Points of persuasion: Truth spots in future city development

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Abstract

Geographers and historians have contributed to a well-established literature on how places become repositories of inherited meanings and contested memories. Much less attention has been afforded to space and place as future-making resources. In this article, we consider how extant places feature in the imagination, planning and development of ex novo cities. Focusing on three new administrative capitals in Southeast Asia – Putrajaya (in Malaysia), Naypyidaw (in Myanmar) and Nusantara (in Indonesia) – we show how places have been mobilized as points of persuasion, or what sociologist Thomas Gieryn has termed "truth spots". Drawing and building upon Gieryn's work, we identify three heuristic types of truth spot: *aspirational* truth spots that demonstrate progressive developmental possibilities for emulation; *antithetical* truth spots signaling past failures to avoid in planning and developing the future city; and *anticipatory* truth spots that articulate future expectations, justifying forms of (in)action in the present. While existing work on truth spots emphasizes powers of persuasion associated with physical, in-person experiences of place, our emphasis and contribution centres on the narrative mobilization of place references.

Key words: geographies of the future, Naypyidaw, Nusantara, place references, Putrajaya

Introduction

The diverse ways in which places relate to time have received uneven scholarly attention. Most existing research across the humanities and social sciences has considered how historical actions account for places in the present, or read extant places as repositories of inherited meanings and contested memories. In contrast, in this paper we consider how places feature in the imagination and making of cities. We do so in the context of an interdisciplinary collaborative research project on ex novo administrative capitals in Southeast Asia. The conception, planning and construction of cities that are intended to serve as state administrative centres are self-evidently occasions for consideration of the material and symbolic construction of national futures (Vale, 1992). Our focus is not on national forms or identities, but on wider narratives and the associated role that place references play in shaping future city plans and outcomes. Specific places feature prominently in circulating narratives about both existing urban developmental possibilities and future expectations. We show how place references, both domestic and international, are mobilized as points of persuasion in the planning and politics of future city development.

Our efforts to foreground the role of place references in the making of future cities does not dismiss prior work on how places articulate past-ness and memory. On the contrary, among the foundational scholarship for our collaborative research is work on, with and against "lieux de mémoire" (Nora, 1989), some of it published in this journal (Legg, 2005; King, 2008a). *Lieux de mémoire* in the wider literature – including but expanding over the past three decades way beyond Pierre Nora's seminal contributions – encompasses the power of places in articulating and reproducing both hegemonic historical narratives and counter-memories (Harrowell, 2015; Sumartojo, 2012). It is by now also widely recognized that place-based

memorial processes have future-facing normative effects. As cultural geographers Alderman and Inwood (2013: 187) have noted: "While memory is ostensibly about the past, it is shaped to serve ideological interests in the present and to carry certain cultural beliefs into the future". A key concern in our own contribution is how extant city projects are selectively remembered and narrated in the making of future cities. In the development of new administrative capitals, existing and past city developments are referenced in ways that both reflect and generate normative future imaginaries – in terms of *aspirational* ways forward, as well as through *antithetical* pathways to avoid.

In addition to considering historical place-based experiences as resources for the planning of new cities, we draw attention to how some places are imagined as instantiations of the future. Building on recent work on sociological fictionalism, we examine how the anticipated futures for which ex novo cities are planned arise through "fictional expectations" (Beckert, 2013). In Jens Beckert's terms, future imaginaries (even more than memories of the past) are fictitious because under conditions of uncertainty "a reality in the future *cannot* be known in the present" (Beckert, 2013: 225, italics in the original). Our contention is that geographical variegation plays a powerful role in shaping how future realities are imaginatively constructed – or fictioned – in the present. We draw upon Thomas Gieryn's work on "truth spots" (Gieryn, 2018) to spatialize sociological fictionalism. In particular, we foreground the role of places in the making (up) of persuasive narratives about times to come. In a world of uneven spatial development, some places appear to be – or may be strategically cast as – more advanced, ahead or leading edge. Such places can thus become *anticipatory* of future conditions elsewhere in ways that rationalize pre-emptive action and investment, including in terms of how new cities should be planned.

The remainder of the paper consists of two main sections. These respectively provide elaboration of our conceptual scheme, and its application to three planned national administrative centres that are at different stages of development. Conceptually, we consider how extant cities are mobilized and referenced elsewhere as three distinct types of truth spots: aspirational, antithetical and anticipatory. The ex novo cities to which we apply our scheme are all located in Southeast Asia: Putrajaya, which became home to Malaysia's federal government administration in 1999; Naypyidaw, which was formally inaugurated as the new capital city of Myanmar in 2006; and Nusantara, the planned replacement for Jakarta as Indonesia's national capital (a project still in the early stages of development, and which was only officially named "Nusantara" in early 2022). Ordering our coverage of these cities chronologically, we show how: (1) the three different types of truth spots are evident in a variety of ways in each of the three cities; (2) this involves referencing of a geographically-diverse range of places as truth spots, both within and beyond Southeast Asia; and (3) the historically earlier administrative capital cities in our study (i.e. Putrajaya and Naypyidaw) are mobilized as points of persuasion in narratives surrounding the most recent one (i.e. Nusantara).

How places are mobilized as truth spots

Some highly influential social science scholarship over the past decade or so has examined authoritative imaginings of the future and their effects in the present (Anderson, 2010; Beckert, 2018). To date, however, little attention has been given to the role of place(s) in the narrative construction of expected or plausible futures. For economic sociologist Jens Beckert, imagined futures are fictional in ways similar to how literary theorists understand works of fiction. The defining characteristic of fiction writing is not that it is unreal, but that

it seeks to create its own world and spaces of mental operation for readers. The success of any piece of fiction in doing so is dependent, in part, on how convincingly the author narrates that world through the interweaving of elements, features or referents that are not purely imaginary. In much the same way, Beckert shows, the narration of empirically-unverifiable economic futures needs to marshal existing evidence and accepted realities in order to become plausible "as if" assumptions about times to come. Beckert thus suggests (citing Riles, 2010) that fictional expectations are "placeholders" for the unknowability of future states of the world. Yet in doing so, he largely overlooks a world of actually existing places and uneven spatial development as constitutive elements in the narration of expectation. This is a somewhat surprising omission given the longstanding tendency for spatial variegation to be translated into temporal conceptions of some people and places as being "behind" or "the past" of others – and because, for all the critique this has been subjected to within the academy (pre-eminently Chakrabarty, 2000 in History; and Fabian, 2014 [originally 1983] in Anthropology), such tendencies continue to pervade uneven economic development imaginaries associated with supranational organizations and the media. The continued prevalence of imaginaries in which some parts of the world are considered to be furthest "ahead" forms a powerful spatial backdrop to plausible narratives of the future.

If widespread belief in what Johannes Fabian termed the "spatialization of time" means that a world of variegated development is a resource for persuasive narratives about the future, it is specific places that become key spatio-temporal reference points or "topoi" (Fabian, 2014: 111). In this regard, work on the intersection of place and truth claims is particularly instructive. The premise of Thomas Gieryn's conception of "truth spots" is that "place matters mightily for what people believe to be true" (Gieryn, 2018: 2-3). As Gieryn (2018: 3) elaborates:

> To locate an account is to return it to a place where it was discovered or manufactured, where it is displayed and celebrated, where it gets enacted and reproduced, where it is contested or obscured. Such places may become truth-spots—and the place itself is not merely an incidental setting where some idea or assertion just happens to gain credibility, but a vital cause of that enhanced believability.

Gieryn details the ways in which a diverse range of places – from Delphi's ruins to Henry Ford's Potemkin Villages to an ultra-clean scientific laboratory at the University of Indiana – confer credibility upon different kinds of truth claims. In earlier work, Gieryn (2006) applied a similar approach to the way in which Chicago and Los Angeles (LA) were positioned as the leading edge of urban development processes by schools of scholars at opposite ends of the twentieth century. Through the Los Angeles School from the 1980s, LA not only came to stand for claims about urban futures, it was narrated as the future – a "prototopos" (Soja, 1989: 191). In Gieryn's words, LA emerged as a future-defining truth spot: "a harbinger of what other US cities will become – a prototype for the urban future in general, a model predicting what eventually will happen elsewhere" (Gieryn, 2006: 26). The effects and implications of such points of persuasion *elsewhere* are central to our own interests: how truth spots become "portable" (Gieryn, 2006: 20) such that they may be moblized in the narrative fictioning of new cities, even in contexts spatially far-removed from the original topos.

There has been no shortage of work in urban studies in recent years on the portability of cities as models. Influential policy mobilities scholarship, for example, has conceptualized how cities (and smaller-scale sites of urban innovation) are mobilized through globally-extended "informational infrastructure" and "connective tissue" (McCann, 2011: 114, 118), while translocal "network formations" are understood to facilitate inter-urban learning (McFarlane,

2011: 4). Our concern is not with the means or mechanisms through which place-based ideas and models travel, but with the roles they play in the planning of cities elsewhere. This is certainly a component of the strands of urban studies literature we have mentioned. However, in that literature, as well as in research on the role of "inter-referencing" in the "worlding" of cities (Ong, 2011), models have largely been understood in terms of successful or "best" places that are worthy of emulation. In contrast to the *predictive* connotation of LA-as-model in Gieryn's work, in other words, recent urban studies research has tended to focus on *superlative* models of "best practice". Superlative cities do also function as truth spots, but in a rather different way to the LA-style prototopos. Whereas the LA School of urban geography narrated that city as auguring or instantiating the future (Gieryn, 2006), superlative model cities present idealized elements of existing urban development that may be adopted as part of plans elsewhere.

Overall, we proffer three ways in which city reference-places are invoked as truth spots. The first and second types of truth spots involve referring back to extant city experiences as resources and lessons for the planning of a future city. First are *aspirational* truth spots. Here the new city of the future is narrated with reference to – often by replicating, appropriating or borrowing from – desirable or progressive developmental possibilities that are perceived to have been realized in an extant city. The work of aspirational truth spots in our scheme is very much in line with how the successful city (as best practice or superlative model) is understood to be brought into new contexts in the urban policy mobilities literature. However, just as important scholarly efforts have been made to counter-balance the success-centrism or "successism" of that literature (McCann and Ward, 2015) – giving more attention to policy "failure" and extant urban outcomes as cautionary lessons (Temenos and Lauermann, 2020) – we also consider how proponents of new cities look back at much less

positive developmental antecedents. We thus distinguish aspirational truth spots from what we term *antithetical* truth spots – our second heuristic type. Antithetical truth spots denote "futures to avoid" in city planning and development. This is well recognised in scholarship on new capital cities, where planning for the future "works to 'other' the past and older urban forms" (Koch, 2018: 5), often including aspects of the existing national capital (King, 2008b).

Our third type of truth spot is distinct from the other two in that it involves looking forward through reference to cities that are deemed to be predictive of future conditions. What we term *anticipatory* truth spots are not future-making developmental resources materialized in extant city experiences, but are invoked as signs of times to come. To return to Gieryn's work on LA: in the last decades of the twentieth century, that city (and its wider urban region) was presented as denoting forms, processes or conditions that would eventually be discernible elsewhere – perhaps everywhere! (Gieryn, 2006) – rather than as either somewhere to replicate (aspirationally) or as a cautionary tale about a pathway to avoid (for being antithetical to desired developmental outcomes). In his more recent work, Gieryn (2018) has described truth spots such as Henry Ford's model villages as "prototypal" in that they were built explicitly to show the plausibility of an alternative future. This only partially applies to coverage of anticipatory truth spots in our paper. Our concern with anticipatory truth spots is not limited to how (or whether) they are deliberately assembled and cast as prototypal by their makers. Rather, our interest in this third type of truth spot is concerned more widely with how they are perceived to portend the future, and so are invoked in anticipatory imaginings and action elsewhere.

Our focus on the work of truth spots *elsewhere* (i.e. in contexts spatially removed from the

original location) means that we also foreground rather different geographies of persuasion from those emphasised by Gieryn (2018). In Gieryn's recent major work, the key ingredients of truth spots are not only a unique location, and how the place concerned is narrated, but also the "material stuff" gathered there. For Gieryn, in other words, the materiality of a location, its "solid physicality" (2018: 2), is a vital component of how places "make people believe" (2018: 3). In contrast, our own focus on the narrative or discursive mobilization of places as points of persuasion is more closely aligned with urban studies work on "inter-referencing" (Ong, 2011). We do not doubt the persuasive powers of (material) spatial experience. We also acknowledge Gieryn's awareness of the power of circulating ideas and narratives about places – his work on the portability of Chicago through the Burgess model very clearly demonstrates his appreciation of such dynamics (Gieryn, 2006) – but we believe that circulating points of persuasion are worthy of further examination in their own right. In the next section of the paper, we apply our conceptualization to the making of three ex novo administrative capitals.

Truth spots in the making of three administrative capital cities in Southeast Asia

The three new cities in our study have been planned to serve as national administrative centres of countries in Southeast Asia. All three of the Southeast Asian national contexts concerned were European colonial territories until the middle decades of the twentieth century: what are today Malaysia, Myanmar and Indonesia. Those nation-states have different relationships with colonialisms past and present – any one of them involving layers of complexity that we certainly cannot do justice to here – but all show evidence of inherited imaginings of modernity and futurity lying in distant western metropoles (Anderson, 1998). At the same time and in all three contexts, the performative urban work of nation building has

involved claims to continuity with selective imaginings of pre-colonial pasts. Examples include incorporation of ostensibly Malay design features in the independence architecture of Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia (Lai, 2007), the Javanese traditions of Surakarta in Indonesia under the New Order regime (Kusno, 2000), and the (re)construction of historically significant religious monuments by Myanmar's military government (Hudson, 2008). In recent decades, such post-colonial national landscaping efforts in Southeast Asia have been accompanied by a noted rise in the "inter-referencing" of experiences from elsewhere in Asia (Ong, 2011).[i]

In what follows, we examine the planning and development of Putrajaya, Naypyidaw and Nusantara, and their reference to extant cities, in terms of the mobilization of our three different kinds of truth spots. This includes how the three Southeast Asian administrative capitals have, over time, been brought into narrative relation to each other, as well as how they each form part of wider worlds of urban inter-referencing. Thus, while we cover each of the ex novo capital cities in turn, the unit of analysis in each case is not so much the city project site itself. Rather, it is that site's comparative and constitutive relation to more or less distant points of persuasion. Chronological ordering of the cities and their relational geographies – starting with Putrajaya which was inaugurated in 1999, followed by Naypyidaw (from 2006), and finally the ongoing Nusantara project (initially announced in 2019) – allows demonstration of how earlier projects became part of the narrative making of later ones. We draw upon three main types of narrative sources: (i) national media, both in English and the national languages concerned; (ii) academic publications, mostly in planning, urban studies and Southeast Asian studies; and (iii) material from original policy, planning and political proponents, both archival and through direct interviews. The availability of material from these generalized types of sources varies across the three city cases. While we

are able to draw upon material from all three source types in the case of Putrajaya, including an interview with its chief planner, this is not the case for either Naypyidaw (owing to the historical secrecy of that capital project under a military regime) or Nusantara. In the case of Nusantara, at the time of conducting the research for this article, that recently initiated project had not yet featured in much academic writing, and the COVID-19 pandemic had disrupted development of the city as well as efforts to study it, including through field-based interviews.

Putrajaya: federal government administrative centre for a Malay-Muslim Information Age

Malaysia's new federal government administrative centre, Putrajaya, was officially developed from the early 1990s as an "intelligent" city with an Islamic aesthetic. The city has been the focus of substantive academic analyses which have (i) discerned the influence of the British Garden City concept and new town experiences; (ii) noted design references to ancient cities across the Islamic world; and (iii) likened Putrajaya to existing master planned administrative capitals such as Brasilia, Canberra and Chandigarh (King, 2008b; Moser, 2010). All of those sets of reference points were also mentioned in an interview with Zainuddin bin Mohammad, who led the Malaysian government department which oversaw development of the Putrajaya masterplan.[ii] First, while the ingrained influence of Ebenezer Howard and subsequent British new town experiences have been widely acknowledged in histories of planning in Malaysia (Goh, 1991), this remains noteworthy in the context of a late twentieth century effort to build a distinctively Malaysian administrative centre decades after independence from Britain. Second, and relatedly, reference to what Zainuddin termed "great Islamic cities" involved a symbolic connection to Malaysia's majority Malay population (which is Muslim by constitutional definition). Zainuddin recalled that he had

been instructed by the Malaysian prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, to plan Putrajaya as a "*bandar firdaus*" (heavenly city) inspired by Qur'anic verses. Part of the objective here was to out-Islamize Mahathir's main electoral rivals and "shut down" Islamic political opposition to the project. Doing this through reference to supposedly superlative examples of Perso-Islamic architecture and design, such as the city of Isfahan – the inspiration for Putrajaya's centrepiece boulevard and bridge – invoked and politically activated historical notions of a Muslim civilizational golden age. The "fantasy Middle Eastern" (Moser, 2012) aesthetic of Putrajaya more widely is a point of distinction from mid-twentieth century ex novo capital complexes such as Brasilia or Chandigarh, which were showcases of international style architecture. Third, however, Canberra was invoked as a model for Putrajaya in terms of what was considered to be its exemplary incorporation of water features into a master-planned national capital city. As such, both Canberra and Isfahan were drawn upon as aspirational truth spots in the design, planning and representational power of Malaysia's new administrative capital.

Against the backdrop of Malaysian political and economic development in the 1990s, the existing national administrative as well as commercial capital, Kuala Lumpur (KL), became increasingly antithetical to Mahathirist conceptions of a suitably well-ordered centre of federal government. On the one hand, Putrajaya followed prior state-sponsored development projects that were "in line with Vision 2020" – Mahathir's understanding of what it would mean to be a "fully developed country" by that year – in being located within Malaysia's main metropolitan region, around (but also extending well beyond) KL. In addition, the federal territory of KL city proper was the skyscraping urban centre and existing leading edge of Vision 2020-oriented national infrastructural development and experimentation (Bunnell, 2022). Malaysian professionals, firms and institutions that had been involved in prior large-

scale urban developments in KL were commissioned to deploy that experience in Putrajaya as a showcase of Malaysian city-building know-how. On the other hand, there are academics who have noted that KL came to be seen as spatially Other to Mahathir's plans for Putrajaya. For architectural theorist Ross King (2008b), for example, KL's multi-ethnic, multi-faith cosmopolitanism and unruly city-ness made it the antithesis of Putrajaya's modernist Islamic order. KL's historical public spaces meant that it was well established as the national symbolic centre for political protest. In the late 1990s, that came to include *reformasi* demonstrations against Mahathir and his authoritarian handling of the Asian Financial Crisis. Before Putrajaya was even fully functional, political commentators contrasted Mahathir's new "palatial" residence in Putrajaya with democratic ferment on the streets of KL (Maznah, 2000). It would be too much of a stretch to cast this as a foundational security-related motivation for Mahathir having initiated the Putrajaya project a decade earlier. However, *reformasi* certainly drew public attention to how Mahathirist (anti)urban ideals in Putrajaya involved a developmental departure from KL-style urbanism, even as the two cities were in the process of being integrated as part of an extended (greater KL) urban region.

The wider planning and development of Putrajaya as part of greater KL was also driven by imaginaries of Southeast Asian megacities as antithetical truth spots. Moving federal government ministries to the new administrative capital, and out of KL, was vaunted as a means of reducing KL's congestion and overcrowding, so as to avoid the developmental fate of the capital cities (and wider urban regions) of several neighbouring countries. As Zainuddin bin Muhammad saw it, *not* proceeding with the Putrajaya project would have resulted in KL following a pathway to megacity dysfunction: "the pressure of development has reached to its limit. And we feel that if we do not do something about diversifying, or going out [of KL], or creating another centre, we would soon be like Bangkok, like Manila,

like Jakarta". In this narrative, KL had not (yet) become the ultimate "Other", but was in danger of becoming like the notoriously challenged "third world" (mega)cities elsewhere in the region. Planning to prevent this future outcome for Malaysia's new capital city means that there is an anticipatory dimension here. Above all, however, Bangkok, Manila and Jakarta were invoked as antithetical truth spots that justified the late twentieth century ex novo development of Putrajaya as part of a spatially-expanded, and ostensibly less-congested, greater KL.

The "intelligent" technological specifications of Putrajaya and its surrounding urban development region were narrated in a primarily anticipatory register with reference to Silicon Valley. Putrajaya came to form part of a high-tech development zone extending southwards from KL, known as the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC). Launched in the mid-1990s, this was not only officially intended to help realize Vision 2020 economic development targets, but also to lead Malaysia into a supposedly immanent Information Age (Bunnell, 2004). Malaysia's MSC, centred on Putrajaya and the adjacent would-be technopole of Cyberjaya was, accordingly, mapped into a much wider imagined geography of uneven technological advancement. Here, Silicon Valley was imagined as globally leading-edge in a variety of ways. On the one hand, the will to "Siliconize" Malaysia through the MSC was driven by international media and academic narratives of Silicon Valley as the apex of information economy innovation. On the other hand, in Malaysian political and media discourse, California connoted extreme liberal forms of Occidental society and culture that were cast as largely inappropriate for predominantly Muslim Malaysia. Silicon Valley was thus at once aspirational in the techno-economic domain, and antithetical to the desired social norms of Southeast Asia. Above all, however, Silicon Valley was referred to in narratives surrounding the development of the MSC as an anticipatory truth spot. For better

or worse, Silicon Valley was understood in 1990s Malaysia as the most advanced extant manifestation of an Information Age that Malaysia and everywhere else was entering. In view of the prospect of such conditions, the MSC was promoted politically as a "test bed" through which Malaysia could prepare for future opportunities and challenges. Within that space of experimentation, Putrajaya combined leading edge technology and Islamic cultural continuity not just to govern the Malaysia of the future, but also as "a template for other cities to emulate" (Moser, 2010: 286).

Naypyidaw: A city in anticipation of resurgent demand for political reform

Initial phases in the development of Putrajaya were completed in the late 1990s such that it could plausibly have been an important reference point for the making of Naypyidaw. Although Naypyidaw was not inaugurated as Myanmar's new national capital until 2006, with construction work beginning in the early 2000s (Farrelly, 2018), its conception and planning must have stretched back to a time when the first phase of Putrajaya was still being built. Myanmar joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997, and as Moser (2010: 285) noted: "It is highly likely that state officials in Myanmar have visited Putrajaya as Myanmar participates in ASEAN meetings, some of which have been hosted by Malaysia". Another scholar who spent extended periods of time in Naypyidaw studying Myanmar's political dynamics noted engagement of technical expertise from Thailand as well as China, but not Malaysia (Farrelly, 2018). We have found no definitive evidence of Putrajaya having been an aspirational model or any other form of "truth spot" for Myanmar's military elite. One Malaysian public figure, reporting on an official trip to Myanmar, did refer to Naypyidaw as "their Putrajaya", although this may have been a squarely comparative gesture without implication of any vector of influence or persuasion. Nonetheless, there are

some striking similarities between the two cities and their constitutive geographies. Like Putrajaya, Naypyidaw has been read in terms of efforts to articulate post-colonial national identity around a politically and demographically dominant ethno-religious group (Seekins, 2009). More significantly for the focus of this article, Naypyidaw, like Putrajaya before it, was from its inception a nation building project defined in opposition to an extant capital city. Cluttered and congested Yangon, with its British colonial trading legacies of ethnic and religious diversity, was the pre-eminent antithetical truth spot for Naypyidaw (Farrelly, 2018). Pushing the Putrajaya and Malaysia comparison further, we might say that Yangon was Naypyidaw's Kuala Lumpur.

While the first phase of Putrajaya was nearing completion by the time Myanmar was admitted to ASEAN in June 1997, the *reformasi* street demonstrations that subsequently erupted in KL and other Southeast Asian cities must have been a particular source of anxiety for the military junta in Yangon. A decade earlier, Myanmar's national government machinery had been "completely paralyzed" when civil servants and even some parts of the military had taken part in anti-government uprisings (Myoe, 2006: 9). Donald Seekins' recent essay on Naypyidaw as representing "the civilian and military elite's blueprint for a 'new' Myanmar" notes how from 1989, the military junta made serious efforts to render Yangon "insurrection proof" (Seekins, 2021: 398, 403). However, given the difficulties of effecting such a transformation in the context of Yangon's "crowds, deteriorating old neighbourhoods, poverty and general social instability" (404), the *reformasi* protests on the streets of KL would surely have heightened alarm among the military elite in Myanmar. Indeed, Malaysian political commentary at that time noting how Brasilia had arisen in the 1950s from military rulers of Brazil who "did not trust their safety in the old capital, Rio de Janeiro" (Maznah, 2000) applied more readily to the eventual makers of Naypyidaw than to Mahathir's

construction of Putrajaya. Although Mahathir did cling to his position as Malaysian prime minister for several more years after the initial wave of *reformasi* demonstrations in KL, those in Jakarta toppled Indonesian President Suharto (whose authoritarian New Order regime extended back to the 1960s, when military rule in Myanmar also began). In terms of our conceptual scheme, Jakarta and KL were thus both as much anticipatory as they were antithetical truth spots for Naypyidaw. These two cities of *reformasi* protest diagnosed the apparent inevitability of heightened public demands for democratic transition that would be difficult to resist in an existing dense and restive capital city such as Yangon, but which might be evaded by building a new administrative capital for civil servants and military personnel.

One specific site within Yangon is among the reference places that can be read from the initial making of Naypyidaw. A near-replica of Yangon's *Shwedagon Paya*, the largest pagoda in Myanmar and one of its most sacred places, was built in Naypyidaw (as the Uppatasanti Pagoda), complete with attending monasteries and libraries. At one level, the very existence of the Uppatasanti Pagoda, and the fact that it contains a replica of a Chinese Buddha tooth relic (Seekins, 2021), appears to confirm academic conclusions that the city works through an entirely different "representational economy" – with very different aspirational reference points – from most other recently-completed new capital projects around the world (Koch, 2018: 5). At the same time, however, Uppatasanti is bound up with more pragmatic political deliberation and planning. Within Yangon, the *Shwedagon Paya* is part of an "insurgent landscape", with the hill on the western side of the pagoda having been where Aung San Suu Kyi addressed a huge pro-democracy crowd in August 1988 (Seekins, 2009: 69). In contrast, as Seekins has put it, "the Uppatasanti Pagoda [in Naypyidaw] can be considered a Shwedagon purged of its historical associations with popular resistance" (2009:

67). Naypyidaw more widely was designed in such a way as to preclude the emergence of public spaces where citizens might challenge the state (Seekins, 2021). The new city's location involved separation of ruling functions and distancing from "the potentially unruly people of Yangon" (Therborn, 2017: 229), the former capital which remained "a power base of civil society and a spiritual center for democratic movements against the ruling junta" (Preecharushh, 2009: 148). But the planned vastness of the Naypyidaw itself has been interpreted to mean that "it will always lack the urban cadences and unpredictable rhythms" of established towns and cities (Varadarajan, 2007).

As Naypyidaw has developed over a period during which Myanmar's position within and beyond Southeast Asia has changed, so new aspirational cues have become evident from the built landscape of the city. The highly secretive establishment of Naypyidaw as "insurance against regime change" (Varadarajan, 2007) in the face of forces of ethnic separatism as well as democratization means that little is known about the city's foundational reference points (although there are rumours of North Korean involvement in the construction of tunnels – Seekins, 2021). However, by the time Naypyidaw was formally inaugurated in 2006, Myanmar's state managers and military were officially following a "Roadmap to Disciplined Democracy", auguring a new political era that would see the opening up of the country's economy and greater international engagement, including a guided embrace of democratic reforms. It thus becomes increasingly possible to discern idealized references to – and, in some cases, direct developmental assistance from – elsewhere. The interior of Naypyidaw International Airport, for example, makes clear design references to Singapore's Changi International Airport, while the stadia built to host the 2013 SEA Games (and its Olympic-like opening ceremony), involved Chinese design expertise and funding (Creak, 2014; Zaw, 2013). With many of the Games' events held in Naypyidaw, the city formed the symbolic

backdrop to the wider "Opening" of Myanmar and its return to the international community. While this suggested possibilities for extending political geographical examination of Naypyidaw beyond its largely antithetical historical relation to Yangon – including delving further into the relational geographies of the city's genesis through archival and interview work – any such openings closed with re-imposition of military rule in 2021. For now, further analysis of Naypyidaw is dependent largely on existing academic publications and media narratives that shed less light on its constitutive truth spots than on the built environment and lived experience of the city. Even today, some 16 years after the city was inaugurated, the predominant representational trope is of a landscape of "empty" roads and buildings and the absence of other defining features and facilities of modern urban life.

Nusantara: Decentralizing the future of national development

Narratives about Putrajaya, Naypyidaw and other planned capital cities elsewhere have been drawn upon in various ways to oppose and support the building of Nusantara, Indonesia's new capital city. Opponents to the project use Putrajaya and Naypyidaw as antithetical truth spots, or as evidence of planned capital cities that have failed to materialize in ways states' had hoped for. Putrajaya, for instance, is home to less than a third of its planned 330,000 population (Salim and Negara, 2019), and has been depicted in media and scholarly discussions as failing to become the 'green', 'model' and inclusive city that was projected (Moser 2010). Moreover, Putrajaya is criticized as a city designed more for tourists and the Muslim world than for local citizens, and in that way is not welcoming nor representative of the nation's cultural and religious diversity (Moser 2010; Tajuddin 2005). In a similar vein, while Naypyidaw is acknowledged as featuring impressive highways and monuments, they are seen to serve no real practical purpose: the city's streets and buildings are empty with few

people who want to live there long-term (Taufiqurrahman, 2019: 2). Putrajaya and Naypyidaw are thus mobilized as regional warning signs for building cities that exclude local populations, serving largely as showpieces for "political ambition", rather than as cities to live in (Souisa and Salim, 2022). Proponents for Nusantara, in contrast, emphasize the seemingly insurmountable challenges found in present-day Jakarta, as well as its dismal looking future. Jakarta has long been Indonesia's centre for economy and industry, but it has some of the worst logistics and transport delays in the region, costing the nation an estimated 7 billion USD in annual losses (Leung, 2016; Sapiie, 2019; The Economist, 2019). Although these 'Jakarta problems' are experienced in highly uneven ways, they affect everyone. President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo while himself stuck in a Jakarta traffic jam and running late for a meeting in 2019 declared: "This is why the capital is being moved" (The Jakarta Post, 2019a). Apart from such infrastructural difficulties and inefficiencies, Jakarta also faces severe problems with pollution and access to groundwater, and is said to be one of the fastest sinking cities in the world (Colven, 2020). Given that the city is already prone to flooding and vulnerable to rising sea-levels, it easy to see why building a new capital in Kalimantan (the Indonesian part of the island of Borneo) seems easier than addressing the environmental, economic and social problems that plague Jakarta.

While Jakarta's troubled present and anticipated dystopian future drive rationalization of the new capital project, the idea of moving the national capital has a long history, particularly in relation to uneven regional development in Indonesia. Sukarno, the nation's first President (1945-67), considered Palangkaraya, also in Kalimantan, as a suitable location for a new capital in part because it was at the nation's geographic centre. This new capital ambition was bound up with Sukarno's state-building efforts at the time, which were focused on the creation and expansion of administrative provinces (such as Central Kalimantan, for which

Palangkaraya became the provincial capital) (Van Klinken, 2006). Following Sukarno, successive presidents, including Suharto (1967-98) and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-14), have continued murmurs of capital relocation, citing 'Jakarta's problems', as well as the need for more geographically balanced regional development (Salim and Negara, 2019; The Jakarta Post, 2019b). Current President Jokowi is committed to realizing these past dreams, envisioning a new capital that will "not only [be] a symbol of our nation's identity, but also represents our nation's development…It's for the sake of realizing an equitable and just economy" (Gorbiano, 2019). The eventual decision to move the nation's capital to East Kalimantan province forms part of Jokowi's wider efforts to spread development, via infrastructure and investments, out of Java and to Indonesia's so-called Outer Islands (Hill and Negara, 2018; Warburton, 2018). Relating these themes of regional development and national unity to our other ex novo cities, we see that Nusantara seems less like Putrajaya, which sits close to KL (forming an extension to the *existing* main metropolitan region), and rather more like Naypyidaw, in its move further inland and away from Yangon (King, 2008b).

The role other planned capital cities play as truth spots has been more prominent in the planning of Nusantara than was the case with Naypyidaw or even Putrajaya. Although Putrajaya's planners did cite specific aspects of Canberra as inspirations, Jokowi has made explicit political use of the Australian capital as a reference point for imagining an Indonesian capital of the future that is "smart, green and beautiful" (Patria et al., 2019). During an official trip to Canberra to ratify bilateral economic ties in February 2020, he took the opportunity to meet with the CEO of the National Capital Authority (Canberra's governmental planning unit). Jokowi was taken on a tour of the capital and Mount Ainslie, a hill which overlooks the city's government buildings and natural areas. According to Jokowi,

his visit to Canberra gave him ideas for how "to improve the development of our new capital – both in terms of management and [spatial] planning". Considering the use of natural topography in the design and layout of Canberra, Jokowi noted in particular that "there were no administrative buildings that were more than seven stories high…it's a very good policy" (The Jakarta Post, 2020). Comparison of a view from Mount Ainslie to a winning design envisioning the layout of the new capital (Dobson, 2020), demonstrates how particular views of Canberra have served as a resource for the aspirational 'yet to come' in Indonesia. While such views are neither neutral nor self-evident (since other aspects of Canberra might have been seen as reasons *not* to proceed with Nusantara), we also note how Jokowi's physical presence in Canberra lent credence to his plans for the new capital, and how "being there" is often important for establishing truth claims (Gieryn, 2006). Jokowi's perspectives on (and from) Canberra invoked Australia's planned capital city as an aspirational truth spot and furthermore, legitimized the transformation of Bukit Suharto, a historic hill in the Nusantara area, to emulate what is seen to have worked in Canberra from the vantage-point of Mount Ainslie.

President Jokowi has a long political track record of learning from elsewhere and obtaining international 'best practice' legitimation for his own urban initiatives. As mayor of Solo, a small city in Central Java province, between 2005 and 2012, Jokowi garnered acclaim for the ways he oversaw peaceful relocation of street vendors, supported small businesses and traditional markets, and involved people's participation in public planning processes (Bunnell et al., 2013). These successes in Solo attracted national and international attention, and 'Solo-as-model' travelled domestically as well as abroad, putting the city "on the map" and serving as a "launchpad" for Jokowi's political career in Jakarta (Bunnell et al., 2018: 1068). This track record helps explain Jokowi's enthusiasm for public engagement with model places in

building (and garnering support for) Nusantara, and why he is looking to model people – often associated with idealized places – to legitimize the future Indonesian capital. The Nusantara steering committee that Jokowi established includes Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed from the United Arab Emirates who "has experience reconstructing Abu Dhabi, [and] building a new city called Masdar City" (Gorbiano, 2020). Both the eminent international leadership committee and official media announcements about Nusantara means that it stands in stark contrast to the abrupt and secretive move of Myanmar's capital to Naypyidaw, but is akin to the high-profile as well as high-tech legitimation of Putrajaya and Malaysia's MSC in the 1990s. Yet, quite different from Putrajaya and the MSC's incorporation into Kuala Lumpur is the decision to locate Nusantara in East Kalimantan. This is not only a matter of addressing uneven regional development, but is in line with a decentralization era conviction that urban innovation, and progress can emanate from sites far away from Jakarta – Jokowi's Solo itself being perhaps the best known example – rather than diffusing from that established national centre. Although COVID-19 has slowed plans for Nusantara, the Indonesian government recently passed a draft law on relocating the national capital, said to be the "fastest bill ever passed by the Indonesian parliament" (Souisa and Salim, 2022). Opponents contest the official fictioning of Nusantara as a 'smart, green and beautiful' new capital city. Meanwhile, Nusantara's proponents, including Jokowi, continue to cast the existing capital (and national centre) in developmentally antithetical, if not outright dystopian, terms (Souisa and Salim, 2022; Normile, 2022).

Conclusions

In our research on and across three national contexts in Southeast Asia, we have considered the role of reference places in the conception and development of three administrative capital city projects. Central to our wider conceptual contribution is demonstration of how these reference places are mobilized as three different types of truth spot: aspirational, antithetical and anticipatory (cf. Gieryn, 2006, 2018). The scope of both the first and second of these types is largely familiar to scholars in urban studies, given longstanding work on efforts to emulate (aspirational) urban policy models, and the more recent attention that has been afforded to examining (antithetical) cases of urban policy "failure". Our third type – i.e. anticipatory truth spots – is informed by rather different strands of social science research on futures, pre-eminently concerning the politics of pre-emption (Anderson, 2010) and fictional expectations (Beckert, 2016). While the three types are heuristically distinct, in practice anticipatory truth spots often intertwine with one of the other two types – particular places auguring either positive future conditions of possibility or dystopian futures that rationalize mitigation against future challenges. Our study also shows that it is possible for specific facets of a single place to be referenced as more than one type of truth spot. An example is how perceptions of different aspects of Silicon Valley were mobilized in ways that made it at once an aspirational, antithetical and anticipatory truth spot in narratives surrounding the making of Putrajaya. More routinely, the meaning of any extant place – what kinds of truths it connotes or future city plans it serves to justify – is bound up with contested ways of seeing. Kuala Lumpur or Jakarta as sites of protest, for example, would clearly have been viewed very differently by democratic reform-minded residents of Yangon in the 1990s than by Myanmar's military elite who established Naypyidaw.

We have shown that space and references places are constitutive components of ex novo administrative capitals, but in ways that foreground different geographies of persuasion to

those emphasized in existing work on truth spots. A foundational premise of our wider study is that uneven spatial development and associated hierarchical imaginaries of progress form a powerful backdrop to how places come to be perceived and presented as good or bad, or pre-emptive. We have focused on the narrative mobilization of such places (as reference places) rather than on the material sites concerned. This contrasts with Gieryn's recent work on truth spots which gives much more attention to powers of persuasion associated with the materiality of human spatial experience – seeing (and other sensory experiences of physical places) helping to make people believe (Gieryn, 2018). Despite our different emphasis, the issue of how physical located-ness or being in place enhances believability does arise in our examination of the politics of Indonesia's new capital city plans. The very fact that Jokowi visited Canberra and that his "views" – as in both what he saw and his opinions – were reported from the Australian capital made his vision for Nusantara more plausible. However, this case also allows us to draw a significant conceptual distinction. On the one hand, Jokowi's own belief in Canberra as an aspirational model may have been strengthened through visiting the place, and apprehending it from certain perspectives or vantage points. On the other hand, Jokowi's presence in Canberra conferred authority on his views, serving as a resource to convince others elsewhere (chiefly back in Indonesia) of the plausibility and desirability of Canberra-inspired plans for Nusantara. These two ways of approaching the power of truth spots are important in their own right, and both are likely to feature in any in-depth examination of the politics of building new cities.

This leads onto a set of observations about methods, and modes of establishing authority in our own academic analyses. Physical presence in places at particular times – having "been there" – forms an important part of the methodological toolkits and the empirical substantiation of truth claims in many strands of social and scientific research, including in

major schools of urban studies (Gieryn, 2006). During much of the period when we conducted the research for this article, the COVID-19 pandemic severely curtailed field-based analysis of either ex novo administrative capitals or the extant places that were referenced as truth spots. This partly accounted for our decision to focus on the narrative mobilization of reference places. The widespread resumption of international travel from 2022 may enable us to embrace material place-based dimensions of truth spots in subsequent research. However, the findings of our existing investigation also raise methodological questions about the *when* as well as the *where* of "being there" in research on the persuasive powers of place. In cases where physical visits to extant places appear to have played a significant role in the historical conception or development of a new capital city, how much is to be gained from visiting the original truth spot years, perhaps decades, later? In some cases, it might be possible and useful to reconstruct an historical visit – members of Myanmar's political elite visiting Putrajaya in the early 2000s, for example, or Jokowi visiting Canberra in 2019 – through a combination of interviews with members of the original delegation or official documentation of the trip. Yet even in cases of city planning where it is clear that reference to truth spots involved physical site visits, the key moments of their mobilization as points of persuasion often occur at other times and in distant locations. Examples include meetings of planners and policy-makers in the context where the new city is to be built, or moments when official plans are presented to the public.

Finally, and importantly with regard to possibilities for extending the scheme that we have developed in this article, our existing examination of three ex novo administrative capitals in Southeast Asia serves as a reminder that cities are never completed projects, and that the meanings attributed to places continue to change over time. By ordering our analysis of the three cities in our study chronologically, we have been able to show how the older projects

(Putrajaya and Naypyidaw) are among the place-references that feature in the ongoing planning and design of Nusantara. In the short-term, this suggests the possibility of examining specific moments and sites at which extant places (including, but not only Putrajaya or Naypyidaw) are mobilized as truth spots in the contested "fictioning" of the new Indonesian capital. In the longer term, it is equally possible that aspects of Nusantara may become referenced in plans for subsequent phases of development in Putrajaya or Naypyidaw. There is little doubt that Jokowi and Nusantara's other chief proponents intend for it to be seen as a model city (in ways similar to Putrajaya a quarter of a century earlier). Much effort is being put into the narrative shaping of this new city as aspirational and even "prototypal" (Gieryn, 2018). However, our scheme attends to how places come to be perceived and mobilized over time as much as to the truths that they were originally intended to convey. Just as official *lieux de mémoire* are often subjected to alternative or counter-memories, places in the present and future may be mobilized as truth spots in ways far removed from the intentions of their proponents.

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[i] While this phenomenon holds potential for wider efforts at "dislocating" urban theory from the "metropolis" of the global North (Palat Narayanan, 2022) – and we recognize the significance of that scholarly orientation – this is not within the scope of the current article.

[ii] Interview with Zainuddin bin Mohammad, Director, Federal Department of Town and Country Planning, Malaysia, 12 December 2000.