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Multiple landscapes of capital cities

ABSTRACT

This review looks at three publications that discuss the timeless issue of the relationship between power and space in capital cities located in a broad temporal and geographic framework. By applying Adam T. Smith's model of interrelation among politics, landscape and civic values, the editors and authors of Political Landscapes of Capital Cities (2016) examine several major cities located in the area between South America and Southeast Asia during the period spanning from the fourteenth century bc to the present day. They elucidate the ways in which power and political authority are constructed and manifested in conjunction with the natural landscape and human-made environment. The edited volume Capital Cities in the Aftermath of Empires: Planning in Central and Southeastern Europe (2010), which covers the turbulent period between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century, deals with the capitals that emerged after the collapse of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires. The book reveals the ways in which the architecture and urban planning of capital cities were used to represent the national identity of the newly formed states. The author of the book The Capital of Europe: Architecture and Urban Planning for the European Union (2004) discusses the capital of one state, the European Union, arguing that common values and identity can be constructed by relying on a clear architectural strategy. Together, these three books highlight the importance and necessity of analysing the multiple landscapes of capital cities from diverse angles.

KEYWORDS

capital cities
power and authority
urban history
political landscape
national identity
urban planning
architectural strategy
human geography

REVIEW TEXTS

- Joyce Christie, Jessica Bogdanović, Jelena and Guzmán, Eulogio (eds) (2016), *Political Landscapes of Capital Cities*, Boulder: University Press of Colorado.
- Gunzburger Makaš, Emily and Damljanović Conley, Tanja (eds) (2010), *Capital Cities in the Aftermath of Empires: Planning in Central and Southeastern Europe*, London: Routledge.
- Carola Hein (2004), *The Capital of Europe: Architecture and Urban Planning for the European Union*, Westport, CT and London: Praeger.

When Richard Harris, alias Emperor Marcus Aurelius, asked Russell Crowe, alias General Maximus Decimus Meridius, who became a gladiator in the eponymous Academy awarded historical film directed by Ridley Scott (2000), 'What is Rome, Maximus?', he responded enthusiastically: 'Rome is the light', opposing it to the 'cruel and dark' rest of the world. The general had never visited or seen Rome before and this was merely his perception and the idealized imagination of the Roman Empire's capital around the year 180 bc. At the time, the Roman Empire occupied a significant part of the territory that would belong to the European Union (EU) two millennia later. This short movie sequence shows capitals as complex spaces that incorporate a wide range of heritage, symbols, representations, visions, experiences and value systems. The capital is not always the largest, the most spacious, the most populous or the most beautiful city, but its capital status makes it special compared to other cities in a country. The motives for choosing a space to act as a capital are diverse: some cities were built by the will of sovereigns as places expressing political power and unity with a deity; some were erected as national symbols to demonstrate independence; and some have gained and lost the capital status throughout history as a result of political events and processes. In the twentieth century alone, the number of capitals around the world increased four times compared to the nineteenth century.

In this context, capital cities and the wide diversity of designs of their urban and political landscapes are topics that fascinate scholars. Accordingly, the three books presented in this review discuss the emergence, development and vanishing of capital cities from different standpoints: Jessica Joyce Christie, Jelena Bogdanović and Eulogio Guzmán edited the book *Political Landscapes of Capital Cities*; Emily Gunzburger-Makaš and Tanja Damljanović-Conley edited *Capital Cities in the Aftermath of Empires: Planning in Central and Southeastern Europe*; and Carola Hein wrote *The Capital of Europe: Architecture and Urban Planning for the European Union*.

The starting points of the Christie, Bogdanović and Guzmán edited volume *The Political Landscapes of Capital Cities* are Adam T. Smith's theoretical concept according to which 'the creation and preservation of political authority is a profoundly spatial problem' (Smith 2003: 20) and his three main categories for the study of the political landscape of capital cities – experience, perception and imagination.¹

While Smith elaborates his concept on the examples of ancient cities of the Classic Maya, Urartian and Mesopotamian cultures, in this volume, the

concept is applied to the cities located in a very wide geographic and temporal range, from South America to Southeast Asia, from the fourteenth-century bc Amarna to the twenty-first century Tehran. This spatial and temporal diversity is covered thanks to the outstanding contributions of an interdisciplinary group of authors trained in different methodologies – architects, architectural and art historians, ethnographers, historians and cultural anthropologists and geographers. These pluralisms have been very skilfully combined by three editors into a consistent and clearly structured book. In the introductory chapter, the three editors discuss the theoretical framework of the volume. Ten analytical and interpretative essays² follow Smith's thesis and study capitals as the primary places of power through the relationship of 'the natural landscape, human-made environments, and sociopolitical needs of governmental authority' (Christie et al. 2016: xiv). The book ends with conclusions that summarize the role of foundation events, claims to totality, precedential authority and processes of renewal as critical features of spatial politics of capital cities.

According to Jessica Joyce Christie's opening essay, nature and physical landscape played a decisive role in the selection of site for Amarna, which was built by the Egyptian pharaoh Amenophis IV (ca. 1353–33 bc) as a new capital on previously unoccupied terrain. In the natural landscape chosen by Amenophis, it was possible to identify symbols (e.g. the sunrise seen in a rift between cliffs) representing the materialized sovereign's vision of building a city in order to fulfil a political and religious mission ordained by the good Aten. Alexei Vranich highlights sophisticated connections between the natural landscape, architecture, politics and religion in the city of Tiwanaku: 'configuring architecture and space along symbolic lines is a fundamental design principle of the Andean builders' (Vranich in Christie et al. 2016: 182). In the space shaped by architecture, mountain peaks and mountain landscapes, politics and religion become one.

The discussion on the influence of capital cities on the formation and shaping of urban landscapes of other cities is one of the book's greatest strengths. In her second essay in this volume, Christie demonstrates that the city of Cusco was 'a prototype or micromodel of an ideological geography that was replaced in different scales at selected sites' (Christie in Christie et al. 2016: 215). This was a strategy applied by Pachakuti (ca. 1438–71) and his successors to form a network in which the cities that followed the model of the capital, Cusco, served as hubs. The network would cover and mark the Inca space. This topic is meticulously elaborated by Jelena Bogdanović, who convincingly demonstrates that the geopolitical and geo-religious landscape of Constantinople had a vital influence on other cities beyond the borders of the Empire. Constantinople, the Byzantine capital built by Constantine I (died in 337) in the impressive setting of the Bosphorus Bay, was conceived as 'the imperial Christian capital' (Bogdanović in Christie et al. 2016: 100). The capitals of medieval Bulgaria (Veliko Tŭrnovo and Preslav) and Serbia (Smederevo and Belgrade) imitated the spatial and design elements of Constantinople's political and religious landscape – from the triangular shape of the city located on hills and bordered on two sides by water (river), through the masonry technique of city walls, gates, monumental buildings and churches with high domes, to the practice of naming capitals after local rulers. Imitation could sometimes be observed mostly in the sphere of incorporating the conceptual elements of the Constantinopolitan model 'and its religious and urban ceremonials' (Bogdanović in Christie et al. 2016: 120), as it was the case with Kiev and Vladimir, in medieval Russia.

2. The authors of the essays are: Jessica Joyce Christie, Gregor Kalas, Jelena Bogdanović, Melody Rod-ari, Alexei Vranich, Eulogio Guzmán, Anne Parley Toxey, Stephanie Zeier Pilat and Talinn Grigor.

A distinct aspect of establishing and expressing power in capital cities is the physical demolition of already built structures and urban landscapes. As demonstrated by Stephanie Zeier Pilat, the demolition undertaken by the Italian Fascists (1922–43) in Rome symbolized the break with the previous government and was intended to create the impression of progress and advancement under the new regime. This phenomenon is further illustrated by Talinn Grigor in her vivid discussion on the modernization of Tehran, the capital of Iran, during the reign of Raza Shah Pahlavi (1925–41). The demolition of city walls, which were perceived as standing tributes to the political power of the previous ruling dynasty (Grigor in Christie et al. 2016: 355), and the razing of the royal complex and the nearby buildings emanated the power of the new sovereign placed under the umbrella of progress and modernization.

The authors of all essays are focused on the interaction between the authorities and capital cities' landscapes; it is only sporadically that they tackle the interaction between the inhabitants from different social strata and (politically) constructed landscapes of capitals. The text by Anne Parmly Toxey is an exception as it discusses how the subaltern, poor and powerless inhabitants of Matera (Italy) 'perceive the space of the city and how it reinforces their lack of political authority' (Toxey in Christie et al. 2016: 290). The topography of the terrain and the built structure of Matera also influenced the social form of the city and social divisions – the rich lived on a terrain that was elevated, compared to the lower areas inhabited by the poor and peasants – due to which no spiritual and physical interactions between these two worlds were established. Although Toxey's perspective differs from that of other authors in the book, and even from Smith's starting standpoint, she claims that Matera is a model example showing that 'politics, landscapes, and civic values interrelate' (Toxey in Christie et al. 2016: 290).

The volume *Capital Cities in the Aftermath of Empires*, edited by Gunzburger Makaš and Damjanović Conley, focuses on the representation of national identity as a structural element in creating or transforming capital cities and their urban landscapes. The spatial and temporal scope of this book is considerably narrower than that of *Political Landscapes of Capital Cities*. It focuses on Central and Southeastern Europe from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, covering the crucial period in the collapse of the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires, after the end of First World War, and the establishment of several nation states that wanted their capitals to 'give visual support to national identities' (Gunzburger Makaš and Damjanović Conley 2010: 2). The volume consists of fourteen case studies grouped into two sections – seven cities of Southeastern Europe that emerged after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the same number of cities in Central Europe that rose after the disintegration of the Habsburg Empire. The process of decline was different in these empires, and this was reflected on the already diverse historical and urban topographies of capital cities. In order to study these differences, the editors and the authors of the essays (historians, architectural historians and architects) used the same research methods, relying on archival documents, urban fabric and political authorities, to show how the created or the restructured capital city landscapes were used in the representation of national identities (Gunzburger Makaš and Damjanović Conley 2010: 9).

The political authorities that governed the capitals sought to endow urban forms with symbolic meanings. Accordingly, the beautification, monumentality and theatricality of the capital's urban landscape were in the service of

representing a political ideology and tangibly highlighting a vision of a national identity. It may be concluded that the representation of the national identity of capital city landscapes was conceptualized by political authorities in interaction with professionals, urban planners, architects and engineers. Consequently, the infrastructure projects placed in the service of political agendas 'to demonstrate national pride and progress [...] often overpowered the pragmatic purpose' (Gunzburger Makaš and Damljanović Conley 2010: 14).

In this context, the authors discuss tools available to urban planners, architects and engineers when putting in practice the political messages of national authorities through urban plans and projects for physical structures. In the capitals that rose after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the countries where national movements were strongly associated with the desired (western) Europeanization and modernization of the society (Ankara, Athens, Belgrade, Bucharest, Cetinje, Sofia and Tirana),³ plans and projects incorporated pro-European models and implied the demolition of the Ottoman legacy, which was fairly superficially and stereotypically considered backward, uncivilized and barbarous throughout the region. The approach to heritage, as a system of signs and images of the previous empire, was different in the milieus established after the disintegration of the Habsburg Empire and, consequently, the expression of political power had different physical manifestations. The cities of Budapest, Prague, Bratislava, Cracow and Warsaw, Zagreb, Ljubljana and Sarajevo⁴ embraced the former heritage that was adapted to accommodate new capital functions. In this series of cities, Sarajevo is a specific example where the authority and legacy of both empires overlapped, leading to the formation of complex, interrelated and at times contradictory urban identities.

Despite the appealing discourse on the construction and representation of the national identities of capitals by means of political authority, urban planning and architecture, this book concludes that the initial aspirations of the authorities, and professionals, were limited to the spheres of symbolism and intent rather than having been implemented in reality. Although they do not offer a deep insight into the relationship between urban planning and (re)imagining of the national identities of the discussed capital cities, the essays in this volume are important because they analyse examples from European countries that have been subject to research (available in English language) to a considerably lesser degree than the leading capitals of Western Europe. Another point of relevance is the timeframe covered by the book, keeping in mind that recent studies on the cities of Central and Southeastern Europe mainly cover the period after Second World War, i.e. the socialist or the post-socialist periods.

Several cities discussed in the *Political Landscapes of Capital Cities* are also covered in the *Capital Cities in the Aftermath of Empires*, but the analysis focuses on a different timeframe, allowing us to track changing relationships and influences among the capitals. Constantinople, as the Byzantine capital, was perceived in medieval Bulgaria and Serbia as a political, religious and spatial model. Several centuries later, the situation was completely different. Constantinople, which in the meantime had become Istanbul, the political and symbolic centre of the Ottoman Empire, appeared as an example to overcome. The eradication of the urban tissue perceived as the physical legacy of the Ottoman Empire was a distinct form of 'revenge' by the nations that gained liberation (Gunzburger Makaš and Damljanović Conley 2010: 9). This was additionally a representation of the power of the new sovereign state and the newly established authorities, comparable to the acts of demolition in

3. The authors of the essays are Zeynep Kezer, Eleni Bastéa, Tanja Damljanović Conley, Maria Raluca Popa and Emily Gunzburger Makaš, Maja Dragičević and Rachel Rossner, Elitza Stanoeva and Gentiana Kere, respectively.

4. The authors of the essays are Robert Nemes, Cathleen M. Giustino, Henrieta Moravčíková, Patrice M. Dabrowski, Sarah A. Kent, Jörg Stabenow and Emily Gunzburger Makaš, respectively.

Rome employed by the fascist government or those in the inter-war Tehran by King Raza Shah Pahlavi.

What happens if a state and the government representing it cannot make a decision, despite the political power they have to determine which city is the most suitable and most representative to serve as the capital? This is exactly the topic discussed by the architectural historian Carola Hein in her excellent book *The Capital of Europe*, where she seeks to examine why the European Union has not managed to establish a common capital, despite numerous attempts. Returning to the period when the early EU institutions, which enshrined the European sense of community, were formed, and bearing in mind 'their perception as the seed of a future European super-state' (Hein 2004: 7), Hein argues that this specific political agenda fostered the initial assumptions of the capital as a 'single and monumental symbol' of the territory and initiated a pursuit of locations to build it (Hein 2004: 67). Long-standing discussions, numerous urban planning and architectural visions of the future capital have constantly reflected the politically and culturally constructed landscape of Europe's longtime unification. Parallel to the attempts to establish a common capital, three cities – Strasbourg, Luxembourg and Brussels – had served as temporary seats from which the EU policy had been implemented, until 1992, when the Council of the EU 'made the polycentric capital permanent'.

In the period following the publication of *The Capital of Europe*, several countries whose capital cities were covered in the book *Capital Cities in the Aftermath of Empires* (Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania) have either joined the European Union or have been granted the status of candidate or potential candidate for the accession (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Turkey). Most of them established their capitals in the twentieth century, while associating the formation of their urban structure with a national identity. A strong link between the national identity and capital cities is also typical of all other EU members. As opposed to national parliaments, the buildings that house the EU institutions have not been perceived or experienced as buildings important for most Europeans. In Hein's opinion, this is due to the lack of an unambiguously European identity and the fact that 'built environment, architectural and urban forms, culture and cultural innovation' have remained under national control (Hein 2004: 7). She argues that a clearer architectural strategy could promote the emergence of a stronger European identity.

In the book *Political Landscapes of Capital Cities*, namely in the remarkable essay on the Mexica/Aztec capital Tenochtitlan, founded in the fourteenth century, Eulogio Guzmán addresses the 'universal human necessity to give political agendas spatial form' (Guzmán in Christie et al. 2016: 251). The Mexica carefully studied the spatial dimension of their political aspirations, while improving their political agenda and consolidating sovereignty by adopting, adjusting and transforming social and visual expressions of political landscapes, creating a vibrant and multi-cultural heritage. However, the ultimate imperative of this multiculturalism was to incorporate and subjugate all and everything into their political conglomerate, under their power and administration. Quite oppositely, multiculturalism and a wide range of diversity are promoted by the European Union through its political agenda, fostering the construction of a European identity as a set of diversities united in promoting common values. This is partly confirmed by the 'diversity' of the three officially accepted capitals instead of a single 'capital city', referring us

back to Smith's claim cited at the beginning of this review: 'the creation and preservation of political authority is a profoundly spatial problem'.

The three important books presented in this review share a common topic – the capital city. Generally, they analyse capital cities as places where the governmental authority and power have been manifested over several millennia. Then again, they have different starting points and perspectives, employ different research methods, cover different periods in history and deal with different geographies of the studied capital cities. Christie, Bogdanović and Guzmán focus on political authority as a prime asset in transforming natural landscapes into culturally constructed and ideologically defined landscapes of diachronic capitals in different parts of the world. Gunzburger Makaš and Damljanović Conley focus on the need of the nation states of Central and Southeastern Europe established at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, after the collapse of two great empires, to make the representation of the national identity visible in the physical space of their capitals. In her book, Carola Hein offers an insight into the future of the representation of states in the post-national age and the construction of a common (European) identity relying on the power of architecture. All three books are written with imagination and knowledge; they recurrently address the reader in balanced terms, using rich illustrations, some of which were made by the authors of the texts. Their extraordinary significance becomes apparent once they are brought in juxtaposition, jointly and individually, as they offer both scholarly and popular audiences wide-ranging perspectives in exploring, imagining, perceiving and experiencing capital cities.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Vuksanović-Macura, Z. (2017), 'Multiple landscapes of capital cities', *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies*, 4:3, pp. 437–44, doi: [10.1386/jucs.4.3.437_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jucs.4.3.437_1)

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