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To cite this article: Lawrence J. Vale (2022) Gordon Cherry memorial lecture 2022: the design-politics of planning equitably resilient capital cities, Planning Perspectives, 37:6, 1269-1284, DOI: [10.1080/02665433.2022.2132347](https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2022.2132347)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2022.2132347>



Published online: 17 Oct 2022.



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Gordon Cherry memorial lecture 2022: the design-politics of planning equitably resilient capital cities

Lawrence J. Vale

School of Architecture and Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, USA

Forty years ago, Gordon Cherry published a commendably slim volume entitled *The Politics of Town Planning*. My own title shares many of the same words but clearly lacks his parsimony. In 1982, Professor Cherry noted: ‘Town planning in the past has imposed an unreal simplicity on cities.’ He then presciently observed that, ‘No longer can this be the case, because town planning today deals with the incrementalism of *process*, rather than the static concerns of *ends*,’ adding that ‘The political expectations of town planning have irrevocably changed.’¹ This may well have held true in Britain but no one seems to have told those who continue to propose and implement new capital cities across much of the rest of the world.

Accordingly, I focus here on a more specific type of town planning politics: the planned capital city. I aim to make three central points. First, this notion of the planned capital city is less of a niche market that it may seem; second, that scrutiny of such places provides a valuable entry point into the politics of planning; and third, that the challenges of designing new capitals in the twenty-first century are more politically daunting than ever, given the extent to which such urbanization is linked to entrenched inequality and a burgeoning climate crisis. In other words, there is a politics embedded into the design and planning of capital cities, and it is increasingly difficult to deploy that politics in service of what I will term *equitable resilience*.

In what follows, I will make many historical stops along the axial boulevards of designed capitals, ultimately considering what lessons Brasília and its ilk may have for the newest capital mega-ventures, such as Nusantara, now under construction as the designed new capital of Indonesia. Formally approved in early 2022, building this new city portends a dramatic shift from the congestion of sinking Jakarta to the forests of East Kalimantan.² Wilfully borne onto Borneo, Indonesia’s audacious experiment invites consideration of past capital-building practices that have merged urban design with the politics of nation-building.

Capital city planning as design-politics

In considering the long planning history of past designed capitals, it seems clear that these places have often fallen well short of yielding settlements we might call ‘resilient urban environments’ – let alone ones that could be regarded as equitable. Much of the disconnect between aspiration and actuality has to do with the twin shortcomings of politics and design. I do not wish to view politics as solely a matter of policy or even of implementation. Nor do I think of politics as some necessary-

CONTACT Lawrence J. Vale  ljvale@mit.edu

¹Cherry, *Politics of Town Planning*, 110.

²Lie, “Indonesia’s New Capital”; Ho, “Indonesia to Start Building”; Piri, “Jokowi Chooses Nusantara”.

but-regrettable impediment to realizing the vision of a designer, however true that may be in some instances. Rather, I see politics as intrinsically embedded in the place-based propositions that planners make. In other words, both politics and planning to me seem inseparable from design.

The persistent phenomenon of the designed capital provides ample evidence of the design-politics nexus – in part because political priorities find form through design choices and, conversely, because design priorities encode political preferences. Regimes and their leaders select sites for capitals for a variety of purposes, sometimes stated explicitly, sometimes withheld. Similarly, the choices they make about which components of the national institutions to highlight spatially (the executive versus the legislative, for instance), how such institutions get arranged, and which elements out of the totality of national architectural patrimony to highlight, all stand as revealed preferences. As processes, and as symbolic products, politics is inextricable from of one brand of town planning and design.

I have been thinking about the design of new capital cities for a long time – it is fully 30 years since the first edition of my book on this subject, and nearly 15 since that book's updated version.³ But government leaders have been designing capitals for millennia, and the practice has proliferated around the globe since the rise of the modern nation-state. Many of these are globally famous. Washington, D.C., New Delhi, and Canberra came first; Chandigarh, Brasília and Islamabad proved to be memorable mid-twentieth-century successors. In what follows, I'll say something about these places, as well as others. I am drawn back to this topic not simply because it contains such a trove of international planning history examples, spanning the globe, but also because these ventures are not simply artifacts of the past. Surprisingly to many, the production of designed capitals remains a growth industry. Since 2000 alone, there have been 'active public debates' in at least three dozen countries.⁴ Whether or not one takes note that Ngerulmud replaced Koror as the capital of Palau (national population 18,000) in 2006,⁵ it is hard to ignore the dramatic plans underway in Nusantara or Wedian Green City, the new administrative capital of Egypt.

Across the globe, the civic space of capital cities has been a prime indicator of power relations. The deliberate placement of squares and streets and the locational pre-eminence afforded to particular institutions sets out desired hierarchies. Axial approaches highlight the position of key terminal vistas, and can be used to both link and separate. The placement of public space, together with its surveillance and management, enable participation in the most visible parts of democratic discourse – as well as its suppression. All spaces carry the potential for political meaning, whether 'democratic' or otherwise, but national capitals inevitably support more spaces that are more explicitly saddled with a political agenda than others. These places – especially designed capitals whose central reason for being is tied to their capacity to both house and display the institutions that express the nation-state – surely hold some special place in the definition of politicized space.

Capital city scholarship as a growth industry

I am happy to note the ongoing interest among scholars in the history and meaning of capitals, both planned and otherwise. Historian Carl Nightingale's' magnificently ambitious new biography of an urbanizing planet, *Earthopolis*, traces a 6000-year span and provides us with a far more

³Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*.

⁴Rossmann, *Capital Cities*, Table 3, 303–304.

⁵Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 152.

completely global picture than other major integrative tomes such as Lewis Mumford's *The City in History* or Peter Hall's *Cities in Civilization*.⁶ In an essay I wrote in 2015 for *Built Environment* entitled 'Moralism and Urban Evolution: Excavating Mumford's *The City in History*,' I suggested that anyone who might take on a twenty-first-century version of such an over-arching vision should now 'work backward from our collective present of entrenched inequality and an ominously changing climate.' I called for the 'next Mumford' to 'explain how our current challenges have emerged, and how they might yet be overcome.' At the time, I had no idea that Professor Nightingale had already taken up this mantle. His volume goes well beyond a focus on capitals but it does usefully frame cities as a multi-pronged tale of human efforts to exploit the environment to enhance their own power, thereby conjoining for me links between cities and what I will term *equitable resilience*.

Another similarly globe-spanning effort by sociologist Göran Therborn, *Cities of Power*, set out a vast typology of 'the urban, the national, the popular, and the global.'⁷ That volume does actually focus on capital cities, sorting through them in relation to the evolution of different types of nation-state. Other single-authored books have been only slightly less ambitious, notably Vadim Rossman's *Capital Cities: Varieties and Patterns of Development and Relocation*, as well as edited volumes by Michael Minkenberg, *Power and Architecture: The Construction of Capitals and the Politics of Space*, and David Gordon's *Planning Twentieth Century Capital Cities* (which I note was nurtured across several iterations of IPHS conferences).⁸

Far more succinctly, in 'Seven Types of Capital City,' Peter Hall set out his own framework. Hall distinguished among Political Capitals – those created chiefly to serve as seats of government; Multi-Function Capitals – which operate more holistically; Global Capitals – notable for their super-national role in the world economy; and Super Capitals – cities housing international organizations, such as the UN, that may not be national capitals. Acknowledging that capitals may have long and shifting histories, he also distinguishes three other types: Former Capitals, which may in turn be Ex-Imperial Capitals or may linger in status as Provincial Capitals in federal nation-states.⁹ This is certainly useful but it is also readily apparent that it yields categories that, while possibly comprehensive, are neither parallel nor mutually exclusive. More problematic for me, this typology downplays the import of political power, especially in comparison to the frameworks that emerged from Therborn or Nightingale.

Rather than attempt to set out the totality of urban history and its import, or even to untangle the multiplicity of places we term capitals, my goal here is more modest and focused: What lessons can we draw from the planning history of designed capitals that should inform similar efforts today? And, specifically, given the environmental peril of the planet and the entrenched inequality in cities, what would it take for designed capitals to contribute more positively to what might be termed the equitable resilience of cities?

Rationales for planning a new capital

Before moving to ask what it would take to design and implement a new capital equitably, it seems worth stepping back to consider the range of rationales that undergird such impulses, since many of those may have little to do with equity. When choosing the site for an entirely or substantially new

⁶Nightingale, *Earthopolis*.

⁷Therborn, *Cities of Power*.

⁸Rossman, *Capital Cities*; Minkenberg, ed., *Power and Architecture*; Gordon, ed., *Planning Twentieth Century Capital Cities*, 15.

⁹Hall, "Seven Types of Capital City," 8–14.

capital city, political leaders juggle many variables and make revealing choices. They face daunting geopolitical borders which may suggest either the need to pull inland or to defend a territorial edge. They grapple with financial stresses, which may suggest the need to depend on international donors or investors in these capital ventures, thereby exposing the capital to the preferences of outsiders. Many nation-states seeking to design new capitals emerged from states of colonial exploitation and may wish to avoid negative associations with particular port cities or other aspects of a stigmatized history. Pluralist nation-states, especially if their boundaries arose through the will of others, may harbour intense ethnic or sub-ethnic rivalries and other subnational pressures. Some rulers may act upon deeply personal aspirations, such as to deliver a new national capital in proximity to a favoured village or provincial homeland. Other leaders seek new capitals as a way to spur economic decentralization away from primate cities, and may prioritize promoting infrastructure development between nodes when pursuing such growth poles. More viscerally there are also ‘push factors,’ – a denigration of conditions in the existing capital, seen as overcrowded, polluted, violent and corrupt. And, undergirding all this, national leaders must now take into consideration the relative vulnerability to disaster of existing capitals versus safer alternatives. No longer dominated by considerations of seismology alone, consciousness of disaster vulnerability now includes the full range of exigencies induced by a rapidly changing climate that portends destruction from floods, draughts, fires, and excessive heat.

Rossmann’s effort to account for the ‘varieties and patterns’ of capital city relocation (which include many instances where political leaders moved to alternative already-existing cities, in lieu of designing new ones) captures many of these rationales. He importantly notes that some capitals shift for more than one reason and that the stated reasons for a move often fall far short of acknowledging the full set of tacit motivations. In the modern era, he identifies ‘nation-building’ as the over-arching motivation behind much of capital relocation.¹⁰

Overall, Rossmann’s view of such capital moves is quite benign, eager to empathize with the aspirations of rulers seeking to advance national economic development and nation-building. He devotes little attention to how the benefits of any such gains may be distributed. While appropriately critical of the tendency of political leaders to be less than transparent, his own tendency is toward accepting their aspiration for inclusion of diverse ethnic groups or factions into capital sites that welcome all, rather than to view capital city construction projects as exercises that can reinforce the dominance of particular subnational groups at the expense of others. To frame capital city planning through an ‘equitable resilience’ lens, by contrast, is to insist on asking pointed questions about who gains economically and who feels represented in the view of nationhood being proffered by leaders of the nation-state.

In contrast to those such as Rossmann who have adopted more neutral stances on designed capital cities, and are eager to credit many of them with substantial success, another recent book by Dorina Pojani, *Trophy Cities*, is relentlessly critical of the underlying gender bias that undergirds these ventures. As its subtitle proclaims, she offers ‘a feminist perspective on new capitals.’ She documents ‘the patriarchal character of most nationalisms,’ including the male-led predilection to found new capitals. Importantly, this intersectional feminist lens centres ‘not only gender by also class, race, ethnicity, religion and other systems of domination.’¹¹ In that spirit, my own call for Equitable Resilience views capital design-politics through such a lens.

¹⁰Rossmann, *Capital Cities*, 272.

¹¹Pojani, *Trophy Cities*, 3, 8.

The continued growth of new designed capitals

Some of the growth in capital-designing (as opposed to mere capital-*designating*) is the explicit result of the collapse or disintegration of multi-national empires during the course of the twentieth century, coupled with the post-colonial nation-building efforts that proliferated around the world and staked out new capital grounds. It is striking to recall that about three-quarters of the places recognized as capitals in 2000 were not capitals when the twentieth century began.¹² In every decade since 1900, national governments have commissioned large places to take on some if not all of the functions of an administrative capital, while often also endeavouring to be a full-fledged city.

These are in addition to the places that have been built as smaller administrative centres, what I have termed capitol complexes. Those are intended chiefly as new protected zones for government, rather than entirely new cities. Such capitol complexes, in places such as Sri Lanka and Papua New Guinea and Zimbabwe (where a new Parliamentary district is nearly finished in a distant suburb of Harare),¹³ often get constructed on the edge of existing capitals. Though often quite lavish and saddled (or credited) with carrying heavy-handed doses of nationalist symbolism, they stop short of the investment needed to design and inhabit whole cities. Yet, this moderate modesty of capitol complexes has not been the dominant practice. The larger temptations of nationalism¹⁴ have continued to prompt new volleys of full-scale capital city construction across the entire urbanized and beleaguered planet.

Rossmann's *Capital Cities* book makes clear that the trend to create wholly new capitals may even be accelerating – at very least as ideas thought worthy of extended discussion. Since 2000, following previous African capital moves in Nigeria, Tanzania, Malawi and Côte d'Ivoire, new African capitals have been constructed in Egypt and Equatorial Guinea and Burundi,¹⁵ and discussed in Senegal,¹⁶ Kenya,¹⁷ Ghana,¹⁸ and post-Gaddafi Libya¹⁹ (a list that does not even include afrofuturist Wakanda). The creation of an independent South Sudan in 2011 elevated Juba to the status of a national capital, but also prompted debate about shifting the capital to Ramciel: more central, less tied to a single ethnicity, but lacking urban infrastructure.²⁰

Many capitals of the erstwhile Soviet republics have also debated or actually undertaken shifts, most famously Astana, now called Nur-Sultan, in Kazakhstan. Moreover, some in Moscow itself have entertained periodic proposals to shift the Russian power centre, possibly into Siberia. Often promulgated by those with close ties to such areas, they point to Peter the Great's monumental decision to construct a 'Window to the West' and argue for a parallel need to have twenty-first-century fenestration facing the Pacific east.²¹

East Asia has had dramatic capital-building projects for millennia, and such matters have also resurfaced in the twenty-first century. South Koreans continue to debate alternatives to Seoul, though the locational priorities differ if a capital is thought of as charged with governing a single unified Korean nation-state (which would suggest keeping it toward the northern borderland) or

¹²Vale, "Urban Design of Twentieth Century Capitals," 15.

¹³Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 197–247; "New Zimbabwe Parliament Building".

¹⁴Vale, "Temptations of Nationalism," 196–208.

¹⁵Dahir, "Burundi's President is Moving the Capital".

¹⁶Flynn, "Senegal Sees 'Atlantic Dubai';" Sala, "Senegal is Building a Futuristic City".

¹⁷Okolla, "Isiolo: Relocating Kenya's Capital".

¹⁸Boadu, "Ghana: New Capital City Needed".

¹⁹Magdy, "Rival Libya PM to Set Up Government in Sirte".

²⁰"Proposed Ramciel City"; "South Sudan Relocates Capital"; O'Connor, "World's Youngest Country".

²¹Rossmann, 140–151; Heritage, "Russia Ponders the Future"; Rossmann, "In Search of the Fourth Rome".

whether the goal should be to move it further away from the potential hostility of its unpredictable neighbour. So far, the solution has favoured the latter approach, yielding Sejong, 120 km from Seoul. Founded as a planned administrative capital in 2007, Korean political leaders have increased pressures to shift more of the capital's functions to this new city. It now houses most of South Korea's ministries, and is projected to have a population of 500,000 by 2030. It is already most of the way there.²² Japan and China continue to think through ways to decentralize their own capitals.

In South Asia, distinguished by the designed cities of New Delhi and Islamabad, as well as by many state capitals within India such as Chandigarh, moving or altering capitals remains on the agenda. New Delhi, under the nationalist gaze of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is in the process of a highly-controversial re-design of structures along its Central Vista, viewed by critics as entailing an unfortunate emphasis on security and privatization.²³ Even before the devastating earthquakes in the Kathmandu Valley in 2015 revived the discussion, some leaders in Nepal advocated shifting the capital to Chitwan, located in the southern flatlands. Bangladesh, where at least a quarter of the country's entire landmass is subject to periodic flooding,²⁴ has few viable alternatives to Dhaka – but this has not stopped scholars from trying to find such a place.²⁵

In Southeast Asia, the launch of Putrajaya in Malaysia during the 1990s seems to have energized additional discussions in the region (and beyond). The government of Myanmar constructed the vast new city of Naypyidaw to succeed Yangon as the national capital,²⁶ and capital relocation has been discussed in Thailand, especially as the megacity of Bangkok faces increasingly devastating floods.²⁷ Leaders in the Philippines have been so concerned about the vulnerability of Metro Manila to some combination of climate disaster and political unrest that, starting in 2016, they have constructed a kind of back-up government complex in New Clark City, 100 kilometres away. The Filipino Bases Conversion and Development Authority celebrates this as the country's first 'smart, green, disaster-resilient city.' New Clark City's National Government Administrative Center (NGAC) initially served as medical and isolation facilities during the pandemic, and re-opened to the public in May, 2022. That is hardly the first association with disaster: New Clark City is built on the site of Camp O'Donnell, which in 1942 was the dreadful destination of the infamous Bataan Death March, housing thousands of brutally mistreated POWs during the Japanese occupation.²⁸ Eight decades later, located on relatively high ground with relatively low seismic vulnerability, the claim of disaster resilience is ironic if not without merit.²⁹

It is always difficult to predict which discussions of capital city moves will yield actual completed projects, especially given the vagaries of political and economic forces, and the exigencies of wars and disasters. The front-burner ideas of one decade are marginalized or forgotten during the next, especially if they have been floated by narrow or partisan interests. That said, from the perspective

²²Ko, "Capital Relocation Plan"; Ryall, "Incoming President Yoon Wants to Relocate Capital"; "S. Korea Chooses New Capital"; Kim, "Mini-Capital Sejong City Opens"; Babe, "South Korea's Master Planned City"; Rossman, 115–118; Pojani, *Trophy Cities*, 116–118, 157–160.

²³Dharwadker, "Dystopia's Ghost."

²⁴Sengupta and Manik, "A Quarter of Bangladesh is Flooded".

²⁵Morshed, "A Post-Dhaka Bangladesh".

²⁶Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 153–6.

²⁷Thomas, "Bangkok to Relocate?"

²⁸Norman and Norman, *Tears in the Darkness*.

²⁹Dancel, "Manila Builds S\$3b Administrative Centre"; Ochave, "New Clark City".

of the early 2020s, a few other cities that may well relinquish their status as capitals include Tehran,³⁰ Taipei,³¹ Kabul,³² Abu Dhabi,³³ and Buenos Aires.³⁴

Nusantara and the perennial challenge of capital centrality

In all this, Jakarta is certainly in good global company. In Indonesia, political leaders have periodically discussed moving the capital away from Jakarta for decades, though sometimes only entailing a decentralizing move within western Java. After 2010, the discussion focused on sites in Kalimantan, yielding the recent dramatic decision to construct Nusantara. Nusantara, like other emergent new capitals, is – or should be – part of a longer discussion about what it means to undertake such ventures, raising questions about the meaning of many perennial urban and regional planning struggles: economic and political centralization and decentralization, environmental impacts, ethnic rivalries, security, and the relationship between governments and those they govern.

At the largest scale, the siting and design of newly-constructed capital cities surely serve as vital exercises in geo-politics. Neither design nor politics alone can explain why Canberra is between Sydney and Melbourne, Ottawa is between Montreal and Toronto and Washington, D.C. is between Philadelphia and Charleston. Site selection, rooted in the documents that regulate it, is a technology of design-politics. In the 1950s, the leaders of post-partition Pakistan located its invented capital, Islamabad, close to its contested border with India, and adjacent to the existing city of Rawalpindi, a military stronghold. In other places, capitals ‘often must serve as fulcrums that balance contending sub-national forces based in diverse regional centers.’³⁵

Canberra, Australia’s invented ‘Bush capital,’ arose at politically palatable distance from both Sydney and Melbourne. To the aboriginal inhabitants who lived there first, this was usurpation of sacred ground, not some conveniently available tabula rasa. American Walter Burley Griffin, with Marion Mahony Griffin, won the international competition. They established a dominant narrative about ‘garden cities’ and democracy – but there is also a counter-narrative promulgated in the same central space by Aboriginal activists who regard the very site of the capital quite differently. Intermittently since 1972, and consistently since 1992, these activists have maintained an ‘Aboriginal Embassy’ – an informal settlement placed directly athwart the country’s most iconic political space. In addition to tents and signage that conveys reminders about ‘stolen children,’ ‘native title,’ and ‘genocide,’ a ceremonial flame has been kept alight since 1998.³⁶ Although frequently ridiculed as the ‘Tent Embassy,’ the aboriginal diplomatic encampment made it onto Australia’s Register of the National Estate in 1995, due to its political significance for Indigenous Australians. As a prominent work of design-politics, it persists as a point of contention, despite government efforts to inscribe an alternative official recognition of disputed Aboriginal history into the outdoor museum plaza of nearby Reconciliation Place.³⁷ Meanwhile, a massive art project drawn onto the former terrace of the Old Parliament House valiantly maintains that the Australian

³⁰“Iran Mulls Plan to Move Capital”.

³¹Liu, “It is Time to Consider Relocating”.

³²Hamidi, “Kabul New City”.

³³Barnard, “Progress Made on Zayed City”.

³⁴“President Wants Buenos Aires.” <https://en.mercopress.com/2021/12/18/president-wants-buenos-aires-to-no-longer-be-capital-of-argentina>.

³⁵Vale, “Capital Architecture and National Identity,” 35, 37.

³⁶“Aboriginal Tent Embassy”; McLroy, “The Aboriginal Tent Embassy”; Tan, “The Aboriginal Tent Embassy”; Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 81–104.

³⁷McLroy, “The Aboriginal Tent Embassy”; “Aboriginal Tent Embassy”; Carlson and Coe, “A Short History”.

government has been trespassing on ‘Sacred Land.’ The terror of the territory has not yet been forgotten. Black and white Australians share the calculated symmetry of the same central axis yet occupy a conceptually different place; one group’s strong association is the negation of the other.

It doesn’t seem likely that Australians will abandon Canberra anytime soon, but this has not stopped historians based in Western Australia from proposing that the erstwhile Bush Capital find a new perch in Perth. Arguing that economic growth will favour Western Australia and Indian Ocean frontage in the coming decades, Professor Geoffrey Bolton noted that the only Constitutional siting criterion was that the capital be located more than 100 miles from Sydney.³⁸ So, a mere 2300 should do nicely.

In the fledgling United States, in 1790, the siting of the national capital we now know as Washington, DC far to the south of other contenders such as New York and Philadelphia was in large part a quid pro quo deal to get southern states to agree to a northern plan to force federal assumption of the national debt linked to the Revolutionary War.³⁹ It had nothing to do with centrality, and was an inconvenient place to get to for nearly everyone – even before the United States expanded all the way to the Pacific Ocean, and beyond. In any case, musically-attuned historians of planning can at least now boast that this particular siting controversy has been immortalized in a *Hamilton* song.⁴⁰

Its hip hop history aside, the future Washington, D.C., as designed in 1791, was audaciously planned to be larger than London or Paris. Importantly, it was located on a series of large landholdings – including plantations supported by slave labour – as well as territory that included forests and wetlands – including unceded territory from the initial indigenous inhabitants.⁴¹

Americans did subsequently debate moving the capital away from Hamilton’s famous Potomac compromise trophy city. Some prominent midwesterners touted the idea of relocating the seat of government to St. Louis, where the Capitol – reassembled piece-by-numbered-piece – could instead overlook the Mississippi. In 1868, the U.S. House of Representatives voted down the suggestion by a mere twenty votes, 97–77.⁴² Nearly a century-and-a-half later, a campaign video produced for Nebraska-based U.S. Senatorial candidate Ben Sasse, while surely fanciful, reiterated the longstanding association between architectural and moral renewal. His solution to ‘cure the incredible ineffectiveness and dysfunction of *both* parties in Washington’ was to truck the Capitol itself to a more centrally-located new home: a wheat field located in, of course, Nebraska.⁴³

More seriously, this is a reminder that many newly-designed capitals have been prompted by the urge to abandon a current capital viewed negatively. The act of building has been touted as an opportunity to start over. If the current capital could be rejected as congested, polluted, corrupt, over-centralized, ethnically-skewed, or militarily vulnerable, the alternative could be touted as a kind of moral cleansing. Rhetoric aside, even those new capitals sited to be more geographically central – such as Abuja, Nigeria as the successor to Lagos or Dodoma, Tanzania as heir to Dar es Salaam – harbour many other motives.

Indonesia, as a nation-state composed of so many islands, large and small, has an especially difficult challenge in siting a capital centrally. The new site, while arguably less vulnerable to climate change and natural hazards than many other parts of urban Indonesia, clearly poses many

³⁸Orr, “Move Over Eastern States”.

³⁹Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 66.

⁴⁰To listen in on “the room where it happens”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WySzEXKUSZw>.

⁴¹Vale, “Trumping the Triangle”.

⁴²Gershon, “Ill-Fated Idea to Move.” <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/ill-fated-idea-move-nations-capital-st-louis-180977569/>.

⁴³See Ben Sasse campaign video (2014): <https://youtu.be/a6Ov47lCkgY>.

challenges to East Kalimantan itself, as well as for the logistics of getting to and from there. By contrast, proponents of many previous designed capitals – just like Washington, D.C. – paid little attention to environment in their siting and planning.

Canberra, as designed following an international competition, was sited on one of Australia's most beautiful sheep stations, as well as erected on land long considered sacred by the country's Aboriginal people. Brasília, famously and intentionally, was a developmentalist effort to move away from cities clustered along the coast – an effort to impose a capital city on Brazil's remote high central plateau. Most recently, Egypt has undertaken construction of yet another new city in the drylands beyond the Nile River Delta. The new administrative capital – boldly named Wedian Green City (with Wedian the plural of Wadi, or valley) – has been dropped into the desert. This new capital is also part of a larger, strategic string of cities, linking the megalopolis of Cairo and New Cairo in the west to planned linkages eastward to the Red Sea.⁴⁴ The development ambition is dramatic and clear; the commitment to climate resilience, let alone equitable climate resilience, is less clear – even though it has a green name.

Other places have tried to pay more attention to the environment. I have not myself studied or visited Putrajaya in Malaysia, but it is clear that the Malaysians have sought to decentralize from KL in a much more modest way than Indonesia is doing – the new administrative/executive and judicial capital is not on a separate island, and features rail connection to the airport. It houses 120,000 people as of 2021 – but is aiming for 350,000 – with half a million jobs to attract additional commuters.⁴⁵ The site of Putrajaya, like other capitals, was once an agricultural area – in this case rubber, cocoa and oil palm plantations, covering thousands of hectares. In other words, it is a city built on top of a heavily managed forest, not a jungle, so it presumably carries important lessons for how best to do that in an environmentally responsible way. This is a reminder, as well, that environments also house and employ humans. When plants get replaced, plantation workers get displaced.⁴⁶

What would it take to plan an equitably resilient capital?

Given this long, tumultuous and ongoing saga of designed capitals, one can ask what the history of such plans should cause us to question if we want to take the distributional politics of resilience seriously. I will apply these queries to the example of Nusantara, Indonesia but the challenges outlined here should matter for any newly-planned capital (as well as for new cities that are not capitals).

Let me offer one brief but holistic definition of what it would take to make such a settlement 'equitably resilient,' drawing on principles outlined in an upcoming book on 'The Equitably Resilient City' that I am co-authoring with Zachary Lamb (a book that is not about capitals, but still seems relevant):

Equitably resilient new capitals can result if there is a legitimate process that merges environmentally protective infrastructure and an attractive built environment to promote habitation that benefits everyone, including the least advantaged.

Past efforts to design and develop new capitals have often fallen short in the key political dimensions of legitimacy and equity. It matters who is included in the processes of building

⁴⁴Urban Development Consortium, "New Administrative Capital – Wedian".

⁴⁵Moser, "Putrajaya"; Department of Statistics, "Federal Territory of Putrajaya".

⁴⁶Bunnell, "Multimedia Utopia?" 281–85.

the city, who and what is displaced to build it, and who is welcomed to live and work there once it is built.

Four Principles of Equitable Resilience

In turn, achieving an equitable and legitimate process entails attention to four major domains. If we care about equitable climate resilience, this entails more than a focus on the environment. Attention to the environment is definitely one key part. City design and development must seek to reduce the vulnerability of residents to environmental risks and stresses. But that is not the only element in a holistic approach to resilient city design. Capital city design must also support community structure and the economic livelihood of residents. Third, equitably resilient design and development needs to empower communities through enhanced capacities to share in their own governance. And, finally, a fourth key principle: security. An equitable and legitimate approach to city design must enhance security of residents in a double sense: personal security in the face of violence, and familial security from the threats of displacement. As a mnemonic shorthand in English, I call these the LEGS principles. Equitable Resilience must stand on those.

Importantly, the 4 LEGS principles need to be applied at a variety of scales. I am focusing here on the design-politics of a capital city-region, but taking equitable resilience seriously means asking difficult questions at smaller scales, too. Each project, or district – has its own needs in terms of livelihoods, environment, governance, and security. And, within those, these same principles apply at the smallest scale of individuals and households. The questions are different but the urgency is the same.

Environment

Given my focus on climate resilience, it makes sense to start with the dimension I have labelled ‘environment’. If we were to begin at the level of the household or individual, we could ask: does the project improve residents’ understanding of hazard and ecological dynamics? In other words, can the design of the capital be part of an educational experience that transmits knowledge? At the level of individual projects or communities or districts, we should ask about environmental protection: Does the project reduce the frequency and/or severity of environmental hazard impacts on residents? And, at the city-region – my chief concern here – there is the matter of ecological vitality: Does the project support the ecological systems on which residents rely?

An environment example from Putrajaya

Keeping the focus on the city-region, what can the Indonesian capital project learn from the efforts in Putrajaya, where there have been efforts to retain, remake, and restore environmental amenities? What can Indonesian design and planning professionals and political officials learn about building a new forest city in ways that can enhance rather than damage older cities and older forests? And what will Indonesia learn from Malaysia’s treatment of the thousands of people who lived and toiled on such allegedly ‘greenfield’ sites but were not re-housed in the new city?⁴⁷

⁴⁷Ibid.

Security

Second, there is the matter of security – both security of persons and security of tenure. If we were to focus on individuals or households, we could ask: Does the project support or maintain residents' sense of safety, stability, belonging, and attachment to their place? This is a reminder that no new city lands on a completely empty site. How will the new dwellers and builders be received? At the level of projects and communities, we should ask: Does the project support or maintain residents' informal security through collective solidarity to resist threats of eviction and/or violence? And, for the capital city/region as a whole – we should insist on continuing to ask a difficult question as the city-building project expands: Does the project support residents in gaining formal security and recognition of their right to protection from displacement and/or violence?

A security example from Chandigarh

Chandigarh is the important designed state capital constructed after Indian independence and partition caused the Punjab capital of Lahore to be located in Pakistan. Le Corbusier's plan envisioned a carefully bounded settlement of carefully delineated gridded sectors. As it was built out over several decades, however, there was no place for hundreds of thousands of persons who could not be housed in the plan. Informal settlements proliferated and Chandigarh burst its boundaries – taking over much of the land that was once labelled on maps simply as 'vegetation.' At the same time, Chandigarh engendered periodic violence- – since it became both a Union Territory and the state capital for two different Indian states – predominantly Sikh Punjab and predominantly Hindu Haryana.⁴⁸ With each of the architecturally famous buildings needing to be divided for separate use by two state governments, security has been a persistent challenge.

Livelihoods

My third key dimension for building equitable resilience in capitals has to do with Livelihoods. For individuals and households, we can ask: Does the project support residents in acquiring or maintaining the skills, tools, and capital necessary to forge stable and dignified livelihoods? In other words, what kind of work is supported, and how can the jobs grow in tandem with the new city in ways that support the workforce? At the level of projects and communities this means planning for a variety of employment: Does the project create spatial and material conditions that support residents' livelihoods, including home-based and informal work? And, at the level of the capital city/region: Does the project enable residents to access viable livelihoods, through proximity to work opportunities and/or access to affordable transportation? Mobility, jobs, and residences need to be planned together.

Livelihoods examples from New Delhi and Islamabad: separation versus dynapolis

Some designed capitals have planned for this by building the new adjacent to the old. New Delhi (planned starting in 1911) shows how this operated in colonialist terms – with a maidan of separation kept between the hyperdense Shahjahanabad and the garden city planned for the British and

⁴⁸Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 122.

Indian elite.⁴⁹ The two sides of the early city were close enough to share an economy, though this one was initially built on colonial dependencies.

A half century later, independent Pakistan commissioned the design for its own new capital, Islamabad. Here, too, the so-called ‘dynapolis’ capital emphasized strategic adjacency. Islamabad is not just *near* Rawalpindi – it was built out immediately adjacent to this large existing city.⁵⁰ It seems much easier to grow an economy and service an emergent city when these proximities are immediate.

A livelihoods example from Brasília: plan and reality

The Brazilians did not have a Rawalpindi out on the Alto Plano – so they had to import a workforce to build their city. The big problem was that they did not really want that low-income workforce to stay once the city was built. Oscar Niemeyer’s buildings in the *superquadras* of the two residential wings were idealistically, and communistically, intended to house all classes together in the same apartment buildings, but it did not work out that way. The buildings were designed to house all levels of *government* workers but were not designed for the rest of the workforce. Moreover, many of the wealthiest preferred to decamp to single family villas along the new artificial lake. Meanwhile, the poor who had come to build the city and did not wish to leave were exiled to informal irregular settlements on the distant periphery – and the middle class removed to regular settlements – large planned satellite towns also located well outside the Plano Piloto.⁵¹

The informal settlements and the satellite towns grew rapidly through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s – eventually linked with subway lines to the Southwest. The town of Aguas Claras, located at the junction of the two subway branches shown at the upper right itself houses several hundred thousand people – probably about double the population of the entire pilot plan. Today, about 200,000 people live in the famous bird-shaped Plano Piloto, and the other 90 percent live beyond it. When I visited some of these places a few years ago, I was told that many of those who lived on the periphery spent their entire lives without even once glimpsing the famous *superquadras* of the World Heritage site in the city centre. Today, Brazil’s high plains are scattered with the highrises of a sprawling Brasília, a reminder of the distinction between the carefully drawn plan of a highly imageable capital and the futility of managing its growth.

Governance

Finally, I come to the fourth key principle of equitable resilience – that of governance. For a capital city, this has to do with how – and where – to house the government. But it is also about broader ideas about how places are governed and who feels that their voice matters. If we care about issues of legitimate processes and equitable results, *governance* matters just as much as *government*. For individuals and households, we should think to ask: Does the project support residents in developing individual and collective efficacy in addressing problems and challenges? For the capital’s projects and communities, especially once the various neighbourhoods start to be built out, we can inquire: Does the project provide robust structures for residents to play a central role in both designing interventions and making decisions regarding ongoing management? And, as we

⁴⁹Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 109–10.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 146–51.

⁵¹Holston, *The Modernist City*; Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 138; Rossman, *Capital Cities*, 132.

consider the city as a whole: we can ask about how those who are not government workers will interact with those who are: Does the project create pathways for residents to advocate for themselves and others with respect to larger institutions, including governments?

A governance example in Canberra: government group

Many previously designed capitals have made the challenge of this more holistic kind of governance more difficult by choosing to locate the national government's key facilities in an entirely separate – and separated – zone. In Canberra, for example, the Griffin plan (1913) explicitly enshrined an extreme form of functional proto-zoning by segregating the most prominently enshrined buildings as the 'Government Group,' also known as 'Government Center.'⁵²

Almost a half-century later, Le Corbusier separated the seat of government from the rest of the city of Chandigarh quite deliberately – a head protruding about the rest of the corporate body. He claimed to plan the city in accordance with his human-scaled modulator, but it yielded a vast empty plaza between the main government buildings and – worse – actually separated the government zone from the rest of the city by construction of a towering artificial mound. Government leaders were to stroll in a sacred elevated space, without the need to see those they governed.⁵³

Governance examples in Brasília, Abuja, and Putrajaya: emptiness and separation versus more integration

Brasília, planned shortly after this, took government separation to its logical extreme – with a separate Avenue of the Ministries leading to an isolated Plaza of the Three Powers. This brought together the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government but kept all of them separate from the populace. Abuja, Nigeria, planned in the late 1970s, adopted a similar strategy – aligning the city with the natural outcrop of Aso Rock, but separating the branches of government in their own 'Three Arms Zone' – a somewhat more militaristic sounding version of the Brasília plan. Finally, Putrajaya offers a somewhat softened approach to government isolation – an axial approach to a privileged place for the Prime Minister's Office but still a somewhat more interwoven and polycentric design that offers modestly more opportunity to include non-elites in more spaces.⁵⁴

Conclusion: towards an equitably resilient capital city

So, let me close with some broad challenges as we think about building an equitably resilient capital city – bringing us back full circle to the relationship between 'politics' and 'town planning' raised by Gordon Cherry four decades ago. My first question is the most pragmatic: Where do politics need to be considered and understood in order to be effective in implementing resilience objectives equitably? A second query asks all of us to consider the totality of the city holistically and empathetically: How are investments in resilience experienced differentially *within* a city? What can be done to make projects more *legitimately* carried out and benefits more *equitably* shared? A final question is addressed to my broader audiences. It is a chance to reflect on your own professional identity, whether you are a student, a professor, a government official, a practitioner, a scholar or simply an urban citizen. Given that resilience has both technical and political aspects, what is the proper

⁵²Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 85–6.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 126–32.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 138–45, 165–6; King, "Re-writing the City," 125–131.

level of emphasis on issues of socio-economic deprivation and inequality when talking about resilience? Given past propensities for exclusion and separation, how much should be done to prevent this, especially given that locational choice often delivers differential exposure to hazards? Will Indonesia, unlike many other countries that have commissioned and developed new capitals, manage to develop Nusantara for all segments of the society?

So, to conclude, what would it entail for Indonesia – or any other country – to plan, design and implement an equitably resilient capital? For me, seeking to learn from the planning history of past new capitals, an equitably resilient capital city-region results only when it is possible to give an enthusiastic ‘Yes’ to four further questions that keep us focused on the equity and legitimacy of proposals:

1. Does the capital reduce environmental vulnerability?
2. Does the capital produce quality public space?
3. Does the capital engage the affected community in a way that empowers rather than merely placates?
4. Does the capital benefit disadvantaged communities rather than harm or displace them?

It is difficult, but not impossible, to ask for all of this when planning for an equitably resilient capital, and I very much hope that critical evaluation of past new capital planning efforts will encourage future planning teams to pursue such complex ambitions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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