City profile

Putrajaya: Malaysia's new federal administrative capital

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ABSTRACT

In the early 1990s, the Malaysian government conceived of a new federal administrative capital built from a *tabula rasa* on former oil palm and rubber plantations called Putrajaya. It was designed to be the new home to all of Malaysia's federal government ministries and national level civil servants, host all diplomatic activities for the country, and function as a potent symbol of the nation's ambitious modernization agenda and of its new 'progressive Muslim' identity. As one of many new cities recently built as seats of power in Southeast Asia and the 'global south', Putrajaya is emblematic of the trend of former colonies to reject the colonial capital and to replace it with a city that symbolizes the state's national ideology and aspirations. This article provides a brief overview of the history and development of Malaysian urbanism that set the stage for the creation of Putrajaya and critically examines its claims of being 'green'. Particular attention is paid to how a national identity has been constructed through the design of the city.

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Introduction

A master planned city built on a tabula rasa

The city of Putrajaya is one of a series of ambitious urban projects in Malaysia that reflect the state's commitment to craft a particular national identity and to gain recognition on the world stage. As the new federal administrative capital of Malaysia, Putrajaya is the new home to all federal-level government ministries, civil servants and their families. About 100,000 of the expected 350,000 residents are now living in Putrajaya and the city is slated for completion in 2011. Reminiscent of the classic master planned cities of Chandigarh and Brasilia, Putrajaya is a valuable contemporary example of a master planned government showpiece and illustrates the struggle of many former colonies to forge a distinct national identity that both reflects the values and aspirations of the new nation and distances itself from its colonial past.

Putrajaya's size, scope, and speed of construction are ambitious. As the most ostentatious and expensive administrative capital in Southeast Asia[1], Putrajaya provides insights into current directions in Malaysian and Southeast Asian urbanism. The generous state financial backing for the city has ensured its completion and has secured Putrajaya a prominent place in the pantheon of grand master planned capitals. Malaysia's oil-driven economy combined with the ruling elite's capacity to allocate unlimited amounts of public money to mega-projects that serve nation-building purposes make Putrajaya an important and fascinating city to examine.

Putrajaya is the latest in a tradition of postcolonial master planned cities built on a *tabula rasa*. Like other master planned cities, the creators of Putrajaya subscribe to a utopian belief in the possibility of the ideal city, that engineering a society's – even a nation's – success is possible through design (Scott, 1998; Vale, 2008 [1992]). Beyond realizing such practical goals as relieving congestion or creating a healthy urban environment for residents, the primary objectives in master planning capital cities is to construct, communicate, and normalize national identity to the citizenry. Not only are cities 'the medium by which the powerful express their influence' (Kong, 2008, p. 26), capital cities in particular reveal how the state imagines itself or how it aspires to be, as well as how it wishes to be seen by others (Vale, 2008 [1992]).

Putrajaya was begun in 1995 as an urban showpiece for the country, intended to demonstrate both to Malaysians and the international community that Malaysia is a stable, prosperous, progressive, and technologically sophisticated Muslim country, but at the same time, showcase Malaysia's rootedness in traditional culture and religion. The city is part of a series of mega-projects initiated by former Prime Minister Mahathir that were intended to propel Malaysia onto the world stage and as a way to attract foreign investment (Olds, 1995; Morshidi and Pandian, 2007).

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[1] Naypyidaw, the new capital of Myanmar (formerly Burma), is another expensive and ostentatious Southeast Asian city built in recent years to replace the colonial capital of Rangoon (now Yangon). Little, however, has been written on it to date and the city is shrouded in secrecy by the ruling military regime. 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. Future research on Naypyidaw may reveal connections to Putrajaya and other new cities in Asia and the Middle East.

The name is a reference both to the first Malaysian Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, and the Sanskrit-derived *putra*, meaning 'son' or 'prince' and *jaya*[2], translated as 'success' or 'victory'. The underlying goal in Putrajaya was to create a 'model city' that would set a new standard for Southeast Asian cities and would be looked to as a template for other cities to emulate (Putrajaya Holdings, *Bridges of Putrajaya*, 2003, p. 9). While all of the federal ministries are located in Putrajaya, parliament is still located in Kuala Lumpur, which, for now, technically remains the capital city. However, Putrajaya has become an important national symbol and the venue for national events including the festivities surrounding Independence Day.

Relatively little has been published to date on the city of Putrajaya itself. Scholarship on Putrajaya has generally been tied to broader discussions on the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), a high-tech zone stretching between KL south to the new national airport, and the Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Area, which includes Putrajaya, Cyberjaya (Putrajaya's high-tech twin city), Petaling Jaya, Shah Alam and Klang (Bunnell, 2002; Bunnell, Barter, and Morshidi, 2002; Indergaard, 2003; Bunnell, 2004; Ramasamy, Chakrabarty, and Cheah, 2004; Bunnell and Coe, 2005; King, 2008; Goh and Liauw, 2009). There is, however, merit to a focused study on Putrajaya as the city has been a source of inspiration for other cities in Malaysia, other states in Southeast Asia, and for countries as far away as central Asia and Africa.

This paper provides a critical look at an important and symbolic new Southeast Asian city and its attempt to forge a new national identity through the design of a city. I begin by introducing Putrajaya's location and Malaysia's unique demographics. I provide a brief overview of Malaysia's diversity of urban influences and place Putrajaya in the context of Malaysia's era of mega-projects. I then examine Putrajaya's master plan and the turn in Malaysian state architecture towards a generic Middle Eastern imaginary. Finally, I highlight some of Putrajaya's challenges and shortcomings related to its claims of being a 'green' city, constraints of its master plan, and critically evaluate Putrajaya's aspiration to be a 'model' city.

Urban history in peninsular Malaysia

Location and demographics

Putrajaya is located on peninsular Malaysia in the Klang Valley 25 km south of Kuala Lumpur in the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), a 50 km long stretch between Kuala Lumpur and KLIA (Kuala Lumpur International Airport) (Fig. 1). As Malaysia's most populous urban region, the MSC was conceptualized as a Malaysian version of California's Silicon Valley in a bid to nurture the country's budding knowledge economy and attract international high-tech industries. Although the MSC has not achieved the anticipated level of success (Bunnell, 2004), the state's intention was for it to become a sophisticated information network based on multimedia technologies and serve as the digital backbone to support interactive government, community, commerce and society. Kuala Lumpur and the MSC have been examined in a previous City Profile, 'Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Area: a globalizing city-region' (Bunnell, Barter, and Morshidi, 2002), that focuses on the increasingly global orientation of the city and its implications for the wider urban region.

Located just a few degrees north of the equator, Malaysia is hot and humid all year. Rainfall averages 2–3 m (100–200 in.) per year

and usually falls in heavy monsoons, depositing 10–30 cm within just a few hours. Putrajaya sits on hilly terrain that was once tropical jungle but was transformed in colonial times into a vast series of plantations growing cocoa, rubber and oil palm. To create the city of Putrajaya, large tracts of agricultural land were bought up by the state, displacing around 2400 plantation workers (Bunnell, 2002).

Malaysia's population is over 27 million, 70% of whom are urban and 15% of whom live in the Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Area (Department of Statistics Malaysia website). Rates of urbanization in Malaysia have dramatically increased since the end of the colonial era, from 26.5% in 1957 to 66.9% in 2005 (Thompson, 2007). Due in large part to colonial policies, Malaysia is an ethnically and religiously diverse country. Large numbers of migrants from China and to a lesser extent India and what is now Indonesia migrated to the Malay Peninsula in the 19th and early 20th centuries seeking trade opportunities and to work as labourers on colonial plantations (Cho, 1990). These migration patterns are evident in Malaysia's current demographics: Malays[3] and other indigenous people constitute 61.4% of the population, people of Chinese descent 23.7%, people of Indian descent 7.1% and others 7.8%. Muslims constitute 60.4% of the population, with the remaining 40% split between Buddhists (19.2%), Christians (9.1%), Hindus (6.3%), Confucianists, Taoists, and followers of other traditional Chinese religions (2.6%).

Malaysia's diversity of urban influences

Malaysia has a long and rich urban history with many diverse influences. During the second half of the 20th century, Malaysia shifted from a largely rural to a largely urban population (Leete, 1996). According to Southeast Asia historian Anthony Reid, the percentage of city dwellers prior to the colonial era was extremely high in the commercialized areas of the Straits of Melaka (Reid, 1993). The cities were rarely walled, and even the walled cities appeared to be a different kind of city to visitors as they were particularly green, sparsely settled, filled with fruit trees and built entirely of wood. Ross King (2008) sees similarities between descriptions of past cities and contemporary Malay settlements in their spaciousness, the lack of geometrical layouts and the priority placed on the growing of fruit trees for each household. While there were large settlements centered around trading ports in the pre-colonial Malay Peninsula, these were made of wood and have not survived except in travellers' tales. Moreover, contemporary urban Malaysia did not evolve from indigenous settlements but from colonial administrative centers and the international trade activities of the British colonial government and immigrants (Evers and Korff, 2000).

As the governing colonial power in what is now Malaysia, the British had a significant impact on Malaysian cities. The approach to planning introduced by the British in Malaysia was hierarchically ordered and produced the administrative town. A distinct ethnicized urbanization was developed according to British prejudices that viewed the Chinese as thriving in urban settings and Malays as an inherently rural people. These racial assumptions resulted in the Malay Reservation Enactments in the 1930s, a series of policies that placed Malays on rural reservations and thus institutionalized an urban/rural divide based on race, of which the repercussions are felt today.

As a primarily urban-based community and as the second largest ethnic group in the country, the Chinese–Malaysians have had a significant impact on Malaysian urbanism. Broadly speaking,

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[2] *Jaya* is a common part of place names in Indonesia and Malaysia: Nusajaya, Irian Jaya, Petaling Jaya, Subung Jaya, Aceh Jaya, and Jayakarta, the pre-colonial name for Jakarta.

[3] This category includes those who had migrated from what is now Indonesia, including Javanese, Bugis, Batak and so on.