate how Country Garden uses Forest City's success in the urban awards industry to position the project as a global leader in urban sustainability. This chapter builds on the previous manuscript by elaborating on how Forest City's green identity constitutes a calculated strategy to attract international attention, praise, and investment while precluding criticism of the project. I suggest that the troubling pattern of awarding ambitious eco-cities like Forest City – a project that has caused immense and irreparable damage to local ecosystems and livelihoods – has significant implications for eco-city development more broadly in a wide range of contexts and regions.

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Emma Avery (lead author): Contribution of original research material; conceptualization theoretical framework, methodology, structure, and argument; data analysis; writing of original draft; review and editing of draft versions and final submission.

Sarah Moser (second author): Contribution of original research material; conceptualization of theoretical framework, methodology, structure, and argument; data analysis; thorough review and editing of draft versions of the manuscript.

Chapter 5: Prizes for fantasy: The role of the urban awards industry in validating greenfield eco-cities

Abstract

A distinct wave of self-proclaimed 'eco-cities' built from scratch has emerged over the past two decades, claiming to pioneer sustainable urban solutions to a range of environmental challenges. Despite little evidence that such projects succeed in achieving their green aims, a burgeoning awards industry is recognizing eco-city developers for their leadership in sustainable urbanism. In this article, we examine Forest City, a new eco-city project in Malaysia, to make three main arguments. First, we introduce the range of awards Forest City has won, and show how the developer uses these awards to generate publicity and push back against criticism. Second, we point out the damage that Forest City has caused to nearby ecosystems and livelihoods to demonstrate the blind spots of awards committees. Third, we argue that awards for projects like Forest City suggest a troubling conflation of sustainable design with spectacular eco-cities, while lending credibility to unproven projects that are far from realizing their stated goals. We suggest that the urban awards industry deserves greater critical scholarly attention regarding the ways in which awards-granting agencies and urban prizes contribute to the circulation of normative eco-city ideals, which are often profit-driven and highly damaging to local environments and social sustainability.

Key words: new cities; urban awards industry; land reclamation; eco-city; sustainable development; Malaysia

5.1. Introduction: Dreams of a green urban future

Over the past two decades, a distinct wave of urban mega-developments – branded as 'eco-cities' and built from scratch – has proliferated largely in the Global South, promoted under the banner of urban experimentation as strategies to create sustainable built environments (Caprotti 2014a; Cugurullo 2018). Rather than damaging the environment, builders suggest that their projects will fit seamlessly within and even enhance surrounding ecosystems. In contrast with smaller-scale attempts at environmentally-conscious and sustainable urbanism, the current wave of eco-cities is entrepreneurial and driven largely by economic objectives: developers aim

to pilot green technologies and create models for future sustainable urban development (Rapoport 2014) that can be easily replicated, exported, and sold for profit around the world (Chang, Leitner, and Sheppard 2016; Hodson and Marvin 2010; Shwayri 2013).

People have long aspired to create alternatives to polluted and congested cities, attempting to foster connections with nature, and nurture rather than disrupt surrounding ecosystems. Ebenezer Howard's Garden City concept responded to urbanization and mass industrialization in the UK by deconcentrating populations into self-sufficient garden-like towns (Howard 1898). Ekistics, a planning approach developed in the decades following World War II by the Greek planner, Constantinos Doxiadis, sought to achieve a harmony between human settlements and the environment (Pyla 2009). The Minnesota Experimental City, a concept developed by Athelstan Spilhaus in the 1960s, similarly aimed to reduce the impact of settlements on the environment, but sought to do so through techno-utopian means (Spilhaus 1968). Other early eco-cities emerged from counterculture movements led by activists largely in western countries in the 1960s and 1970s: Arcosanti, an experimental 'city' project in Arizona, sought to integrate architecture with ecology to minimize its environmental impact (Rae 2016). These idealistic, relatively small-scale, bottom-up projects from earlier decades were planned for predominantly Euro-American contexts, yet remain largely unbuilt, in contrast to the massive scale of top-down eco-city projects that are currently underway, primarily in Asia and Africa (Rapoport 2014).

Despite scarce evidence regarding their ability to achieve social, economic, and environmental sustainability goals, eco-cities today are promoted as a solution to the climate crisis by a wide range of global actors (Caprotti 2015), including research organizations, consulting firms, national and international governmental bodies, NGOs (Joss, Cowley, and Tomozeiu 2013), and, increasingly, tech corporations. Correspondingly, an urban awards industry – consisting of largely the same actors – has emerged to recognize these eco-city projects for their ambitious and apparently ground-breaking plans in industries such as renewable energy, sustainable building design, and ecological conservation. Eco-city builders position their projects as models for future sustainable development, referencing their long awards lists to prove their success and lend credibility to their endeavours as they seek to attract investors and export their models to other regions, countries, and climates. In recent years, there has been a surge of critical urban scholarship that interrogates the environmental claims of eco-cities built

from scratch. However, scholars have yet to critically examine the burgeoning urban awards industry that amplifies and publicizes these projects, while legitimizing their ambitious claims and profit-oriented mode of entrepreneurial development. Given the increasing global circulation of normative eco-city aspirations, there is a need to investigate how prestigious urban awards promote a particular mode of entrepreneurial 'green' development, while glossing over its more harmful aspects.

Forest City is a prime example of such an entrepreneurial urban mega-development and self-proclaimed eco-city that is branded as 'a prime model of future cities'. It is being built by Country Garden Pacificview (CGPV), a joint venture company majority-owned by Country Garden Holdings, one of China's largest property developers. Constructed on four artificial islands in Malaysian territorial waters along the Johor Strait, Forest City plans to accommodate 700,000 residents, making it the largest Chinese-financed new city project outside of China. Construction began in 2014, but only part of the first island has been built. The city currently consists of a visitor gallery, a mall and office space, an international school, a water park, 65 condo towers, and upwards of 200 villas.

Despite a number of environmental controversies surrounding the project – including a stop work order for CGPV's failure to complete a legally required environmental impact assessment – Forest City has received dozens of awards for sustainable planning and design, including six from the Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements Awards (SCAHSA), an annual prize awarded by the Global Forum on Human Settlements (GFFHS) and supported by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (GFHS n.d.). These awards are widely promoted in Forest City's Visitor Gallery, on its website, and through press releases. Press releases are then reported in various news media organizations, amplifying Forest City's sustainability claims and reinforcing its image as a green project. CGPV sells prospective investors on a model eco-city of the future that 'will bring the symbiotic coexistence between city and nature to new heights' (CGPV n.d.). However, there is a significant gap between Forest City's sustainability claims and the built reality of the project: the new city has faced sharp criticism from environmentalists (Schneider 2019), scholars (Moser and Avery 2021; Rahman 2017b; Zhao, Koh, and Shin 2021), and nearby villagers (Anonymous 2014; 2015) for causing significant environmental damage.

The trend of awarding partially built eco-cities for their ambitious goals expands beyond Forest City. Masdar, a once-promising eco-city in Abu Dhabi, lists 100 awards on its website for clean energy and sustainable real estate and corporate achievements, despite the fact that only a fraction of the planned city has been built, and many of the city's initial sustainability plans have been abandoned. The Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City in Binhai, China lists 19 awards for green aspects of the project – mostly granted by Chinese state entities, but a handful by international agencies, including a global non-profit recognized by the UN. Neom, a planned 'green' city in Saudi Arabia that claims to revolutionize urban sustainability, has been nominated for a Hollywood award solely for its promotional video (Anonymous 2022) – despite allegations that Saudi forces killed a local resident and activist for refusing to give up his land to make way for the new city (Younes 2020).

This paper uses Forest City as a case study to demonstrate how eco-city developers can leverage urban sustainability awards to lend credibility to ambitious, for-profit megaprojects during early planning and construction stages. We contrast Forest City's many accolades with the damage its construction has caused to nearby ecosystems and livelihoods, demonstrating the narrow criteria awards-granting agencies use to evaluate merit when granting sustainability awards. Finally, we suggest that the practice of awarding futuristic, greenfield eco-cities for grand and unfulfilled plans cements a normative association between the 'eco' and the spectacular, rewarding projects for their ambition while neglecting to examine the feasibility of their plans and the ecological context in which a project is located.

This research draws on six visits to Forest City between 2017 and 2019, which involved taking official tours, conducting interviews, exploring the Visitor Gallery, and staying in the hotel. The second author also traveled to Malay and Indigenous Orang Asli villages near Forest City to learn about the impacts of Chinese urban mega-developments in the area, while the first author conducted remote videoconference interviews in 2020 and 2021 with planners who worked on Forest City and other developments in Iskandar Malaysia, and residents of a local Orang Asli village. Finally, we conducted extensive content analysis of Forest City's master plan, official online promotional materials – including its website, videos, social media, and press releases – as well as newspaper articles and social media commentary. As governments and other actors around the world continue to announce greenfield eco-cities and look to emulate prominent megaprojects like Masdar (Cugurullo 2013), it is essential to unpack the uncritical

praise that many eco-city projects attract and the role of the urban awards industry in encouraging this highly speculative, entrepreneurial mode of development.

5.2. Eco-city aspirations and urban awards

5.2.1. Eco-cities as antidotes to a warming planet

The term ‘eco-city’ was originally coined by architect and activist Richard Register in the 1987. However, there is no single or accepted definition of an ‘eco-city’ today. Though eco-cities commonly claim to prioritize concern for the natural environment, anyone can apply the ‘eco’ label to their project (Rapoport 2014), and the success of ‘eco-cities’ in reducing the urban ecological footprint is uncertain (Joss, Cowley, and Tomozeiu 2013). The roots of the eco-city ideal originated from grassroots environmental movements in the 1960s and 1970s (Caprotti 2015; Rapoport 2014). However, the current wave of eco-cities has been shaped more significantly by two concepts popularized in the 1990s, ‘sustainable development’ and ‘ecological modernization’. The former introduced the notion that economic, social, and environmental sustainability goals are not mutually exclusive but in fact complementary, while the latter suggests that urban environmental challenges can be solved through technological innovation (Rapoport 2014; Roseland 1997). These two concepts have come to define the aspirations of the current wave of eco-cities, as builders invoke a ‘close normative and conceptual connection […] between environmental sustainability and economic growth’, with the city seen as the locus for bringing these two realms into harmony with one another (Joss, Cowley, and Tomozeiu 2013, 69). The idea that sustainable urbanism can boost economic growth in part explains the appeal and rapid growth of the eco-city concept around the world (Rapoport and Hult 2017; Rosol, Béal, and Mössner 2017).

Forest City is emblematic of this contemporary wave of built-from-scratch eco-cities, which began in Asia during the early 2000s and has since expanded throughout the Middle East, Africa, and beyond. These projects tend to be large-scale, top-down, for-profit endeavours. They are informed by and targeted at a global discourse of environmental and carbon crisis, claiming to build the world’s ‘greenest’ or most sustainable city (Caprotti 2015; Joss, Cowley, and Tomozeiu 2013; Rizzo 2017). A number of new city projects are touted as experiments that radically rethink urban life and mobility and contribute a net benefit to sustainability goals. Eco-city proponents suggest that a blank slate is necessary to allow for innovation free from the

constraints of existing infrastructure. Their projects share largely utopian aspirations and are experimental in nature (Rapoport 2014), seeking to create living laboratories to 'test new technologies, policies, and "ways of doing"' in real time (Caprotti 2015, 9).

Developers position and justify their endeavours as solutions to a range of urban crises, incorporating environmental R&D as a core feature and experimenting with technology-based solutions to environmental challenges, which their developers aim to test, sell, and replicate in cities around the world (Caprotti 2014a; Cugurullo 2013; Shwayri 2013). To develop and finance their green technologies, eco-cities are often conceived of by or in partnership with powerful tech corporations: for example, Masdar's development model is based on a partnership with Siemens, Toyota is creating a new city in Japan, and Songdo, Korea was built in collaboration with Cisco. Although there is significant variation among projects, many of the same corporate names and consultants appear in concurrent eco-city projects around the world, meaning that many new cities draw from the same global ideals and rhetoric (Joss, Cowley, and Tomozeiu 2013; Rapoport and Hult 2017). Technological experimentation in eco-cities reflects the influence of ecological modernization discourse, and is targeted at solving a number of challenges, such as transitioning national economies to renewable energy sources (Caprotti 2015), or developing and testing autonomous e-vehicle technologies.

Despite their stated environmental focus, scholars argue that eco-city motives tend to be equally – if not more – political and economic (Cugurullo 2016a; Koch 2014; Rapoport 2014; Rizzo 2017). Critical scholarship cautions that the profit motives underlying urban megaprojects and new cities limit their potential for genuine sustainability, as current eco-cities work within rather than trying to challenge the dominant entrepreneurial, growth-oriented mode of development (Ajibade 2017; Caprotti 2014a; Rapoport 2014; Rosol, Béal, and Mössner 2017). Rather than being grounded in a holistic definition of economic, environmental, and social sustainability, many eco-cities use their stated environmental and social aims as a justification for or façade to obscure their economic drivers (Cugurullo 2013). Many projects – including Forest City – are elite enclaves that sell luxury real estate for profit and seek to offer an exclusive lifestyle, including golf courses, swimming pools, and other resource-intensive amenities that contradict their stated environmental aims (Moser and Avery 2021). Further, many are built on reclaimed land, allowing their developers to bypass existing infrastructure and planning regulations while offering desirable waterfront properties to prospective buyers. The for-profit,

luxury nature of today's eco-cities resembles a form of 'enclave urbanism' (Ajibade 2017, 87) or gating (Caprotti 2015, 17) that exacerbates urban inequality and segregation: only the wealthy are able to buy a place in the eco-city of the future and enjoy the renewable energy and clean air it promises.

In turn, the costs of construction, pollution, and waste are often externalized beyond the eco-city's boundaries, through the depletion of resources, damage to the natural environment caused by large-scale construction, and a privatization of urban infrastructure and services. The environmental impacts of building a new city are often disproportionately felt by marginalized, lower-income communities, who face threats to their livelihoods and are in many cases relocated to accommodate development. For example, Eko Atlantic City off the coast of Lagos, Nigeria began sand dredging for land reclamation in 2009 to build a new 'city' that aims to protect the coastline from storm surges and rising sea levels by decreasing erosion. However, the same environmental protection does not exist for lower-income residents, who have been evicted from their homes in surrounding coastal areas (Ajibade 2017).

Eco-city builders' interpretations of sustainability often contain contradictions, neglecting to examine or take into consideration the ecosystems and contexts in which projects are constructed (Koch 2014). In particular, new eco-cities tend to overlook the social dimension of sustainability, as developers are primarily concerned with the satisfaction of their paying customers, rather than existing residents in the area. Though some eco-cities advertise plans for affordable or low-income housing, evidence suggests that these commitments are largely symbolic, as many scale back their environmental and social goals when faced with the realities of the market (Chang, Leitner, and Sheppard 2016; Cugurullo 2013). In sum, critical scholarship offers little convincing evidence that contemporary greenfield eco-city developments are truly 'green' or sustainable. Using Forest City as a case study, our paper contributes to this line of investigation by examining the role of urban awards in legitimizing this mode of unproven sustainable development among urban megaprojects.

5.2.2. The urban awards industry

While scholars have highlighted the negative aspects of self-proclaimed eco-cities, little attention has been paid to the growing awards industry that recognizes these projects, the types of projects that are awarded, and the ways in which developers advertise the awards they receive.

In an analysis of the British Urban Renewal Association's BURA 'Best Practice' annual awards (1991-1999), Jones and Gripaios (2000) assess the award's criteria for environmental improvement and the range of award-winning projects, while flagging the challenge of self-sustaining the benefits over time. They argue that the latter may be a more accurate assessment of projects' success, rather than the short-term gains observed by selection committees. More recently, a special issue in *Environment and Planning A* on urban environmental regimes edited by Rosol, Béal, and Mössner (2017) explores the global marketing and adoption of 'sustainable' urban models. The authors suggest that urban awards and rankings for sustainable urbanism feed urban competitiveness and ambitions to create 'greenest' cities – including through the construction of eco-cities from scratch – a trend in which 'environmental improvement [is not seen] as a goal in itself anymore, but as a way to enhance competitiveness' (1712). Our article expands on this subject by conceptualizing the urban awards industry as a key player in circulating normative eco-city ideals built on growth-oriented 'sustainable' development.

The most substantial article on the urban awards industry comes from management studies and examines 'ex ante' awards, which are granted on the basis of unbuilt plans for the future. Through two case studies in Sweden, Styhre and Brorström (2021) demonstrate that ex ante awards provide a variety of benefits for award recipients, award-granting organizations, and specific industry sectors. The authors provide insights into the effects of awards on the parties involved, including how they strengthen the relationships between actors involved in a project while bestowing award-granting organizations the 'authority to define quality' (1). The narrow criteria and blind spots of urban awards – and the ways in which they may legitimize the green claims of harmful urban mega-developments – has not yet been investigated.

5.3. 'Glory comes when you dare to dream': Forest City's urban sustainability awards

As a new 'green and smart' city, Forest City invests heavily in branding and marketing itself as such. Its green identity includes covering buildings head-to-toe in vines, and is a calculated strategy to attract buyers and investors (Moser and Avery 2021), drawing from the signature 'green everywhere' style that defines Country Garden's real estate projects within China (Koh, Zhao, and Shin 2021b). Forest City's success in marketing itself as a model eco-city can be seen in the vast number of awards it has won for its green concepts, plans, and buildings. Despite only having partially completed its first island, Forest City has received nearly 30

awards since beginning construction in 2014 (Table 5.1). CGPV showcases Forest City's awards on its website and in press releases, which are frequently reported in Chinese and Malaysian media with headlines such as, 'Country Garden Forest City Continues to Amaze at a Global Level' (Shafeq 2021). Awards certificates are displayed prominently in the first room of the Visitor Gallery in a section titled 'Glory Comes When You Dare To Dream' in English and Mandarin (Figure 5.1a). Its impressive, futuristic Visitor Gallery seeks to cultivate an image of a world-class project, and impress prospective buyers and investors (Figure 5.1b).

Table 5.1. Awards Forest City has received.

	Name of award	Year	Feature awarded	Organization granting award
1.	Green Solutions Award	2021	water recycling, biodiversity conservation	Construction21 International
2.	Global Model of Low-Carbon City Planning and Design Award	2021	Overall low-carbon green development concept	Sustainable Cities And Human Settlements Award (SCAHSA)
3.	Global Model of Coastal Ecological Environment Protection Award	2020	"excellent urban green ecosystem construction and development, adhering to the environmental protection concept throughout urban planning, construction, development and operations"	Sustainable Cities And Human Settlements Award (SCAHSA)
4.	Asian Townscape Jury's Award	2020	Water Cycle System & Sponge City Concept (four sewage treatment plants, wetland treatment system)	UN-Habitat Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, Fukuoka Asian Urban Research Center, Asian Habitat Society
5.	Asia-Pacific Top 100 Golf Courses	2020	Forest City Classic Golf Course	Asia-Pacific Top 100 Golf Courses Selection Awards Ceremony held by Cloud Golf
6.	Recognition Award & Certificate, "National Community Contribution to Strategic Friendship and Collaboration"	2020	PPR projects and CSR contributions to the community	Secretary General of KPKT Dato Sri Haji Mohammad Mentek, on behalf of Malaysia federal government
7.	Top 100 Golf Courses	2020	Forest City Liang Guokun Golf Course	Yunlu Top 100 Golf Courses Asia Award Ceremony
8.	Largest fully automated pre-fab construction facility in Malaysia	2019	Industrialised Building System (IBS) Plant	Malaysia Book of Records
9.	Global Green Smart City Award	2019	Smart city development	Sustainable Cities And Human Settlements Award (SCAHSA)
10.	Asian Townscape Jury's Award	2019	Feathers of the Sea International Business Complex (Green construction design, smart solutions, preservation of ecological environment, sustainable townscape construction)	UN-Habitat Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, Fukuoka Asian Urban Research Center, Asian Habitat Society

11.	Recognition Award & Appreciation Certificate	2019	Support of Malaysia's federal affordable housing plan	Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad
12.	Best Sustainable Green Development	2019	Construction-focused industrial park	Presented by Malaysia Housing and Local Government Minister YB Zuraida Kamarudd as part of the Des Prix Infinitus ASEAN Property Awards Malaysia
13.	Best Smart Building Project	2019	Smart B.I.A. system	IDC Smart City Asia Pacific Award
14.	Global Model of City-Industry Integration Award	2018	City-industry integrated development	Sustainable Cities And Human Settlements Award (SCAHSA)
15.	Best Safe City	2018	Overall project	Iskandar Sergeant Noor Hashim Bin Mohammd
16.	Gold Award, Provisional GreenRE Certifications Township Category	2018	Forest City Island 1	GreenRE
17.	Gold Award, Provisional GreenRE Certifications Township Category	2018	Shattuck St Mary's Forest City International School Multi-Use Centre	GreenRE
18.	Global Green Building Industrialization Demonstration Park Award	2017	Building Industrialization Base	UN-HABITAT Award for Sustainable Urban and Human Settlements
19.	Global Model of Green Building Industrial Park Award	2017	Industrialised Building System (IBS) Base	Sustainable Cities And Human Settlements Award (SCAHSA)
20.	Best Sustainable Developments Award	2017	Overall project	2017 StarProperty.myAwards: Jewels of Johor Awards ceremony
21.	Asia Pacific Property Award Mixed-Use Development Malaysia	2017	Overall project	Asia Pacific Property Awards
22.	Asia Pacific Property Award Architecture Multiple Residence Malaysia	2017	Overall project	Asia Pacific Property Awards
23.	Asia Pacific Property Award Best Architecture Multiple Residence Malaysia	2017	Overall project	Asia Pacific Property Awards
24.	MIPIM Asia's Best Future Mega Project Gold Award	2017	Overall project	
25.	Global Human Settlements Award on Planning and Design	2016	Overall project	Sustainable Cities And Human Settlements Award (SCAHSA)
26.	Frost & Sullivan's Asia Pacific Property Development New Product Innovation Award	2016	Overall project	
27.	MIPIM Asia's Best Future Mega Project Gold Award	2016	Overall project	

28.	Architectural Landscape Design Excellence Award	2016	Merit Award for Landscape Analysis and Planning	Boston Society of Landscape Architects
29.	LEED-CS Gold Pre-Certification	Unknown	International Clubhouse	U.S. Green Building Council

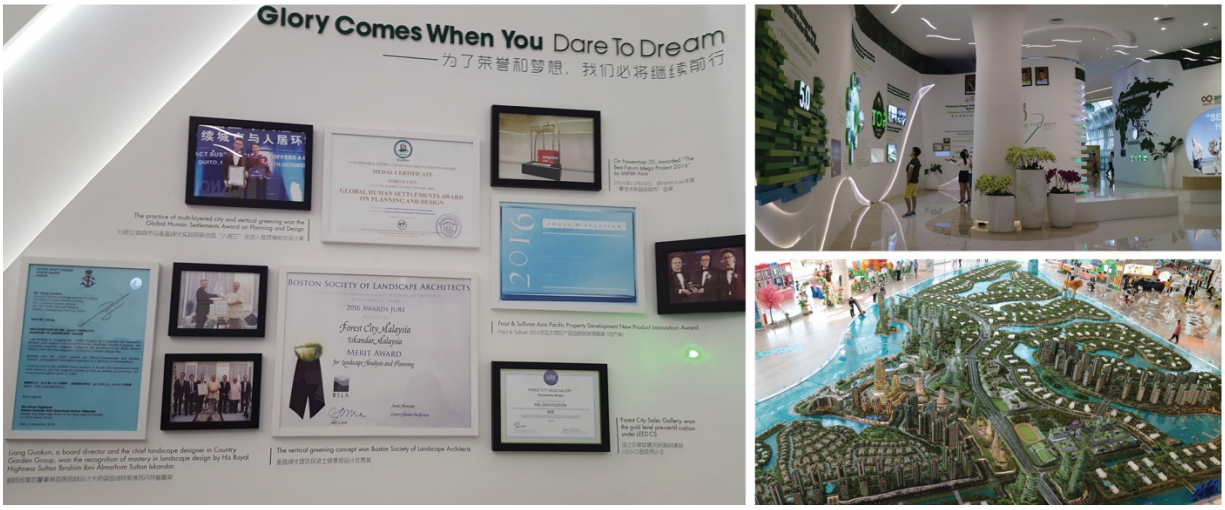

Figure 5.1a (left) and 5.1b (right). Forest City's Visitor Gallery seeks to impress visitors through its futuristic style and prominent awards display. (Source: Authors, 2017)

Awards for green urban mega-developments tend to take one of two approaches. As Table 5.1 demonstrates, many awards focus on a specific initiative – such as green landscaping, sustainable construction, water treatment or harvesting, smart city development, or climate change resiliency – which may or may not be constructed already. Other awards focus on big-picture project goals – for example, low-carbon features or enhancing regional biodiversity – regardless of whether such goals have been achieved. Most are competition-based awards decided by panels of 'experts'. Others certificates include recognized international green building certifications, such as LEED. Forest City's heavy promotion of its awards demonstrates that they are a key marketing tool for reinforcing the project's green identity and supporting its environmental credentials. To visitors with little knowledge of the project and the context in which it is being developed, awards backed by organizations like the UN suggest that the project is a global leader in sustainable urban development.

Despite all the sustainability awards Forest City has won, its development has been mired by a number of environmental controversies, including the developer's failure to complete an environmental impact assessment before starting construction, and complaints from local

villagers about the project decimating marine life and habitats. In the context of negative publicity and criticism (Anonymous 2014; 2015; Ourbis and Shaw 2017; Rahman 2017c; Schneider 2018), the awards become a troubling tool for precluding criticism of the project and giving the impression that development is proceeding according to plan, when the reality is far more complicated. For example, when a 2021 YouTube video ranked Forest City among the 'most useless megaprojects in the world' (Top Luxury 2021), the Sultan of Johor, who controls the majority of the Johor state government's stake in Forest City, wrote a Facebook post in English and Malay referencing several of Forest City's awards to push back against the criticism:

> I would like to refute allegations viral on social media that the Forest City Project is a failed project. This is not true and is mere slander spread by certain parties [….] At the end of last month, Forest City also received the Global Model of Low-Carbon City Planning and Design Award from the Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements Award (SCAHSA). This indicates that the project has not failed, instead it has attracted attention on the international stage with its technical advancement. (Facebook post, November 20, 2021)

In response to the same video, CGPV released a statement attempting to discredit the information in the video, asserting that 'The recently released so called global city ranking on Forest City project is not recognised by any international authoritative organisation' (press release, Nov. 18, 2021). In contrast, Country Garden issues a press release every time Forest City wins a positive award or ranking, demonstrating the importance that CGPV places on recognition from 'credible' entities. CGPV further suggests that the awards demonstrate that Forest City is 'becoming a model to emulate in terms of planning a future city' (press release, Nov. 29, 2017).

5.4. Ecological blind spots of the urban awards industry

While Forest City's wide-ranging awards for sustainability and environmental conservation suggest a model green city, a deeper analysis of its resource consumption, embodied energy costs, and the context in which the project is constructed leads to a vastly different set of conclusions. In this section, we outline some of Forest City's ecological impacts on the surrounding environment, and explore contradictions in the project's understanding of sustainability. Forest City's harmful environmental impacts demonstrate that many urban awards

take a narrow view of sustainability, ignoring the context in which a city is built and how it impacts people and ecosystems beyond its bounds.

By their very nature, eco-cities built from scratch bulldoze vast swaths of land, often evicting the residents who already live in the area (for example, Tianjin, China; Lavasa, India; Neom), or building on top of natural landscapes – even ones that have been designated as environmentally sensitive or protected (Forest City; Dongtan, China; Songdo). Forest City is no exception. The most significant issues surrounding Forest City's environmental credentials arise from the developer's choice to build a new city on four artificial islands spanning 30 square kilometres, while introducing up to 700,000 new residents to the region: not only is the project built on top of the largest sea grass field in Malaysia (Hossain et al. 2019; Rahman 2017a), it has destroyed coastal mangroves (Chu 2021), depleted local fish and shellfish populations, and relies wholly on Johor, a drought-prone state, for its water (Chuah, Ho, and Chow 2018). The massive amount of sand required for land reclamation harms ecosystems not only where the project is constructed, but where the sand is dredged and mined, too. Beyond the project's bounds, fisherfolk in local Malay and Orang Asli villages have seen decreased earnings due to land reclamation and destruction of marine habitats, and must travel further afield and use more gasoline to fish (personal communications, 2019; interview, Sept. 21, 2020).

In response to criticism over the environmental impacts of land reclamation for a luxury new city, Forest City has publicized a number of solutions: it has a water efficiency plan that involves rainwater capture and water recycling; it has installed silt curtains in an attempt to prevent sediment from suffocating marine life along the Johor coast; it is educating local school children about habits such as reducing use of plastic straws; and has hired a Malaysian researcher to monitor the seagrass health and replant the species where it has been destroyed (press releases, Mar. 19, 2015; Apr. 22, May 29, July 21, Aug. 25, Sept. 21, Oct. 20, 2020). Such initiatives are important, but are ultimately band-aid solutions to the initial decision to build a new luxury eco-city in a sensitive marine environment, and pale in comparison the massive amount of resources – sand, energy, water – that have been poured into the its construction. CGPV further does not mention where any of its energy and power, building materials, and sand for land reclamation come from.

Common approaches to sustainability often focus first on reducing consumption. In this regard, there are many contradictions within the design of Forest City itself and its understanding

of sustainability. For example, Forest City is built with entirely new materials from scratch and filled with extravagant ornamental gardens, meticulously manicured lawns, golf courses, and swimming pools, none of which display a genuine desire to conserve water usage (Moser and Avery 2021). There is a clear mismatch between telling people to avoid plastic bags, but including golf courses and swimming pools freely – part of a larger trend in 'green' urban mega-development where golf courses and nature reserves are 'not problematized as potential conflicting interests' (Ouis 2011, 72). Meanwhile, some lush 'green' walls are made of plastic, and plant species throughout Forest City are largely imported from other regions and climates (Moser and Avery 2021). While Forest City management claims that the project is enhancing the surrounding environment and is helping to restore nearby mangroves (press release, May 29, 2020), the existing coastlines of Forest City do not recreate mangrove ecosystems, but rather, create man-made sand beaches with elaborate lawns and coconut palms (Figure 5.2)[17].

Figure 5.2. Forest City's existing coastline consists of (imported) sand beaches with manicured lawns, coconut palms, and plastic sculptures of marine life. (Source: Authors)

Above all, Forest City is a project built primarily for Chinese nationals seeking to buy investment properties and vacation homes: at any given time, management expects Forest City to only be 30 percent occupied (personal communication, March 2017). Instead of addressing local housing needs, Forest City is pouring non-renewable resources into constructing thousands of homes that are anticipated to sit largely vacant. As a result of this construction, nearby villages

[17] There are plans to recreate mangrove edges in Forest City's master plan, but these have not yet materialized and are not shown widely in CGPV's promotional materials.

have experienced water shortages and electricity disruptions, and local residents worry that water may be being diverted to luxury homes and wealthy residents in Forest City (Chu 2021).

The contradictions in Forest City's green identity illustrate how 'green and smart' features are adopted first and foremost 'for marketing and branding purposes' (Koh et al., 2021: 21). The awards buy into and reinforce the trendy discourse of green urbanism as an 'apparatus for speculative city-making' (Zhao, Koh, and Shin 2021), taking a narrow view of sustainability that mirrors the piecemeal approach of building an eco-city to solve global environmental challenges (Grydehøj and Kelman 2016; Rosol, Béal, and Mössner 2017). Forest City's successful 'green and smart' marketing is evident in the high number of sustainability awards the project has received.

5.5. Urban awards and the spectacle of sustainability

As one of the largest, most ambitious, most awarded eco-city projects under construction today, Forest City is an illustrative case study for critically analyzing the implications of urban awards. In this section, we argue that Forest City exemplifies several problematic aspects to awarding urban mega-developments for 'sustainability', particularly during their early conceptual stages. Further, we suggest that the practice of awarding ambitious, large-scale, luxury eco-cities for their 'green' plans associates sustainability with the spectacular, while neglecting local stewardship practices that are less flashy.

5.5.1. 'Ex ante' awards for imagination and marketing?

Urban awards and prizes are frequently awarded on the basis of plans for the future without proof of completion or success (Styhre and Brorström 2021). Many greenfield eco-cities have not yet been built or are only partially built, meaning that awards are almost exclusively given at early conceptual stages: awards-granting agencies make their decisions based on the *claims* of the developer, with no guarantee that the developer will follow through on their green ambitions. Because the motives of eco-cities built from scratch are economic first and foremost, decisions about design and planning frequently change according to market shifts and the desires of buyers, partners, and investors (Cugurullo 2016b). The underlying economic motives of eco-cities suggest that their developers will ultimately choose to build the features deemed most profitable, rather than most sustainable.

As with many eco-cities, there is no existing public data to prove that Forest City is meeting its green targets or significantly reducing consumption, emissions, waste, or energy. Awards for big-picture, long-term dreams, such as Forest City's 'low-carbon green development concept' (press release, Nov. 2, 2021) assess projects based on their wish lists, rather than on tangible achievements. Many of the green features that figure prominently in Forest City's promotional materials and on-site Visitor Gallery have yet to materialize. For example, renderings of the completed city show light-rail transit and a car-free superstructure covering the four islands, dedicating the surface of the city to pedestrians, bicycles, and gardens while relegating cars below ground. However, a visit to Forest City or a stroll through the project on Google Street View demonstrates that its street grid is far from demonstrating leadership in walkability or sustainable transportation: the roads are built entirely for cars, and there are hardly any sidewalks in the new city (Figure 5.3). An at-grade, private highway connects the first island to the mainland, with no suggestion that the above-ground podium will be built any time soon. The decision will likely depend on when Forest City has the financial capacity to build the podium, and if it is deemed to be a profitable feature that will sway prospective buyers. The plan also raises logistical questions, as gardens and entrances to buildings are currently located at ground level alongside arterial roads. As CGPV's former director of strategy explained, the developer is considering pursuing partnerships with autonomous vehicle manufacturers instead of building the light rail it currently advertises, due to the industry's growth and popular appeal (interview, Oct. 22, 2018). As one planner suggested, constructing the car-free area is not seen as a key element for establishing the city on the map (interview, Mar. 25 2021). Despite the fact that this feature does not yet and may never exist, the imaginative renderings of the car-free superstructure have already succeeded in attracting international attention and winning the project awards for 'promoting walking and cycling […] by building a consistent and green support infrastructure for these healthier modes of transport' (CGPV press release, Nov. 2, 2021).

Figure 5.3. There is a significant gap between what Forest City promises – a car-free superstructure and light rail transit (left) – versus what currently exists (right). (Source: CGPV n.d.; Google Street View 2020).

The relentless pivoting and lack of follow through on ambitious green aspirations reflects the fact that despite impressive 3D models and elaborate renderings, which are supposed to reflect what the city will look like at completion, master plans for new cities and urban mega-developments are conceptual at best. Their eventual implementation path and decisions are highly dependent on shifting social, political, and economic dynamics (Cugurullo 2013; Griffiths and Sovacool 2020), and available technological and financial resources. Many new city builders hire internationally renowned urban planning and design firms and 'starchitects' – who routinely win awards for their designs – to generate buzz and create a sense of spectacle and expertise (for example, British architects Foster + Partners' design of Masdar, Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG) creating the Oceanix concept for UN-Habitat, and Forest City hiring Sasaki). Even if these firms design cities and buildings that are truly cutting edge in their sustainability, there is no guarantee that the built form will resemble the artful renderings.

To date, there is no evidence that any greenfield eco-city has been able to realize the full extent of its green ambitions. Perhaps the most studied eco-city of the past two decades is Masdar, a new satellite city in Abu Dhabi slated for completion in 2016 and planned to be zero-carbon, car-free, and powered entirely by renewable energy. However, as of 2022, only a fraction of the city's planned area has been built. Despite its small geographic footprint, the city's greenhouse gas emissions are far from zero, with representatives admitting that zero-carbon is an unattainable goal. Despite winning awards as early as 2007 for its renewable energy and sustainable design plans, Masdar has been forced to draw energy from off-site sources rather than solely relying on its solar power technology (Cugurullo 2013). In another example, Tianjin

Eco-City scaled back its social sustainability goals due to a shortfall in profits and financing, reducing its original affordable housing goal from 50 to 20 percent (Chang, Leitner, and Sheppard 2016).

The future success of Forest City is similarly uncertain. In 2016, CGPV hired the international planning consultant Sasaki to create a second master plan that would lend environmental expertise and credibility to a project that had been widely criticized for damaging local ecosystems. However, the new master plan is described as a 'flexible guiding document' (planner, interview, Mar. 25, 2021), created to design a vision and set of guiding principles for Forest City's development. It is not a blueprint for step-by-step implementation, and has yet to be translated into any developments on the ground at Forest City. Similarly, Forest City has received certificates of recognition for its commitment to affordable housing, but has not released any concrete plan for creating any affordable homes in the luxury project. Even if CGPV does succeed in building a city with legitimate claims to being sustainable, it will likely remain an enclave for the wealthy, as its apartments and villas are unaffordable to the majority of Malaysians. This commodification of the environment is a common and troubling trend in which the greenest cities are reserved for the wealthy, as eco-city developers seek to commodify and maintain the purity of 'borderless resources such as the sun, air, or water' (Caprotti 2015, 18).

5.5.2. Green as spectacular

A lack evidence for or follow through on the environmental claims of eco-cities does not seem to deter awards agencies from praising the most ambitious and speculative projects. The elaborate green branding of large-scale projects like Forest City functions as a powerful tool for shaping green development discourse and cementing a project's identity as a pioneering 'eco-city' among international actors. The results of such awards are inherently skewed towards the spectacular because developers nominate their own projects for awards. Larger developers can allocate more resources to putting application packages together for awards, and can pay large sums of money to hire internationally renowned firms that create impressive renderings of life in the future city. As a result, ambitious projects with wealthy backers generate media buzz and international attention before they even put shovels in the ground. As Cugurullo (2013, 32–33) notes, 'Even when the site was only sand and dust, the Masdar Initiative was already investing a

lot of energy in constructing the image of the development, arguably paying more attention to the representation of the city than to the city itself.' More specifically,

> The image of Masdar City as an eco-city predates any forms of assessment and evaluation. Masdar City became an eco-city prior to its birth, and this representation began to circulate before the cornerstone was laid. Discourses came first, solidifying around the project and shaping its perception. As a member of the UPC confirms, their examination has been limited to the design phase and they do not hold empirical data regarding the environmental performance of the city. Everything goes back to the project, as it was once envisioned by the Masdar Initiative and F + P. Discourses, images and assessments refer to an ideal plan that […] was soon changed when it crashed against the economic reality of the late 2000s. What the images portray simply does not exist and never has. (Cugurullo 2013, 33)

In other words, once the image of an eco-city is cemented through marketing and promotional materials – portraying grand and overtly 'green' visions – the realities of implementation seem to matter less than the developer's original 'ideal plan'. For example, Dongtan Eco-City was once 'praised as a "best practice" example during its planning stage' but ultimately failed, suspending construction in 2008 (Chang 2017, 1720). Nevertheless, the project remains an influential model for eco-city planning, demonstrating how plans become powerful 'performative objects' that circulate through transnational networks and shape perceptions of future developments – regardless of whether they exist yet in any recognizable form (Wade 2019). Forest City advertises its participation in the International Green Model City Initiative, a UN-supported 'global network to promote sustainable urban development' (press release, Sept. 19, 2019), part of a broader trend in which new city builders sell urban models that are at best partially built, but more often exist only in PowerPoint slides and Photoshop renderings (Moser and Côté-Roy 2021).

Awards for unfinished projects like Forest City cement the green identity of self-proclaimed eco-cities, without providing any incentive or requirement for megaprojects to meet their environmental targets. Further, they create a normative association between the sustainable and the spectacular, validating a particular entrepreneurial mode of greenfield eco-city development. In this sense, sustainability becomes an 'empty signifier' that can be used to justify almost any project (Rosol, Béal, and Mössner 2017). The lengthy awards CVs of half-built projects like Forest City, Masdar, and Tianjin demonstrate that eco-cities receive recognition and praise for grand ambitions, regardless of whether they have the track record to prove it. The same

UN-backed SCAHSA award that Forest City has won six years in a row has been given to numerous other urban megaprojects that been similarly criticized for environmental damage or eviction of local populations, including Tianjin, Masdar, Sihanoukville in Cambodia, and a range of new town projects in China. This practice sets a troubling precedent for future projects, which will look to models like Forest City and Masdar and recognize that the grander the scale and the more spectacular the design, the more attention and accolades a project will receive.

Scholars have documented the ways in which green discourses and urban sustainability models circulate across the globe, as self-proclaimed 'green' cities promote and seek recognition for their sustainability initiatives through transnational networks (McCann 2013). In legitimizing a project like Forest City, these awards more broadly legitimize the current wave of eco-cities built from scratch and their entrepreneurial mode of development and elite enclave creation, while disregarding the damage that many such projects have caused, and the contradictions in their interpretations of sustainability. In the case of Forest City specifically, such awards do not take into account the local ecological context and the wide-ranging and serious impacts of land reclamation on regional sustainability, and the ways in which the 'luxury' lifestyle the project seeks to offer is at odds with a genuine concern for environmental, economic, and social dimensions of sustainability.

5.6. Solar panels on a coal mine? Conclusions and directions for future research

Forest City is a productive case study for examining the proliferation of urban awards given to early-stage urban mega-developments branded as eco-cities. Forest City's green urbanism, marketing, and the corresponding awards it receives promote a narrative of ecological development and growth, focusing on how Forest City adds to the natural environment while glossing over what the development has taken from it – vast amounts of sand, water, and other constrained resources. The awards Forest City receives for features such as sustainable building construction ignore the fact that the project is premised on large-scale destruction of the natural environment and corresponding local livelihoods. Programs to raise environmental awareness and teach youth about sustainable practices place the responsibility on the individual consumer to be environmentally conscious, while absolving the developer of responsibility. Press releases (May 29, 2020; Sept. 21, 2020) emphasize that Forest City is saving mangroves by clamping

down on ‘illegal logging’, but conveniently ignore the mangroves that were cleared for Forest City’s very construction.

Forest City exemplifies stark social contrasts associated with the eco-city of the future, and how awards for such projects gloss over troubling patterns of enclave urbanism. The underlying profit motives and exclusive lifestyle of luxury that the project seeks to cultivate are at odds with equitable environmental and social sustainability, as the wealthy are the primary beneficiaries of green initiatives. While Forest City buyers benefit from features like wastewater recycling, the project makes it harder for villagers nearby to earn a living and actively paves over their fishing and hunting grounds. Through urban awards, Forest City is rewarded for the neat control and integration of nature in an urban environment (Moser and Avery 2021), but the same awards do not recognize the smaller-scale stewardship practices of villagers who have lived in the area for centuries.

Urban sustainability awards gloss over these contradictions, instead reinforcing Forest City’s environmentally friendly brand, elevating the project as a global model for green urbanism, and encouraging others to aspire to the same type of project – despite the fact that CGPV has only realized a fraction of its plans. The many documented shortcomings and negative impacts of Forest City lay bare the limitations and blind spots of the urban awards industry. Together, the speed at which ‘fast’ urban mega-developments (Cugurullo 2016b) are executed and the global influence of unproven but well-marketed eco-city plans (Chang 2017; Cugurullo 2013) underscore the urgency of addressing how awards-granting agencies position projects like Forest City as ‘global models’, selectively praising green features while failing to examine the project’s sustainability in a holistic manner.

Forest City does offer some positives: the project has brought more attention to environmental education and conservation in the region, and the developer – after much criticism and intervention from the Malaysian federal government – has gradually put more effort into environmental protection. However, its environmental initiatives do not fundamentally challenge the premise of the project nor its speculative mode of sustainable development and firm belief in ecological modernization. The decision to develop a new city for 700,000 people on artificial islands is an enormous gamble: the new city remains largely empty, and has struggled to sell properties in recent years (Kumar 2020a). If Forest City does not succeed in selling all the units

it builds or reaching its anticipated population, it will be a waste of resources for construction at an unimaginable scale.

Ultimately, we have suggested that Forest City's success in the urban awards realm is indicative of its marketing and branding, rather than holistic sustainability. Future scholarship can turn a critical eye to the actors, institutions, and awards that legitimize harmful modes of entrepreneurial 'green' development. Further research would also shed light on the extent to which awards play a role in attracting investors, shaping local and international perceptions of eco-city projects, and influencing the adoption of entrepreneurial eco-city ideals from projects like Forest City in other contexts.

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Chapter 6: Discussion and conclusions: The price of speculative urban fantasies

6.1. Overview and chapter findings

This thesis has provided an in-depth account of Forest City's development history and green branding, offering a case study in speculative urbanism and eco-city construction brought to life primarily by Country Garden, a private Chinese developer, and the Sultan of Johor in Malaysia. Specifically, I have sought to outline how Forest City's strategy and rhetoric has evolved since construction first began, and how its green identity has been shaped and reinforced by a global urban awards industry that has received little scholarly attention to date. In this concluding chapter, I reiterate the environmental, social, and economic implications of this type of entrepreneurial new city construction and 'fast urbanism' (Cugurullo 2016b), and argue that the case of Forest City demonstrates an urgent need to hold new city developers and governments accountable to their ambitious claims and utopian visions. Below, I summarize the key arguments of each chapter, before providing final reflections on the contributions of this thesis, directions for future research, and final comments.

In **Chapter 1**, I began by describing two different stories that I suggest are closely intertwined with the story of Forest City as a new, Chinese-financed, master-planned city. The first scene introduced the Orang Seletar village, Kampung Sungai Temon, whose residents will be evicted by the state from their customary and ancestral lands, and who are currently trying to negotiate a years-long settlement with the state to secure their future. The second scene described the recent Chinese property developer crisis, which took hold in late 2021 as Evergrande and a string of other Chinese developers failed to meet bond re-payment deadlines and defaulted on loans. I will return to these two stories later in this final chapter; however, I chose to introduce them early on in this thesis in order to show the potential implications of real estate mega-development in Iskandar Malaysia, and contrast the costs that have already occurred with the precarity of it all. I have included these two stories because they acutely demonstrate the stark contrasts – and consequences – associated with the mode of profit-driven, luxury eco-enclave development Forest City embodies, particularly the promises that new city developers make and the heavy speculation underlying their claims, versus the realities on the ground. I do not intend for these two scenes to paint a holistic picture. However, I draw from them as a narrative backdrop and additional context to the development of Forest City, and a starting point for

reflecting on the project, its mode of development, impacts, and significance. The remainder of Chapter 1 introduced Forest City as an ambitious new city built by a Chinese developer on Malaysian soil with a distinct green identity and eco-rhetoric. I sought to contextualize the project within the context of Iskandar Malaysia and growing Chinese foreign investment – worldwide, but particularly in the state of Johor, where construction of new luxury homes and high-rises is targeted at an elite, international investor class rather than at meeting the housing needs of local residents and Malaysians (Koh 2021; Lim and Ng 2022; Moser 2018).

In **Chapter 2**, I situated Forest City within the global trend of new master-planned cities. Following this brief overview, I introduced the three main bodies of literature and theoretical concepts that my research draws on and contributes to: 1) Chinese foreign investment, with a focus on urban megaprojects, 2) eco-cities, and 3) speculative urbanism. Finally, I outlined the gaps in these existing areas of scholarship, and how research on Forest City can contribute to each area. The first gap I identified relates to the limited number of studies that focus on Chinese foreign investment in *urban* megaprojects, as opposed to those examining geopolitics and energy, transportation, and other infrastructure projects. Within research on foreign Chinese-financed megaprojects, there is also a limited understanding of how Chinese actors navigate local dynamics (Liu and Lim 2019), and how they are forced to adapt their projects in ways that may depart from their original ambitions (Ballard and Harrison 2020). This mirrors a gap in scholarship on new cities more broadly, in which there are few studies that examine how master plans mutate from their original grand visions (Cugurullo 2018), or how new city plans are 'perforated' as they begin construction (Kundu 2016). The second related gap I identified addresses the lack of studies examining the on-the-ground social and environmental impacts of (Chinese-financed) new cities and urban megaprojects (Brill and Reboredo 2019). Although there is a large body of critical eco-cities literature that sheds light on the challenges and inequities associated with eco-city development (Rapoport 2014), scholars have not yet examined the awards many eco-cities receive, nor the role of the urban awards industry in legitimizing ambitious and unproven eco-city projects.

In **Chapter 3**, I provided a detailed overview of the methods used to conduct this research, in addition to reflections on my positionality, limitations, and the challenges associated with conducting remote research during a global pandemic. At the same time, this chapter also reflected on some of the emergent possibilities and creative methods for conducting remote

research during a time when many people and organizations became much more accessible online than ever before. Ultimately, while I would have still conducted fieldwork had I had the opportunity, this thesis demonstrates that there are many research questions related to new city development and discourses of green urbanism that can be fruitfully investigated through online and remote methods.

In **Chapter 4**, I explored how Forest City's rhetoric and branding have shifted over time based on a thorough examination of the developer's PR materials, supplementing this analysis with data from media coverage and interviews with Forest City staff, management, and external consultants. This research identified three broad phases of Forest City's development, which I suggest are associated with both local and global political and economic challenges that the project has faced. Specifically, I chronicled the progression of the new city's external image from a foreign Chinese enclave, to its Malaysianization, to its more recently publicized environmental initiatives and renewed green identity. After providing an overview of Forest City's development and challenges since 2014, this chapter put forward two main arguments. First, I argue that Forest City's development and adaptations over time illustrate the limits of a Chinese developer's power overseas, as CGPV has been forced to adapt the project's marketing and PR strategies in order to survive. In contrast to common narratives of an all-powerful China imposing its investment on Malaysia (M. Zhang 2020), this detailed case study of Forest City demonstrates how a foreign developer must navigate local politics, and the highly uncertain and precarious nature of the new city. Second, I suggest that speculative urbanism offers a productive framework through which to examine Chinese foreign investment in urban megaprojects – not only in terms of a project like Forest City's initial inception, but its adaptations over time, too, and how the developer has been forced to speculate for the survival of the project.

In **Chapter 5**, I expanded on Forest City's green identity and environmental claims, which were first introduced in Chapter 4 and in the introduction to this thesis. The major contribution of this chapter is that it conceptualizes the urban awards industry as a key set of actors involved in promoting and circulating normative eco-city ideals. Specifically, I explore how Forest City's green identity and environmental initiatives are targeted at and influenced by a proliferating global urban awards industry that selectively praises eco-city developers for their ambitious claims and green fantasies. This chapter contributes three key points. First, I argue that Forest City's urban awards form part of a calculated marketing strategy to position the project as

a global leader in sustainable urbanism, while precluding criticism. Second, by contrasting these awards with the environmental damage the project has caused, I show the 'ecological blind spots' of the urban awards industry, as awards-granting agencies follow a narrow definition of sustainability that neglects to examine the context in which a project is situated and its impacts on nearby people and ecosystems. Building on this point, I illustrate the challenges of awarding unfinished projects for their grand ambitions, in the face of mounting evidence that most greenfield eco-cities fail to meet their ambitious targets. Finally, I suggest that the practice of awarding unproven eco-cities and their elaborate designs cements a normative association between the green and the spectacular. This practice is highly damaging, especially given the fact that many greenfield eco-cities make claims they cannot fulfill, and are responsible for significant irreversible environmental damage and non-renewable resource consumption.

In the following section, I seek to bring the key points from these individual chapters together to reflect on their common contributions and significance to scholarship on new cities and urban megaprojects.

6.2. Speculative fictions and green fantasies: Research contributions and significance

This thesis has broadly contributed to scholarship on new master-planned cities, a growing global trend that has received increasing attention over the past two decades (Datta and Shaban 2016; Moser and Côté-Roy 2021). Forest City is a relevant case study for examining several dynamics that are more broadly associated with new city projects across Asia and beyond – namely, its status as a private Chinese-financed project, its distinct green identity and brand, and the speculation underlying its planning and construction. This research has primarily sought to fill the gaps in the literature outlined in Chapter 3, including the relatively little scholarship on the impacts and implementation processes of new cities and Chinese-financed urban megaprojects, and how the eco-claims of such projects are promoted and legitimized by a global urban awards industry. Each of my two manuscripts provide conceptual contributions to urban studies in this regard. The first manuscript (Chapter 4) builds on Goldman's (2011) concept of speculative urbanism to suggest that Forest City's shifting plans, marketing, and sales strategies can be understood as a form of 'urban speculation for survival'. The second manuscript (Chapter 5) conceptualizes the urban awards industry as a crucial yet unexamined set of actors in the global adoption of spectacular eco-city ideals, exposing this industry's 'ecological blind spots'.

Throughout each chapter, I have sought to ground and contextualize Forest City within the context it is being constructed in – an ambitious Special Economic Zone in Malaysia, a rapidly changing landscape, an influx of Chinese capital and real estate investment, the political cleavages between the federal government and the Sultan of Johor, and the ongoing ethnic tensions that have framed perceptions of Forest City as a Chinese colony in Malaysian territory (Larmer 2018), and which also affect who is included in or protected from the negative impacts of large-scale development in Malaysia (Aiken and Leigh 2011; Cai 2022). At the same time, Forest City's experience can more broadly shed light on how a new Chinese-financed project unfolds on the ground as it is shaped and negotiated by local actors and dynamics. By exploring the various iterations of Forest City's master plans and adaptions to CGPV's strategic branding since construction began in 2014, this thesis has highlighted the speculative strategies and green rhetoric that new cities in many contexts may use to justify and legitimize their existence and grand ambitions. In this research, I have examined the significant overlap and connections between eco-city development and discourses, speculative urbanism or urban speculation, and Chinese foreign investment in urban megaprojects. Here, I seek to elaborate on the connections between my two manuscripts and these three areas of study through observations and analysis of Forest City.

As discussed in Chapter 4, speculation involves expectations of increased future value or, 'the making present and materializing of uncertain futures' for profit (Bear, Birla, and Puri 2015, 387). In an urban development context, speculation has been defined as new urban infrastructure that is built for 'primarily political or economic purposes, rather than to meet real […] demographic or market demand' (Marcinkoski 2016, 10). As these definitions suggest, speculation is an inherently financial bargain. In the case of a project like Forest City, upfront investment in the construction of new homes, infrastructure, or cities is anticipated to return a much higher value than the given plot of land (or water) currently possesses. In other words, the potential for windfall profits is calculated to outweigh or offset the risks of the investment – which are not insignificant. At the same time, I have suggested in this thesis that speculation is not only a financial transaction: rather, Forest City's evolution illustrates how speculation is a constant practice carried out by the developer for survival, involving speculation on the environment, politics, and marketing strategies. However, as I sought to demonstrate in Chapter 5, many of these speculative strategies are also built on fantasies. I suggest that Forest City's

hollow promises and branding amount to what I term speculative fictions – strategies aimed at helping to ensure (financial) success for the project, involving claims that are not necessarily reflective of reality and are not guaranteed to materialize.

Before the Chinese property developer crisis unfolded in late 2021, there was a perception that the Chinese state would not let property developers and their speculative real estate developments fail – in other words, that a developer like Evergrande was 'too big to fail' (Wang 2021; Yam 2014). Many ordinary people thought they were buying dependable financial products and purchasing properties in foolproof projects: as a *New York Times* article explains, one buyer was so convinced by Evergrande's promise and flashy marketing that he became a realtor himself, selling the developer's unbuilt apartments to hundreds of other families (Stevenson and Dong 2021). Now, thousands are left hanging as construction sites sit unfinished, whether investors who bought bonds and other financial products to finance construction, or homebuyers who bought into the dream that developers like Evergrande once sold. Ultimately, the promises of new condos and homes by developers that have since gone bankrupt have turned out to be speculative investments that did not pay off – promises built through debt and sold through fantasies.

Although Country Garden appears to be more financially stable and possesses less debt than Evergrande did, it cannot guarantee that a project like Forest City will succeed, nor that it will be sustainable and liveable in the long-term. As Chapter 4 demonstrates, Country Garden's struggles began long before the pandemic, as China imposed capital controls and prime minister Mahathir Mohamad sought to clamp down on foreign Chinese investment. Since the pandemic, hundreds of newly built condo units in Iskandar Malaysia – many by Chinese developers – have sat empty, while foreign investors who speculated on the relatively low cost of housing in Johor compared to Singapore struggle to sell their units due to Johor's vast oversupply of housing (Yusof 2021). Meanwhile, the Malaysian government has identified at least nine housing projects in Johor – and 79 across Malaysia in total – that have been abandoned by developers, having failed to reach completion (Aziz 2021). In this way, speculation is not only something practiced by a developer like Country Garden, but by the people who buy into its 'real estate dreams' (Rapoport 2014). First, the developer harnesses utopian visions and fantasies to sell the project: in the case of Forest City, CGPV suggests to buyers that this is an unmatched opportunity to live in 'an exclusive and green living paradise' (CGPV n.d.). These sales help the

project materialize, in that the developer requires money upfront to help finance construction. In turn, people buy into the dream and purchase properties in a transaction that embodies speculation.

If Forest City's dream of a 'model future city' materializes, it may well be an unbelievably spectacular place to live. But as this thesis has sought to demonstrate, that dream is highly precarious, and far from existence. In April 2022, Country Garden was ordered by the Malaysian Federal Court to pay a total of RM 50,000 to buyers at its flagship Danga Bay development in Johor to compensate them for delivering late possession of their pre-purchased units over four years after the originally scheduled date (Yatim 2022a; 2022b). More recently, Country Garden's developer rating was downgraded by U.S.-based Moody's Investors Service in June 2022 due to its declining sales, taking it out of the 'investment grade' category (B 2022).

The delays and roadblocks that characterize many urban mega-developments, Chinese-financed or otherwise, do not bode well for Forest City and its ambitious plans. In Yelp reviews, some visitors claim that the water running out of the pipes is brown. Meanwhile, as Chapter 5 demonstrates, many green features have yet to materialize, and many green walls in the project's visitor gallery are made of plastic (Moser and Avery 2021). CGPV packages its green vision into a new city that is supposed to appear ground-breaking and radical, when in fact, many of its features only display the bare minimum: there are roads with no sidewalks and plans to treat sewage for only a fraction of the anticipated number of residents. At its root, Forest City's grand utopian vision for 'idyllic and vibrant city' (CGPV n.d.) is a fantasy, built on speculative and sometimes fictitious claims about the project's success, environmental initiatives, and future plans that may never come to fruition. Above all, environmental speculation has been present ever since the project began construction. CGPV did not complete an environmental impact assessment before beginning construction, representing an immense oversight regarding the viability of the project. It is still not clear whether Forest City has adequately assessed the local environmental capacity to support the construction of the project, and the introduction of potentially 700,000 new residents to a region that also happens to be prone to droughts.

Speculation, as 'the making present and materializing of uncertain futures' for profit, is then an active survival strategy, pursued through marketing and branding initiatives. As noted by an Iskandar Malaysia VP I interviewed, Forest City has shown that 'the visuality is very important to attract people'. In other words, fantasies sell. She further elaborates, 'We thought

the standard of the services, the standard of facilities were important. But actually for human beings, the attraction of the visuality is more important rather than the secondary things' (interview, June 24, 2020). Survival strategies aimed at boosting Forest City's public image through marketing and cosmetic changes are visible over the course of its development, such as its surface-level 'Malaysianization' in the face of criticism regarding its status as a Chinese enclave in Malaysia, and threats from then-prime minister Mahathir Mohamad about shutting the project down. Similarly, Forest City's elaborate green branding can also be seen as a strategy to keep the project afloat and make it more palatable to those concerned environmental damage. Yet, Forest City was never built to address local housing or infrastructure needs, but purely as an investment vehicle for the developer, the Sultan, and a wealthy, transnationally mobile class of investors. Environmental initiatives offer the developer distinct green features and efforts it can point to help justify and legitimize the project's existence in an ecologically sensitive environment. However, as Chapter 5 demonstrates, many of Forest City's green claims are not reflective of reality. Like many other greenfield eco-cities, the project's green identity is built around 'utopian visions and real estate dreams' (Rapoport 2014). The vision it currently sells – a car-free city that 'will bring the symbiotic coexistence between city and nature to a new height' (CGPV n.d.) – does not match the reality on the ground. Rather, the project amounts to an urban fantasy, one that actively worsens inequality in the region and further marginalizes many existing residents (Watson 2014).

6.3. Directions for future research

As discussed in previous chapters, limitations to this thesis are associated with the remote nature of the research. These limitations include not being able to have informal conversations with Forest City residents and employees, and being unable to complete any participant observation. In addition, this research is also limited by minimal access to the officials, executives, and employees behind Forest City, which is a common to research on projects being built by private developers or in 'closed contexts' (Koch 2013). Finally, it is worth noting that Forest City's development has unfolded in real time over the course of writing this thesis, and is far from complete. As a result, aspects of this type research in and of itself are speculative, as many new cities have yet to come to fruition, welcome residents, or build the entirety of their plans (Brill and Reboredo 2019). Below, I build on these ideas to elaborate on future directions

for research regarding the speculative and environmental claims of new cities and urban megaprojects.

Future research on Forest City could further explore the project's development trajectory through interviews with government officials and CGPV executives to gain a better sense of the specific negotiations between Malaysian and Chinese actors involved in the projects, and the rationale behind particular marketing, sales, and planning strategies pursued by CGPV management. Such research would be able to offer a better understanding of the many varied and complex interests held by different Malaysian and Chinese actors, and may also be able to draw on policy mobilities literature to explore specifically how green urbanism ideals are circulated through transnational networks and actors from China, and adapted and copied in a new city in Malaysia, a topic which Koh, Zhao, and Shin (2021b) briefly examine in a recent article on Country Garden's distinctive style of green real estate.

There is also opportunity for a more in-depth study of the social, economic, and environmental impacts of Forest City, issues that I tried to highlight in this thesis but which would require fieldwork and greater conversations with local villagers in order to do the topic justice. Use of mixed methods or collaborations with physical geographers, environmental scientists, and architects could also be fruitful in gathering further data on the environmental costs of Forest City, including exploring a methodology for calculating the total embodied energy costs of such a project. At the same time, more quantitative studies on the project's environmental impact must be careful not to position Western scientific or more technical knowledge as at odds with local 'traditional' ecological knowledge, as villagers living in the area are ultimately experts on the environmental impacts of a project like Forest City, having lived in the region for generations and witnessed the resulting changes. Finally, future comparative analysis of Forest City and other Chinese-financed urban megaprojects could shed light on the varied urban geographies of the BRI (Bunnell 2021), including how Chinese foreign investment simultaneously shapes and is shaped by the urban, social, and cultural landscapes it encounters.

6.4. Final comments

"We cannot afford if [Forest City] is going to be a ghost city. We have already paid the environmental cost and a lot of other costs as well. And if they are not going to succeed, I cannot imagine about that."

– Malaysian MP (CBC News 2019)

Throughout this research, I have struggled with reflecting on the environmental costs of a project like Forest City, versus the benefits it claims to provide and the green technologies it suggests it is pioneering. On the one hand, if new cities are going to continue being built from scratch, is it not better that they at least make efforts to be sustainable and produce benefits to the environment? As one planner I spoke with noted, much of the urban development happening in Iskandar Malaysia is much less dense and less concerned about the environment than Forest City, and is (at least on a surface-level) much more car-oriented and not planned to include transit connections (interview, Mar. 25, 2021). Iskandar Malaysia officials also mentioned that, in some ways, Forest City's high profile has elevated conversations about green development in the region. Further, the developer is providing some environmental education programs to its residents and local school children, and has employed Malaysian researchers to replant and monitor the health of the seagrass and mangroves surrounding the project.

On the other hand, CGPV is not at all transparent about the environmental performance of the project, referencing urban awards rather than publicly available data to prove that it is adhering to its 'low-carbon' or 'green' goals. There is no discussion of how the project is powered, how much energy it uses, or where it gets water and sand from. There is no attempt to integrate local plant species or create habitats that mimic the natural coastal mangrove ecosystems in the area and, correspondingly, little to no acknowledgement of the ecological interdependencies between Forest City and its surrounding environment. There is no mention of using renewable resources or recycled materials in construction, and CGPV actively flouted environmental regulations by from the very beginning neglecting to complete a detailed environmental impact assessment (DEIA) and commencing construction – without any local consultation – in a protected and sensitive marine environment. There is little mention of passive design – a widely recognized method for reducing the energy needs of a house or building through construction. As the case of Masdar shows, it is highly difficult, if not impossible, to build a net-zero carbon new city. Beyond these more quantitative data, local Malay and Orang Asli villagers along the Johor Strait and in the area surrounding Forest City and other similar real estate developments have been speaking out for years about the damaging environmental impacts of land reclamation, the loss of marine life and habitats, and, correspondingly, how it has become harder and harder for them to earn a living.

It is precisely because of Forest City's heavily publicized green identity that its environmental claims are worth interrogating. In particular, Forest City's rhetoric of sustainable development – the idea that economic growth and environmental protection are not mutually exclusive but in fact complementary – reflects the narratives of many self-proclaimed 'green' urban megaprojects or eco-cities (Rapoport 2014), focusing on how the new city enhances the natural environment while neglecting to mention all the ecosystems it has paved over for construction. As Ouis (2011, 72) elaborates,

> Critics have argued that this new environmental discourse celebrating "sustainable development", protects the sustainability of economic development, rather than protecting nature [....] For instance, the development of Saadiyat Island off Abu Dhabi coast will include a nature reserve, but also a golf course. On the homepage this combination is not problematized as potential conflicting interests: "Home to flourishing natural wetlands, lush mangroves, free-flowing waterways, and the region's first ever tidal golf course. An unforgettable place where man and environment become one."

Further, Forest City's focus on sustainability largely excludes social sustainability goals, as it is unaffordable to local residents and causes significant harms to the livelihoods of people in nearby villages. It is a project built by Chinese actors primarily for Chinese nationals and ethnic Chinese residents (Moser 2018), as demonstrated by the staging of the show flats in the Visitor Gallery, the advertising in Mandarin to Chinese nationals and ethnic Chinese diaspora, and the lack of religious infrastructure for Muslims within the project. Forest City is not currently connected to any public transportation, and walking to the nearest mosque takes 44 minutes, according to Google, which would make living in Forest City challenging for residents who cannot afford a car. The perception of nearby villagers and even Malaysian politicians is that the project is not for them, but for wealthy Chinese nationals (CBC News 2019).

Correspondingly, the project raises serious questions about social and environmental accountability on the part of Country Garden – not only to buyers and investors, and what will happen to their money if the project collapses – but to the local Malay and Orang Asli villagers who have experienced the greatest impacts from environmental destruction caused by Forest City. As Cai (2022) demonstrates, in the lawsuit filed by the Kampung Sungai Temon residents regarding Country Garden's Danga Bay development further down the shore from Forest City, the courts determined it is the fiduciary duty of the Malaysian federal and state governments to compensate the Orang Seletar for the loss of their ancestral lands; however, the ruling

determined that 'the China-backed Chinese Malaysian private landowners and property developers […] were not liable for any compensation, suggesting how workings of global capitalism afforded immunity to these footloose overseas mainland Chinese investors and their Chinese Malaysian counterparts' (Cai 2022, 10). In sum, although speculative urban projects like Forest City are brought to life by both local and transnational actors, foreign investors and developers are often removed from bearing responsibility for the on-the-ground consequences of their investments and the damage they cause (Goldman 2020). Ultimately, in the for-profit eco-city, the primary social concern of the developer is the satisfaction of the paying customer or resident (Cugurullo 2013), reinforcing a form of enclave urbanism where – even *if* Forest City's green urban fantasies are realized – only the wealthy can afford to live in and benefit from the eco-city of the future.

As Chapter 5 demonstrates, the project's success in the urban awards industry and the global circulation of normative eco-city ideals has implications for the construction of new cities more broadly, which may look to a project like Forest City for inspiration and a recipe for 'success'. As the environmental damage caused by the project, its struggles for survival, and the Chinese property developer crisis more broadly have shown, the stakes are incredibly high. Forest City has already caused significant irreversible environmental damage, the effects of which are felt most acutely by local villagers who live in the surrounding area, in contrast to the lush greenery and luxury homes that residents who can afford to live in the new city hope to enjoy. However, as a speculative and ambitious new city, the project simultaneously has a high potential for failure. As the recent property crisis has shown, large developers are not immune from bankruptcy. Further, over the past five years, several Chinese-financed megaprojects in Malaysia have collapsed or been dramatically scaled back and delayed. Beyond the direct impacts to local residents in the region that have already been felt, if the project fails, the livelihoods of staff are also at stake. In sum, the costs of failure would be enormous, in light of all the environmental damage that has already occurred, and all the resources that have been poured into the project.

Returning to the two scenes I described at the beginning of this thesis, the implications of this project are bigger than just Forest City. Forest City is one of the most ambitious eco-city and luxury urban megaprojects worldwide, but it is only one of dozens across Johor, Malaysia and beyond. As new eco-cities describe themselves as models for urbanization and seek to create

blueprints to be replicated across the Global South, the successes and failures of their plans have potential to impact 'the way new cities are envisioned and implemented' (Chang 2017; Cugurullo 2016b, 79). As some local commentators have noted, to ensure long-term sustainability beyond the pandemic, it will be essential going forward that foreign real estate developers in Johor turn their attention to the needs of existing local residents, and build housing that is affordable to the average Malaysian rather than exclusive new luxury enclaves (Rafee 2021). But more broadly, there is a need for further scholarship that unpacks and theorizes solutions to the complex and interconnected dynamics that have brough projects like Forest City to life, including housing financialization and associated foreign real estate investment, urban speculation, and the narrative that a single eco-city – built from scratch – can be the solution to urgent global environmental challenges.

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Appendix A: List of interviews

Appendix Table A. List of all interviews conducted.

	Date	Title / description of interviewee(s)	Name(s), if stated	Organization, at the time of interview	Interview conducted by
1.	2018/10/22	Director of Strategy	Ng Zhu Hann	Country Garden Pacificview	Sarah Moser
2.	2020/06/24	Vice President	Not stated	Iskandar Regional Development Authority (IRDA)	Emma Avery
3.	2020/06/30	Planners (2)	Not stated	IRDA	Emma Avery
4.	2020/07/02	Vice President	Not stated	IRDA	Emma Avery
5.	2020/07/09	Planners (2)	Not stated	IRDA	Emma Avery
6.	2020/09/21	Kampung Sungai Temon Orang Seletar residents and lawyer	Eddy; Not stated	N/A	Emma Avery
7.	2021/03/25	Planner	Not stated	Sasaki	Emma Avery

Appendix B: Certificates of Ethical Acceptability of Research Involving Humans (approval period: August 2020 – August 2021; October 2021 – October 2022)

My application to the Research Ethics Board I (REB) was significantly delayed due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and corresponding challenges associated with remote work and unprecedented requests and approval processes. My ethics application was approved in August 2020; however, due to the short timeline of the Master's degree, I began conducting research and gathering data as early as June 2020. During this time before my REB application was approved, I spoke with public-facing government officials, for which I confirmed that I did not need ethics approval from the REB, so long as I was only asking informational questions about an organization, and not asking for people for their individual perspectives. In cases in this thesis where I cited interviews from the months of June and July in 2020, these were all informational interviews with elite officials and government representatives employed by IRDA. The research activities that took place after I obtained REB certification included interviews, email, and WhatsApp communications with the Kampung Sungai Temon villagers and lawyer, and the Sasaki planner (see Appendix Table A).

Finally, interviews cited in this thesis from years prior to 2020 were conducted by Dr. Sarah Moser. These involved communications with Forest City staff and officials that were strictly aimed at gathering information from the organization rather than personal opinions, and so did not require REB approval. My REB approval certificates are included below for reference.

McGill

Research Ethics Board Office
James Administration Bldg.
845 Sherbrooke Street West. Rm 325
Montreal, QC H3A 0G4

Tel: (514) 398-6831

Website: www.mcgill.ca/research/research/compliance/human/

Research Ethics Board 1
Certificate of Ethical Acceptability of Research Involving Humans

REB File #: 20-06-060

Project Title: Chinese investment and urban mega-development in Johor, Malaysia

Principal Investigator: Emma Avery

Status: Master's student

Department: Geography

Faculty Supervisor: Prof. Sarah Moser

Funding: SSHRC Canada Graduate Scholarship - Masters, FRQSC Bourse de Maîtrise en Recherche, Rathlyn Fieldwork Award, Theo Hills Award, Trottier Science Fellowship, Graduate Excellence Award, Graduate Mobility Award, GREAT Award, Supervisor's (Sarah Moser) SSHRC Insight Grant

Approval Period: August 5, 2020 to August 4, 2021

The REB-1 reviewed and approved this project by delegated review in accordance with the requirements of the McGill University Policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Human Participants and the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans.

Deanna Collin
Senior Ethics Review Administrator

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* Approval is granted only for the research and purposes described.
* Modifications to the approved research must be reviewed and approved by the REB before they can be implemented.
* A Request for Renewal form must be submitted before the above expiry date. Research cannot be conducted without a current ethics approval. Submit 2-3 weeks ahead of the expiry date.
* When a project has been completed or terminated, a Study Closure form must be submitted.
* Unanticipated issues that may increase the risk level to participants or that may have other ethical implications must be promptly reported to the REB. Serious adverse events experienced by a participant in conjunction with the research must be reported to the REB without delay.
* The REB must be promptly notified of any new information that may affect the welfare or consent of participants.
* The REB must be notified of any suspension or cancellation imposed by a funding agency or regulatory body that is related to this study.
* The REB must be notified of any findings that may have ethical implications or may affect the decision of the REB.

McGill University
Research Ethics Board Office (REB-1, 2, 3, 4)
RENEWAL REQUEST/STUDY CLOSURE FORM

This form must be completed to request **ethics renewal approval** or to **close a study**. A current ethics approval is required for ongoing research. To avoid expired approvals and, in the case of funded projects, the suspension of funds, this form should be returned 1-2 weeks before the current approval expires. **No research activities including recruitment and data collection may take place after ethics approval has expired.**

REB File #: **20-06-060** Principal Investigator: **Emma Avery**
Project Title: **Chinese investment and urban mega-development in Johor, Malaysia**
Email: **emma.avery@mail.mcgill.ca**
Faculty Supervisor (if PI is a student): **Sarah Moser**

1. Any modifications to the study or forms must be approved by the REB **prior** to implementation. **Are there any modifications to be made that have not already been approved by the REB?** ____YES ____NO
If yes, complete an amendment form indicating these changes and attach to this form.

2. The REB must be notified of any findings that may have ethical implications or may affect the decision of the REB. The REB must be promptly notified of any new information that may affect the welfare or consent of participants.
Are there any ethical concerns that arose during the course of this research? ___ YES ___ NO
If yes, please describe.

3. Unanticipated issues that may increase the risk level to participants or that may have other ethical implications must be promptly reported to the REB. **Have any participants experienced any unanticipated issues or adverse events in connection with this research project that have not already been reported to the REB?** ___ YES ___ NO
If yes, please describe.

4. Is this a funded study? ___ NO
____YES. If yes, **indicate the agency name and project title** and the Principal Investigator of the award if not yourself. This information is necessary to ensure compliance with agency requirements and avoid interruption of funding.
Dr. Sarah Moser's SSHRC grant - Chinese urban mega-developments in Malaysia: Emerging socio-spatial inequalities and racialized patterns of growth

Principal Investigator Signature: _____ Date: Oct. 22, 2021

Faculty Supervisor Signature: _____ Date: Oct. 25, 2021
(if PI is a student)

____ Check here if the **study is to be closed** and continuing ethics approval is no longer required. A study can be closed when all data collection has been completed and there will be no further contact with participants. Studies involving secondary use of data no longer need ethics approval when all secondary data has been received.

__X__ Check here if this is a **request for renewal** of ethics approval.

For Administrative Use

Signature of REB Chair or designate: lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca Digitally signed by lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca DN: cn=lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca Date: 2021.10.25 21:11:49 -04'00' Date: _____

Approval Renewal Period: October 25, 2021 to October 24, 2022

The researcher is responsible for ensuring that all other applicable approvals/renewals from other organizations are obtained before continuing the research.

Submit by email to deanna.collin@mcgill.ca. tel: 514-398-6831/6193; www.mcgill.ca/research/research/compliance/human
(UpdatedApril-17-2019)