

Jessica Joyce Christie, Jelena Bogdanović and Eugenio Gunzmán (eds.)

Political Landscapes of Capital Cities

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Aiming to bring new capital cities and their histories in the discussion about how the political authority created the built environment and influenced social behaviors, the editors have brought into the field of urban history a volume of essays that will be an essential reading. And they have done so by revealing histories and angles less explored until now.

It is commonly known that both the choice and the design principles of capital cities derives from the political will to support and demonstrate political power. The cityscape becomes a stage and a representation of the ruler's view of world, thus being an instrument of behavior and belief manipulation, a perfect and carefully designed setting, a necessary and invaluable piece in the entire political discourse, addressed either to its citizens, or to the outsiders. Surprises always occur at a closer look, when tackling the subject from a different angle. It is in this way that the volume brings forward new interpretations, new historical data, and more importantly, new schools of thought on urban history; for instance by exploring the evolution of "space" that can move into immaterial places or exposing spaces created by a collective and unnamed political authority. The volume also challenges the normal understanding of commonly used terms, thus presenting "political authority" in multiple forms: one single ruler, multiple rulers in different arrangements, a powerful and long-lasting vision that was emulated and created by multiple generations of rulers, or a catalytic and powerful discourse or religion.

The volume is actually a demonstration and continuation of Adam T. Smith's methodology used in *The Political Landscape*¹ that was built upon Henri Lefebvre's seminal work *The Production of Space*.² The volume includes a brief review of Smith's approach in the understanding of "space" as "the spatiality of politics and civil authority" and his three major analytical categories "experience, perception, and imagination." It also advances Smith's spatial analysis model that is "an investigation of the human practices that shape and alter particular social formations" advocating Lefebvre's thesis that "space is inherently a social product and that it has to be analyzed through social production."³ As such, the power-words frequently used in all essays — "political landscape of relations," "geopolitical landscapes," "politicized landscapes," "network of geopolitics" — advance a better understanding of the synergy between space and power.

The introduction places this volume in the theories of space, and includes a thorough explanation of the general terms "landscape," "space," "political landscape" and definitions for "capital city," "state," "authority." The theoretical argument, as explained by the editors, presents the aim of the volume — "to explore the ways politics took spatial forms across time and space" understanding

1 Adam T. Smith, *The Political Landscape: Constellations of Authority in Early Complex Polities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

2 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

3 Jessica Joyce Christie, Jelena Bogdanović and Eugenio Gunzmán (eds.), *Political Landscapes of Capital Cities* (University Press of Colorado, 2016), 8.



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that “production of space is a common tactical process in politics employed by those wishing to govern more effectively.”⁴

The ten essays in this volume uncover the connecting thread between politics and planning, concentrating on the old world and following a chronological order. Each chapter introduces different concepts and exposes switch moments for each history presented.

The essay about Akhenaten’s Amarna in Egypt is an example of political rebirth in a new place, the search and creation of an untainted and undisturbed spirituality, in pursuit of the only place where the ruler will unite with the universe.

The essay about Rome’s Central Forum shows how the Tetrarchic Emperor rearranged the order of a strong past, but preserved and even resurrected the glory of Rome as a central place, despite the fact that the actual seat of government was split and moved outside the old capital in different areas of the empire. Rome was preserved as a symbol of periodic renewal, like the sequence of seasons in nature, mainly as a celebration stage for the new political order.

The essay about Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, explores the export of form onto different cultures. The essay presents the profound and sacred religious symbols encrypted and imprinted in the city’s fabric and how those were diffused into Eastern European medieval capitals, not as a replica, but as a sharing of an ideological set of values to create a capital city. This gesture is a shift from the actual capital city to the image of the capital city, a powerful political authority that is now diffused.

The essay about Bangkok, the capital city of Siam, presents a new city created to preserve the sacral character of the old city, the empire, and the world and to merge with it, in acceptance and unity. The political gesture reinforced old rules of governance but manipulated the space and invented a sacred geography made by tales not by historical accurateness, thus preserving and creating relationships to achieve the desired unity and peace.

The essay about the Tiwanaku landscape, the megalithic pre-Columbian ruins in Bolivia, exposes the fundamental purpose of the political power as the creator of space and invites reflection and deep understanding of the human settlements and the intent of power. The Tiwanaku landscape is the cosmology of singularity, the center of the universe, where ritual architecture reproduces the cosmos in imitation of a celestial archetype. More precisely, it is a sophisticated astronomical device, an atypical settlement with an atypical political authority, but with the same consistency of discourse aiming to attract the masses, organize a society and survive in time.

The essay about the Inka capital Cusco explores an invented set of urban fabric rules to mark and claim Inka territory. It is a very rigid system, filled with symbols that successfully produces a complex social order that linked the people to religious symbols and land, thus creating an empire.

The essay about the Aztec / Mexica people presents the transformation, through a long and sustained effort, resulting in the creation of a new and powerful sociopolitical network and, in the end, of a stable and majestic capital city, Mexico. The social wisdom in forming political and social alliances is a key component of the authority in this case. This component was purposefully translated in the city’s structure, as an intended social stratification, and became the engine of the continuous transformation of the empire.

The essay about the Italian city Matera reveals a space that tells the story of the winners, the selected groups of power and how those shifted according to a larger economical order. The essay follows the non-elite humble and humiliated social class of the past whose story captured the attention of the newly created discipline of sociological studies and became the reason of economic rebirth and thus imposed the physical change of a stiff urban space. This essay steps into deciphering the new political authority of the modern world.

The essay about Fascist Rome unveils the revolutionary character of Fascism continuing the perception of perpetual rebirth of a great empire. For Fascism history becomes a tool, destruction and war are seen and promoted as progress, and progress becomes process, not just the final

4 Christie, Bogdanović and Gunzmán (eds.), *Political Landscapes*, 11.

product. The essay exposes the symbols encrypted in the other powerful means of support: the printed media, the art, *Futurismo*, and the political speech. Fascism is also used here as an example of a finished era. It is a turning point, from an old explicit way, in which the political authority was embodied by the leader, to the modern way in which political authority becomes invisible, ubiquitous, continuous, and anonymous.

The essay about Teheran builds upon the idea of a new modern political authority and recounts the full history of how the public space became the stage for protest against it. Here, the imprints of the modern political thought – new boulevards, street widening operations and new public plazas – discontinued a fluent urban fabric that was already broken and became the stage for revolutions. In this case modern urbanism, sanitation, also brought alienation, displacement and, in the end, a perpetual revolution.

As perfectly outlined in the essays, space creation started with rigorous composition rules using elements that are easily recognizable: geometry, symmetry axes, one or few dominant structures, and created symbols. In the more recent past, social stratification became a composition rule frequently used. The landscape was purposefully created with a cosmic reason and a sacred meaning to easily manipulate and control the masses. The principal idea behind landscape creation was to “put the world in order”, to give meaning to actions, therefore to the world. Setting up cities as “ideological performance stages” was also a principal intention. From this perspective, this volume brings up an interesting angle that shows public space as a clearly written urban history book. Public space is the most visible and easily accessible witness of a place’s history, mainly because it survived, as it was meant to. The capital cities depicted in this volume are chosen in switching moments, in transition towards a new order. The political authorities shown here are the innovative leaders who changed and disturbed old worlds, creating new ones. The intention of the authors is to capture the full extent and display of power, but also the evolution and the different manifestations of power, throughout the diversity of the presented examples.

In his book, Adam T. Smith introduces two extreme depictions of authority, one ancient and one modern, and points to the differences between the respective means of constituting political authority through landscape: a Mesopotamian queen death pit versus a modern execution electric chair.⁵ This example confronts a very explicit representation of a direct form of political authority with a new vision of authority, where the subject is absent, but the authority is everywhere, impossible to locate and bodiless. The present volume offers examples and places them chronologically on a time scale starting in ancient Egypt and ending with Teheran. The volume highlights the passing to a political power less visible and a political landscape more ubiquitous where authority becomes more reliant on technology, more anonymous, and ultimately disconnected from place,⁶ fascism being the switching point. This volume is a *tour de force* in search of a comprehensive explanation, and a persuasive exploration of multiple angles of analysis. The editors chose a good variety of examples that cover different cultures and many parts of the world. The examples range from new locations, to building upon a recent past and apparent continuation of an established tradition, to building upon a more distant and carefully chosen past suitable to the message, or to destroying the past and preserving only chosen symbols. As for the argumentative method, each essay is outlining previous interpretations and is explaining the new understanding based on newly found data and recent archeological research, thus occupying its well-deserved place in the essential readings in urban history.

The common idea presented in every essay is that political authority was always accompanied by other types of discourses accessible to the great masses, either religion (in history), or forms of art (in modern times). This attached discourse helped deliver and gather people around a powerful, meaningful message that engages and motivates the masse, an essential element in power creation. Space creation became the sacred desire of the ruler aiming at immortality that was achieved through the creation of impressive cities, nations, civilizations. Accordingly, throughout this remarkable collection of essays, space becomes the essential tool of a diverse array of landscape manipulations aiming to reflect a chosen purpose.

5 Smith, *Political Landscape*, 3.

6 Christie, Bogdanović and Gunzmán (eds.), *Political Landscapes*, 343.