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Escaping the Climate Crisis: Speculative Wealth and the Selling of a Smart City

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Abstract

As climate change threatens cities worldwide, how does the act of escaping environmental disaster become entangled with opportunities to generate wealth? Recent projections indicate that Manila, the capital of the Philippines, will become uninhabitable due to rising sea levels. In response, the government has begun constructing New Clark City, a smart city promoted as a backup capital where government functions can escape to if climate disasters render Manila inoperable. However, New Clark City has sparked intense speculation and is marketed not only as a safe haven, but also as a lucrative investment. This article introduces the concept of *speculative escape* to explore the complex fusion of fleeing climate catastrophe and capitalizing on climate infrastructure. It argues that speculative escape depends on deliberate spatial and social isolation, shielding privileged groups from ecological and infrastructural breakdown. Corporate actors reinforce this narrative by promoting New Clark City as both a secure financial asset and a space of sustainability, linking survival to capital accumulation in a climate-threatened future. Through this case, the article shows how climate change is transformed into a managed and marketable vision of elite survival, revealing how

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climate escape is shaped by exclusionary practices and uneven politics of adaptation.

Keywords

Speculative escape, Climate change, Smart city, Investment, Philippines.

Selling Green Dreams

In November 2024, the sky was overcast when I found myself attending an event for my ethnographic fieldwork on climate urbanism in the Philippines. That day, the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical, and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA), the country's meteorological agency, reported that another powerful tropical storm was making its way into the Philippines from the Pacific Ocean. Amid this impending threat, I sat in a room filled with people in business attire, all eagerly listening to a talk about a smart city called New Clark City, currently under construction not far from the event's venue. The talk was delivered by a flamboyant speaker who currently heads a business consultancy specializing in the real estate industry. In an upbeat, almost theatrical presentation, the speaker spoke of the promise of living in luxury in a smart city free from storms, earthquakes, floods, and all imaginable forms of catastrophe.

After the talk, a woman with thick makeup and red-painted nails stood up from the crowd, approached the microphone, and said, "I am a real estate agent. When I sell a house, I sell emotion (*emosyon*) and dreams (*pangarap*). Am I right?" She turned to the rest of the audience, comprised entirely of around 100 real estate agents, who nodded their heads in agreement. She looked back at the speaker and continued, "How can I sell an apartment built in a smart and green city like New Clark City? This concept is new to me. How do I sell green emotions and green dreams?"

The speaker at the podium nodded, showing he understood her predicament, then offered a short but impassioned response:

> New Clark City is an upcoming urban area that is close to nature and free from disaster. It is a place of refuge from Manila, which is constantly beset by traffic and flooding due to typhoons. Sell it as a place of escape.

The event was held at a glitzy five-star hotel located in the Clark Freeport Zone – the new name for the former American military facility, Clark Air Base – which was abandoned by the U.S. in 1991 and later converted into an economic zone by the Philippine government. The

event was sponsored by Invest Philippines[1], a real estate company partnered with other private firms and the government to develop New Clark City. Invest Philippines had invited the speaker to share his insights on the prospects of selling a smart city. It was also the second iteration of a previous event organized by the same company, featuring the same speaker, aimed at encouraging real estate agents to sell land in New Clark City to potential local and foreign investors. Although all the invited guests specialized in selling apartments and condominium units, none were familiar with marketing New Clark City as a smart and sustainable urban space of the future.

Unlike other future urban spaces currently being built in the Philippines, the main motivation for constructing New Clark City seems like it could have been lifted straight from a gloomy dystopian film set in the not-so-distant future. The city is designed to be a smart, green alternative to the current capital, Manila. According to official government pronouncements, New Clark City will serve as a backup when future catastrophes render the capital uninhabitable or submerged it under the rising waters of Manila Bay due to climate change.

In many ways, the event sponsored by Invest Philippines highlights an emerging process that reflects how climate change is transforming economies and urban infrastructures. Specifically, it offers a glimpse into the massive speculation driving the construction of new urban spaces in the Philippines. On the one hand, these developments illustrate what geographer Michael Goldman (2011) calls "speculative urbanism," where infrastructural projects are mobilized to entice investment and accumulate profit by speculating on future property values.

On the other hand, it also reveals another layer of speculative urbanism that Goldman's concept understandably fails to fully capture. That is, the growing threats of climate change have given rise to a new form of *speculative climate urbanism* – an urban development model that responds to anxieties driven by climate fear by mobilizing infrastructure, such as smart cities, not only to generate profit (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2020), but also, to quote the speaker at the Invest Philippines event, as a "place of escape" from the consequences of a warming planet.

If speculative urbanism is driven by the anticipation of profit through investment in infrastructure, climate change has introduced an additional layer, wherein people seek out these developments as both places of refuge and sources of capital. In this way, the smart city, as an infrastructure built for climate mitigation, becomes a space of both

[1] Except for known places, most names of people and companies in this article have been changed to protect the anonymity of research interlocutors.

sanctuary and speculation: a climate-resilient safe box, in both literal and monetary terms.

I call this specific entanglement of seeking refuge while accumulating wealth *speculative escape* to describe the emergent processes through which infrastructures aimed at creating a more viable urban future become both objects of monetary accumulation and exilic strategies for building a future safe from climate disaster and catastrophe. Specifically, speculative escape refers not only to the act of seeking refuge, but also to the technologies, forms of climate life, and intimacies that develop in the smart city as a place of escape.

At the same time, speculative escape describes these infrastructures as exclusive spaces, since the pursuit of profit and comfort in a smart city is accessible only to certain sectors of society, especially to those with sufficient financial means to save themselves from impending climate doom. In short, speculative escape captures how the creation of a safer urban future enables acts of flight and capital accumulation, while also reinforcing exclusion and privilege.

In what follows, I describe how speculative escape underpins the construction of the future urban space, New Clark City. I ask: How is escaping entangled with wealth creation and climate mitigation? What technologies of escape, forms of exilic life, and climate intimacies does speculative escape produce? And how does the emphasis on escaping to a smart city become violent and exclusionary? More specifically, to what extent does escaping engender dispossession and create exclusive climate privilege?

Tracing Escape

This article draws on fieldwork conducted at two different periods in New Clark City. My first period of fieldwork took place during an exploratory visit in February 2019, where I spoke with government officers and construction personnel involved in the city's early development. These conversations provided preliminary insight into how the project's vision of safety and climate resilience was already being communicated. A second and more extensive fieldwork period, conducted from October to November 2024, allowed me to observe how promotional strategies had evolved after years of development and in the context of heightened climate anxieties. During this visit, I conducted interviews, visited various parts of the city, and engaged in participant observation at events organized by Invest Philippines. Across both periods of fieldwork, my data collection was oriented towards documenting how urban planners and corporate developers portrayed New Clark City as a space of refuge from climate risk.

These investor events, public activities, and promotional gatherings in New Clark City and nearby municipalities were key sites for documenting how climate change was framed as both a threat and an investment opportunity by corporate actors. Through observing sales pitches and investor recruitment activities, I witnessed how safety, escape, and profit were woven together. In particular, I traced the narratives, visual materials, and framings through which these actors portrayed escape to New Clark City as both a necessary climate practice and a desirable investment strategy. I also collected documentary materials through the government's transparency portal (https://www.foi.gov.ph/), and the unrestricted access to the site enabled me to observe how New Clark City presents itself as an open, desirable, and secure public space. Together, these materials allowed me to trace how escape was cultivated by corporate actors and also show the broader logics through which New Clark City is made to appear as a viable place of refuge in an era of escalating climate uncertainty.

A Sinking Capital

In September 2011, a newspaper article in the Philippines reported a shocking research finding about its capital, Manila (Lagmay 2011). The article described the results of a study conducted by the National Mapping and Resource Information Authority (NAMRIA), a government agency responsible for providing the Philippine government with crucial information about the country's geographic situation. The report revealed that many areas in the capital had sunk by 0.68 to 1.34 meters over a 30-year span, from 1979 to 2009. If the sinking continues, the study predicted that Manila could ultimately collapse and be swallowed by the rising waters of Manila Bay, disappearing beneath the waves like a city consumed by the sea.

This report went on to describe how the slow but continuous sinking of the country's center of trade and power is an example of land subsidence, a geophysical process in which the Earth's surface progressively lowers due to natural or human-related factors, such as climate change. Despite its shocking revelations, the report was not new. In an earlier study, scholars Kelvin Rodolfo and Fernando Siringan (2006) noted that Manila's land subsidence continues because much of its population extracts groundwater for daily consumption. While around twenty typhoons regularly pass over the Philippines, these typhoons can no longer replenish Manila's aquifers because the city is almost entirely covered in concrete, making it impossible for rainwater to seep back into the ground.

As a result, the densely populated capital is sinking, exacerbating an already precarious situation caused by rising sea levels due to melting ice sheets and glaciers from global warming. The interaction of these

different sources of potential disaster creates a polycrisis that collectively poses an existential threat to Manila's continuity as a key administrative center for the Philippines, especially given recent scientific reports estimating that Manila will be underwater by 2100 (Gozum 2024; Romero 2022).

However, the dystopic situation of the Philippines' sinking capital is not unique, as the phenomenon of land subsidence and stronger typhoons also affect other major cities. Like Manila, cities such as Tokyo, Bangkok, Dhaka, and Lagos are all experiencing land subsidence due to massive groundwater extraction (Romero 2022). These cities are also projected to face collapse by the end of the 21st century.

What sets the Philippine government's approach apart is an almost extreme form of adaptation to the effects of climate change. This approach involves the eventual abandonment of the capital and escaping to another future urban space, distant from or shielded against catastrophic events. In response to the anticipated decline of Manila, the government has opted to relocate the seat of power by developing a new urban center marketed as a "climate-resilient, disaster-ready smart city" (Juanico 2023), designed to withstand natural hazards such as earthquakes, typhoons, and severe flooding. This initiative materialized in April 2016, when then-President Benigno Aquino III launched the construction of New Clark City. Backed by legislation passed by the Philippine Congress, the project operates through a public-private partnership framework, in which private sectors such as Invest Philippines participate in the construction and are promised a share of future revenues generated by the development.

The Philippine government has designated a site approximately 100 kilometers north of Manila, situated on flat land that spans the provinces of Tarlac and Pampanga, for the development of New Clark City. This area comprises roughly 10,000 hectares of forested and agricultural land and is strategically shielded on its eastern side by the Sierra Madre mountain range from typhoons emanating from the Pacific Ocean.

Overall, the city's vision reflects techno-futurism and transhumanist ideas, which hold that rapid technological innovation and scientific expertise create "ruptures" (Kurzweil 2005) essential for long-term human survival. According to its urban blueprint, New Clark City is designed as a sustainable and adaptive environment, employing advanced digital systems to detect and manage ecologically vulnerable areas. These technologies aim to enhance the city's resilience to environmental disruptions while allowing everyday life to continue with minimal disaster-related interruptions.

Escape as Climate Response

The ongoing climate crisis has given rise to what anthropologist Adriana Petryna (2024) describes as a "runaway nature." This is a condition in which climate catastrophes and disasters leave widespread destruction and generate "ecologies of capture" (Cons 2021). Within these ecologies, emerging forms of entrapment systematically disposes people of their lives and livelihoods (Cáceres 2015), encompassing not only the immediate losses caused by disasters but also the structural mechanisms that increase vulnerability and leave affected populations exposed to repeated cycles of climate risk. Different societies across the world have developed various ways of coping with this runaway world, including strengthening human resilience to withstand disasters (UNDP 2020; Middleton 2017), enhancing individual and communal adaptation (Nakashima et al. 2012; Sen 2023), and formulating anticipatory strategies to address erratic weather patterns (Paprocki 2019). All these coping strategies are well documented in the existing literature, including critical appraisals about their salience and shortcomings in dealing with climate change (Reid 2018).

However, the climate crisis has also created a situation in which one possibility to deal with a world beset by catastrophes is to leave and escape from destruction and save one's life through abandonment. Existing works that have analyzed escape as a way to deal with climate change have rightly established the link between acts of fleeing and the absence of viable alternatives (Baldwin 2017; Bettini 2013). Communities on the front lines of rising sea levels, as well as those increasingly exposed to extreme and erratic weather patterns, are often left without viable alternatives. Part of the reason why communities have no alternatives is that long-standing practices that once enabled them to anticipate and prepare for catastrophic events have become ineffective, undermined by the growing unpredictability and scale of contemporary climate-related disasters. This disparity has created a vacuum in anticipatory capacity, rendering these communities increasingly vulnerable and leaving them with no recourse but to escape or flee in search of safer conditions.

Time and again, we have seen cases where drought, floods, and disappearing coastlines have created populations on the move. These displaced and fleeing communities are what scholars and the international community have recently documented and begun to call "climate refugees" (McNamara et al. 2012; Mayer 2016). These documented cases of climate refugees show how acts of escape are driven by the absence of alternatives and the inability to stay put and continue living in one's home due to climate danger. Escaping, in this sense, is indelibly linked to how societies have thus far responded to climate catastrophes. It is one coping strategy for climate uncertainty, often employed when other known mechanisms, such as adaptation and

resilience, are no longer effective in mitigating climate damage, leaving communities with no alternative but to flee and escape from destruction.

Yet, in recent decades, a new form of escape has grown in prominence in various parts of the world, namely the act of escaping to purpose-built, high-tech urban enclaves designed to offer refuge from catastrophe. As climate change worsens, several countries are building smart cities designed to offer a literal escape from environmental disaster and urban collapse. Saudi Arabia's NEOM, Indonesia's Nusantara, and the Philippines' New Clark City are among the most ambitious examples. Egypt is also building a new capital in the desert, intended as an escape from Cairo's overcrowding and the unpredictable challenges along the Nile. These cities promise more than innovation. They offer controlled, secure environments as traditional urban centers face rising seas, extreme weather, and growing populations. Collectively, these smart city projects reflect an emerging trend to escape the vulnerabilities of existing urban centers by creating secure spaces of refuge.

However, despite their increasing visibility as a way to deal with climate change, smart cities have not received much scholarly attention as a place of speculative escape, except in discussions that frame them as part of a vision to resist a crumbling dystopia or realize a utopian future (Ong 2011; Greenfield 2013). Indeed, the closest reflections on escaping to such spaces come from scholars working primarily in speculative fiction, where utopian visions of safe, secluded, technologically governed cities provide ways to imagine alternative futures and make sense of a world nearing extinction (Canavan and Robinson 2014; Jameson 2005). One example of this speculative work is that of Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140*, which imagines a partially submerged New York as a site of both resilience and inequality.

Although studies on speculative fiction have provided valuable insights into escaping as part of the growing toolkit people use to cope with climate change (Trexler 2015), the acts of escaping underlying the construction of smart cities point to a more complex and urgent configuration. This emerging phenomenon demands a new understanding of the relationship between speculation and acts of escape in the context of contemporary climate realities. In speculative fiction, escaping is primarily an imaginative exercise, an act of envisioning alternative futures that challenge present constraints and inspire hope or caution about what might come. These narratives allow societies to mentally explore possible scenarios and consider responses to environmental and social upheaval.

In contrast, escaping to smart cities is a tangible and material act. It represents not only a search for refuge from the escalating threats of climate disaster but also functions as a vehicle for capital accumulation. This dual function highlights a crucial distinction: while speculative

fiction engages the imagination and envisions futures that may or may not come to pass, speculative escape to smart cities is grounded in present economic and infrastructural realities. In this sense, speculative escape reveals how climate change not only generates new urban imaginaries but also restructures the economy of refuge. It embodies both the desire to survive and the imperative to invest.

Performing Speculative Escape

Speculation is inherently fragile, filled with tensions and contradictions. It rests on uncertainty, on betting on a potential return or even a loss of investment, and taking on possible risks in the future. Sociologist Aris Komporozos-Athanasiou (2022) perfectly captures this fragility as he showed in his work how speculation entails engaging in unpredictable investment activities for the sole "purpose of profit" (2022: ix). By the same token, climate change also operates on a similar level of unpredictability. There is a constant fear that a storm will wreak havoc or that rising sea levels will inundate entire communities. In this sense, speculation and climate change are two contemporary processes defined by uncertainty.

However, when people escape to smart cities and also treat their newfound place as a source of profit, they must rely on additional processes to manage such uncertainty. For instance, as investors speculate in the stock market or in real estate, they often depend on expert advice or data drawn from the historical performance of specific assets. These strategies, such as technical and fundamental analysis, assume a degree of predictability based on past trends.

While these approaches can be effective in conventional financial markets, they may be less reliable in the context of climate uncertainty, particularly when smart cities are promoted as safe havens from environmental catastrophe. This is because the consequences of climate change do not necessarily mimic the cyclical logic of boom-and-bust patterns in financial markets, where prediction models are tailored to identify recurring market behaviors. For example, researchers on climate risk demonstrate that climate impacts frequently produce non-linear "interdependent" (Helbing 2013) and "cascading" (Pescaroli and Alexander 2016) events that are often difficult to forecast or mitigate with standard risk tools (Beck 2009).

In this sense, speculative escape to smart cities entails not only the physical act of seeking refuge but also novel ways of engaging in a new mode of risk management. These new ways overlay the financial logic of speculation with the unpredictable temporalities of ecological collapse and provide, even at a minimal level, some degree of control and certainty to ensure profit while remaining safe from climate catastrophe.

In his work on urban spaces, sociologist AbdouMaliq Simone (2016b) notes that urbanism always operates on an imaginary of completion or finality, aiming to settle difficult conundrums. For example, urban infrastructural projects around the world typically present themselves as solutions to problems like overpopulation and "surviving the uninhabitable" (Simone 2016b: 138). In this way, urban projects involve finding the proper placement of people, deploying technologies, identifying zones of life, and introducing bureaucratic entities whose regulatory function is to ensure that urban space consistently delivers on its promise of completion, of providing solutions to life's problems.

Simone also describes how even turbulences such as climate change and financial crisis can be "repurposed as a medium of speculative exchange" (Simone 2023: 332). This repurposing of crisis for speculation exemplifies completion in the sense of converting precarious conditions for realizing existential or economic fulfillment. In this context, completion denotes the enjoyment of life as the capacity to accumulate wealth to its utmost potential, even under the looming prospect of incompletion; that is, a future in which life becomes unsustainable due to climate-induced catastrophes. By promising completion, urban spaces function as mechanisms for maximizing the value of wealth even in increasingly uncertain conditions, positioning themselves as sites of accumulation and refuge. The ability to engage in speculation amid turbulences is, thus, inscribed into the very fabric of urban life.

But what are these mechanisms of speculative escape that ensure financial and physical completion in a horizon defined by ecological collapse? How are they mobilized and how do they constitute life in a smart city, such as that of New Clark City in the Philippines? In what follows, I describe how speculative escape entails engaging in three overlapping mechanisms of completion. First, escape is underpinned by an infrastructure akin to a climate bunker, which facilitates possibilities of flight and rescue operation when disaster strikes. Second, escape relies on knowledge that ensures both isolation and connectivity to the outside world in moments of imminent crisis. And third, escaping to a smart city produces *green homo speculans*, a form of life and intimacy that guides the community of escapees while fulfilling projects for a sustainable future. Together, these three processes of speculative escape define escaping as a mode of completion with climate change, while also operating as control mechanisms for managing risk and protecting one's investment from potential losses. In the following discussions, I discuss each medium of completion underpinning speculative escape using the case of New Clark City in the Philippines.

Infrastructures of Escape

At present, the infrastructural landscape of New Clark City is marked by an imposing multi-story building that will house a planned Integrated Operations Center (IOC), an emergency office where vital national offices, such as the Office of the President, could temporarily seek shelter. This building and the entire city are designed to serve as the country's National Government Administrative Center (NGAC) during disasters, from which instructions from the Philippine President will emanate. Situated at the entrance to New Clark City, it is the first building one encounters before reaching other infrastructures, which include, among others, an apartment complex, a hospital, and a government building occupied as a minting facility of the country's central bank.

What makes this building contribute to the creation of New Clark City as a space of speculative escape is evident in the printed posters of the building displayed throughout key areas of the city (see Image 1). These posters are also reproduced in smaller printed advertising materials, such as pamphlet-sized handouts, and distributed to visitors to encourage them to buy an apartment or rent a space to start a business in this new urban environment. The posters' most striking statement is the phrase "Built to Last," printed over a photo of the IOC building. In addition to this slogan, the building is described as the "country's back-up center"

Image 1: A poster at New Clark City showing the different infrastructures and their roles in disaster relief operations (Source: Author's Photo).

that "secures the nation's safety and helps ensure the country's disaster preparedness and resiliency." The posters further highlight the building's design, which enables it to withstand severe natural catastrophes, as well as its strategic location, which is far from "tsunami, floods, earthquakes, and strong storms."

A common thread running through the building's description is the strong imagery of infrastructure designed to function like a bunker, serving as a place of refuge during times of catastrophe and disaster. This imagery of a climate bunker as a space of refuge is reinforced by a similar narrative presented in the posters about another facility located near the IOC building. This facility is an open-air sports stadium currently used for concerts, football competitions, and other sporting events. While the IOC building is intended to serve as a temporary seat of power for key government offices during disasters, the stadium, with its seating and shaded areas, is designated as an evacuation center and a storage site for relief goods during emergencies. In addition, the stadium's football pitch is described as a launching pad for, to quote, "helicopters during rescue and relief operations."

Together, both the IOC building and the stadium serve as critical infrastructures designed to ensure the continuity of government operations during disasters while functioning as climate bunkers. The government's ability to maintain stability in times of catastrophe depends on its capacity to relocate key functions to safer locations and to extend aid to affected populations through rescue and relief operations. In this context, escape does not mean abandonment but rather strategic relocation that enables the provision of assistance to those impacted by disasters. In this way, these two facilities, and the entirety of New Clark City, are conceived as vast climate bunkers, offering refuge from environmental threats while remaining accessible hubs for coordinating emergency responses and distributing relief goods. This dual role underscores their importance not only as shelters but also as pivotal points for disaster preparedness and management in a country increasingly vulnerable to climate risks.

Perceiving New Clark City as a bunker mirrors parallel examples of infrastructures built to provide a place of refuge when disasters strike humanity (Duffield 2011; Pais, Hoffmann, and Campos 2021). Bunkers created at key moments in human history had the sole purpose of providing a place of respite from war, both to ordinary citizens who turned their basements into bunker cells and to states constructing government buildings that could also aid escape when invading forces make their way into their territories. This way, bunkers made during the tumultuous periods of WWI and WWII had this purpose of shielding people from the ravages of war.

However, with climate change taking the place of war as sources of existential anxiety, bunkers re-emerged as a way to deal with impending environmental catastrophes. And although the typical image of bunkers as a place situated underground filled with provisions that could support individuals for longer period may not be exactly replicable in the case of New Clark City, the overall idea behind this infrastructure as a place of refuge or as tools aiding escape remains palpable when both IOC and the stadium were purposely designed with an anticipation of escape from climate disasters.

The Appeal of Isolation

At New Clark City, escaping climate threats through the construction of bunker-like infrastructure is further reinforced by another critical element: isolation. Isolation operates as both a physical and symbolic strategy. Seeking refuge in New Clark City offers the promise of separation from the urban decay, infrastructural instability, and environmental risks that increasingly characterize the capital, Manila. By distancing itself from the traffic congestion, pollution, informal settlements, and vulnerability to natural disasters that define Manila, New Clark City presents itself as a cleaner, safer, and more orderly alternative. This physical separation is imagined by state and corporate actors as a break from the chaos and precarity of the old urban order. In this framing, isolation becomes a desirable condition, reinforcing the city's image as a secure and forward-looking space insulated from collapse.

Such emphasis on isolation from urban decay is evident in the Invest Philippines event, which I described at the beginning of this article. Through a public-private partnership, Invest Philippines is tasked with building green industrial facilities envisioned to host an electric battery manufacturing industry, alongside vertical green residential buildings marketed to prospective buyers interested in relocating to New Clark City. To attract these buyers, Invest Philippines organizes events like the one I attended in November 2024. Most attendees were real estate agents who had been promised hefty commissions if they could secure "locators" for New Clark City. In the Philippines, "locator" is an investment term used to describe local or foreign business investors who establish manufacturing centers, assembly lines, logistics hubs, and similar operations within the country's economic zones.

One theme that was repeatedly emphasized during the event was how New Clark City is designed to ensure the continuity of business and normal life by remaining isolated from urban decay. For instance, in the closing remarks delivered by an officer of Invest Philippines, New Clark City was described as a future urban space that will be shielded from the same problems that afflict Manila, such as severe traffic congestion and unsafe surroundings.

> The selling point of New Clark City is that it's a bubble. There is no traffic, a lot of open air, green spaces, and people who follow rules. There are traffic rules here […] It is really this feature of open greener spaces, the livability, and security […] Whether you are looking for a residential unit or look for industrial space, it is actually the same themes that you can promote to your potential investors.

Here, New Clark City's isolation is presented as both an alternative to and a refuge from the typical problems associated with urban centers. As part of its broader marketing strategy, Invest Philippines constructs a stark binary: Manila is portrayed as the epitome of urban failure, a space marked by decay, disaster, and disease, while New Clark City represents the opposite. For Invest Philippines, Manila becomes a space of potential death, whereas New Clark City is envisioned as a space of life that is prosperous, disaster-resilient, and guided by smart technologies.

This emphasis on isolation, or life within a protective bubble, reinforces the image of New Clark City as a climate bunker and a safe haven. Yet, this sense of refuge extends beyond the promotional language used at marketing events. Another dimension of isolation is achieved through the city's physical geography. The site of New Clark City was deliberately chosen by the government for its natural protection from environmental catastrophes. In this context, geography is mobilized not only to make escape possible, but also to enable the formation of a community that is scientifically shielded from climate risks.

Strategically located on elevated land, far from active fault lines and major bodies of water that could produce tsunamis, New Clark City is geographically insulated from many natural hazards. In addition, the Sierra Madre mountain range to the east acts as a natural buffer against the powerful typhoons that frequently strike the Philippines. In this way, New Clark City's conceptual and physical isolation forms the foundation of its promise as a climate-resilient urban refuge.

To establish the "truthfulness" (Foucault 1978) of New Clark City as an isolated space far from disaster, Invest Philippines relied heavily on scientific knowledge in its portrayal of the city. For example, one image that was repeatedly shown during the event to real estate agents featured a map marking New Clark City's location as strategically distant from earthquake faults and safely elevated above sea level (see Image 2). This map functioned to mobilize cartographic knowledge in presenting New Clark City as a place of escape and a refuge for business, perceived as protected from imminent climate threats.

In this context, geographical features and cartographic representations were not only used to emphasize the city's physical separation from disaster-prone areas. They also helped frame isolation as a desirable spatial condition. This idea of isolation was then turned into a

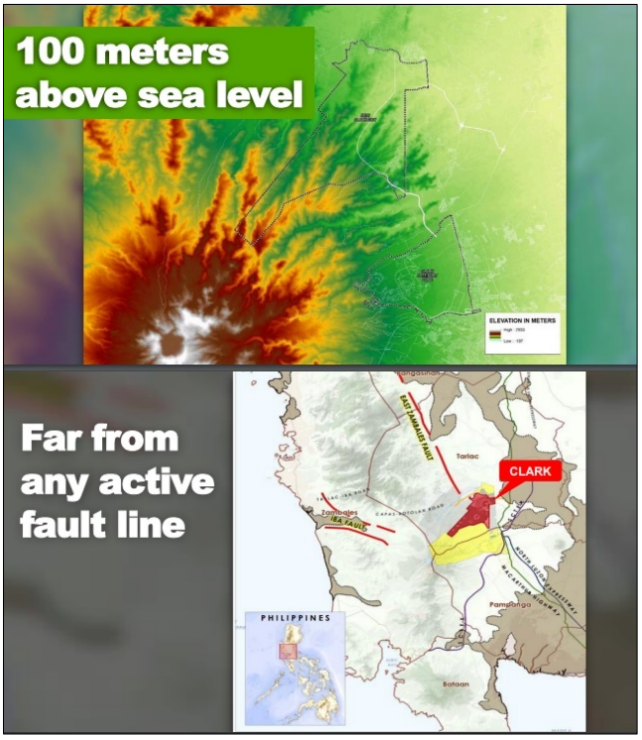

Image 2: Maps showing the proximity of New Clark City to danger zones (Source: Bases Conversion and Development Authority (BCDA) Corporate Center, 2022).

large-scale infrastructural project, offering people the possibility of refuge from climate catastrophe through the promise of safety and stability.

Intimate Community of Leisure

So far, we have discussed the modalities through which speculative escape unfolds as an infrastructure of refuge and a geographical space of isolation. However, we have yet to establish exactly how escape, as an infrastructure existing in an isolated space, engenders a specific form of life that can thrive during disaster and still enjoy a form of existence that is both safe and wealthy.

In addition to the posters that advertised the facilities at New Clark City as infrastructure enabling escape from disasters, another piece of printed material provides a clue as to how Invest Philippines presents New Clark City as a place suitable for business and a way of living that can withstand climate catastrophes (see Image 3). The poster's most prominent feature is the phrase "sustainable living for sale," printed over a photo of one of the apartment complexes within New Clark City.

On the surface, the poster offers no clear indication of what sustainable living at New Clark City entails. However, we gain insight into this envisioned life of sustainability by examining the overall layout developed by Invest Philippines. A key feature of New Clark City is the organization of space into clusters called "super blocks." Each super block

Image 3: A poster at New Clark City showing an apartment in the city promoting sustainable living (Source: Author's Photo).

is designed according to a specific function within the city. Some are devoted entirely to economic production, others to residential housing, and others still to leisure activities. These super blocks are clearly delineated and physically separated from one another.

For example, located north of the IOC building is the Invest Philippines Innovation Park, which consists of super blocks reserved for the production of electric vehicle (EV) batteries, data centers, and other products associated with the green industry. At present, an Australian company has already begun manufacturing EV batteries within this super block.

Not far from the blocks devoted to production are clusters of residential apartments. Nearby, there are also spaces and infrastructure designed for leisure. These include a river park, a stadium that doubles as a relief operations center during disasters, and areas for marathons, jogging, concerts, and even a golf course. Overall, the partitioning of the city into blocks creates both separation and integration. And herein lies the modus operandi that informs how sustainable living is presented as an environmental form of an insulated biopolitical existence at New Clark City. How is this achieved?

Invest Philippines has coined a portmanteau, ECOTECHTURE, to describe the guiding principle of their planning. The term combines three words: Ecology, Technology, and Architecture. ECOTECHTURE represents the imagined lifestyle in New Clark City, where human life is embedded in

a distinct relationship with nature, supported by smart technology and green infrastructure. According to the company, New Clark City is envisioned as an eco-efficient capital where residents are less dependent on cars and can instead enjoy walking, biking, and engaging in leisure activities.

Through the development of super blocks that place daily activities within walking or biking distance, and situate residential and leisure zones adjacent to, but separate from, areas of work in the Invest Philippines Innovation Park, the city takes shape as a place of refuge. This refuge is defined by the separation of workspaces from leisure areas. A sustainable life in New Clark City, then, is one where work and leisure coexist, made possible by the city's green infrastructure.

This is the vision of sustainable living being marketed in New Clark City. To live sustainably here is to maintain a stable continuity of life and accumulate capital, all while remaining isolated from the dangers of climate change. Indeed, during the same event of Invest Philippines I attended in November 2024, a senior officer responsible for the company's logistics division described New Clark City as a seamlessly integrated place capable of continuing to thrive even in times of crisis.

> Its robust infrastructure and connectivity make it a strategic base for economic activity and growth. As an eco-efficient capital, New Clark City is less dependent on cars and more dependent on walking, biking, or running, if you like. Enabled by developments clustered around super-blocks that locate all places of daily activity within convenient walking and biking distance […] This future city also has the National Government Administrative Center. This meant [sic] continuous business in case of disaster in the metro, and it hosts the biggest sports facility in the country.

For this officer, life at New Clark City is envisioned as a space where one can still flourish and enjoy with leisure even while the rest of the country faces disruption from disaster. In this sense, New Clark City resembles what sociologist AbdouMaliq Simone describes as a "cauldron of passions" (2016a: 5), as it enables the cultivation of an insulated existence optimized for life's enjoyment despite the surrounding climate crisis. It promises continuous vitality amid a sea of destruction.

In the third volume of *Das Capital*, Karl Marx (2001) argues that capitalism does not allow for leisure, as it undermines the productive potential of labor. However, as we have described, the possibility of a leisurely and sustainable life during times of disaster and catastrophe remains open. The development of smart cities like New Clark City is based on the premise that, even when one is secluded within its confines to escape climate threats, life can still continue. This is because the city is designed as an insulated space where work and leisure are integrated and shielded from external disruptions. In other words, sustainability as it is

imagined and enacted as a guiding principle in the construction of New Clark City, provides a means to negotiate the precarity of climate change and the continuous propagation of capital without compromising leisure.

Green *Homo Speculans*

In his book on speculation, sociologist Aris Komporozos-Athanasiou (2022) describes the rise of a new kind of subject he calls *homo speculans*, as a successor to the highly rational *homo economicus*. According to Komporozos-Athanasiou, this new subject has its roots in the 19th-century derivatives markets but reemerged after the 2008 global financial crisis. What distinguishes homo speculans from previous forms of subjectivity is how its desires and struggles are shaped by a capacity to imagine new collective futures, even under conditions of extreme uncertainty. This imaginative capacity finds its most acute expression in speculative investment, which involves accumulating profit through an "ongoing anticipation of other traders' expectations and forecasts of the future" (Komporozos-Athanasiou 2022: x).

To some extent, the concept of homo speculans captures the form of life underpinning the infrastructures of escape and spatial isolation that inform the wave of speculation at New Clark City in the Philippines. The capacity to anticipate amid an unstable future drives and shapes the actions of real estate agents as they market New Clark City as a smart city designed to meet pressing needs, fulfill desires, and provide infrastructures that mitigate the effects of climate change.

However, homo speculans does not fully account for the kind of life envisioned or emerging in cities such as New Clark City. The reason for this limitation is partly evident. The concept of homo speculans offers a diagnosis of the subjectivity that arose in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Although financial and climate crises share certain features because both produce systemic ruptures, the appeal of escaping or seeking refuge from climate disaster introduces a new dimension to the speculative subject. While escape during a financial crisis might involve capital flight, such as liquidating investments and securing profits as cash, the kind of escape promoted at New Clark City involves the literal relocation of people to safer spaces in order to avoid catastrophe. In this sense, we may speak of a green homo speculans as an emergent subjectivity attuned to climate change, reliant on infrastructures and spatial strategies designed to shield and future-proof one's speculative investments from environmental disaster.

Speculative Escape to Exclusion

Unfortunately, the emergence of a green homo speculans as the embodiment of a climate subject capable of escaping disaster while still

accumulating wealth in a smart city is accompanied by a parallel process of exclusion. Scholars have long suggested that despite their promises of safety, innovation, and sustainability, smart cities also reproduce deep-seated forms of exclusion and inequality (Datta 2015; Sadowski 2020). For geographer Ayona Datta (2015), such exclusion is attributed to the way smart cities offer narrow technological fixes, as they only prioritize technological and data-driven intervention in climate disasters. By placing all hope in technology, the more difficult questions of extraction, exclusion, and climate injustice are pushed into the background and left unaddressed.

However, there is another reason why smart cities tend to reproduce exclusions. They are spaces where wealth creation is offered as part of the solution to climate change (De Jong et al. 2015; Shelton et al. 2015). This results in a kind of techno-speculative fix, where technology and wealth accumulation are not seen as causes of planetary collapse, but rather are offered as solutions to it. Or more precisely, economic growth, real estate investment, and technological innovation are framed as pathways to climate resilience. Ultimately, what smart cities engender is a particular exclusivist vision of the future suited to green homo speculans who are economically productive and able to escape from climate risks, leaving behind those who lack technological and economic means to escape, permanently stuck in communities prone to climate risk. In other words, smart cities produce climate privilege, wherein protection and the ability to escape climate risks are commodified and unevenly distributed.

At New Clark City, the production of speculative escape as a form of privilege assumed a stark and violent manifestation. This process came at the expense of the Aeta people, whose ancestral lands were appropriated as the site for the city's development. Prior to the construction of New Clark City in 2016, the area was home to an estimated 12 to 16 dispersed Aeta settlements, comprising a total population of approximately 18,000 individuals. Paradoxically, while New Clark City was envisioned as a place of refuge, its establishment compelled this indigenous community to vacate their ancestral territories and retreat into more remote areas.

In this context, the development of New Clark City constitutes a case of land dispossession. The paradox lies in the fact that an infrastructure intended to provide sanctuary from climate-induced disasters simultaneously precipitated the displacement of an indigenous population. A city constructed as a haven for those seeking to escape the effects of environmental catastrophe has, in turn, marginalized and excluded those lacking the technological and economic means to benefit from such infrastructures. Consequently, speculative escape is rendered viable only through the production of exclusivity by transforming New Clark City into a site where affluent Filipino citizens can exercise climate privilege at the direct expense of indigenous communities.

A central mechanism facilitating this displacement is rooted in colonial legacies. Although the area on which New Clark City now stands is part of the ancestral domain of the Aeta people, the land remains unrecognized by the Philippine state. This legal erasure originates in the American colonial period, during which the territory was declared government property. Upon the Philippines' independence from the United States in 1946, ownership of this land was transferred to the newly established Philippine government. For decades, the state assigned little value to this indigenous territory. However, this changed when the government identified the area as a strategic site for the construction of New Clark City as an alternative capital and a space of refuge should Manila succumb to the impacts of climate change.

Furthermore, the creation of privilege did not unfold solely through the violent appropriation of Aeta communities. The aesthetic and spatial design of New Clark City also reinforces this exclusion. The promotional posters (see Image 1 and Image 2) promising isolation from disaster and urban decay, as well as sustainable living based on the separation of leisure and work, are all emblazoned with sleek, clean architecture that projects an image of environmental harmony and control. Yet, these visions obscure the real processes of dispossession and exploitation of the Aeta indigenous communities that underpin New Clark City's construction. New Clark City thus becomes not only a place of escape and refuge but also a site where wealth accumulation and the production of inequality are intensified under the guise of climate resilience and innovation. Speculative escape, in this sense, is an act of accumulation through green dispossession.

Conclusion

In sum, speculative escape to smart cities reveals a convergence of financial speculation, technological utopianism, and climate anxiety. These spaces, marketed as solutions to an increasingly uninhabitable planet, represent more than just physical refuges; they are deeply normative projects. Framed by the logics of capital accumulation and risk management, smart cities embody what sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992) termed the "risk society," where governance is preoccupied with future threats and control is exerted through predictive technologies and infrastructural fortification. Yet, as argued in this article, the future created in these cities is not universally accessible. Rather, it is a future built for those with the means to participate in its speculative promise, particularly those who can afford to transform displacement into investment and uncertainty into opportunity.

By drawing on speculative escape as both a descriptive and conceptual tool to understand the construction of New Clark City, it becomes clear that smart cities function as both a place of refuge and a

financial frontier, or as sites where the climate crisis is not solved but monetized. Like New Clark City, smart cities reinforce a geography of climate privilege, where some escape into sanitized, high-tech enclaves while others are left to confront the raw effects of planetary instability.

Ultimately, the figure of the climate escapees and the investor green homo speculans in the smart city are not opposites but are co-produced by the same processes of dispossession and speculation. Smart cities, in this light, do not resolve the climate crisis. They displace it, repackage it, and sell it back as a desirable future to those with economic resources as a place of refuge and privilege while the majority of the world's population are left to confront planetary collapse.

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