1. Introduction: why a feminist perspective on new capital cities?

Building a new capital city is a unique opportunity for a planning team, a people, and a nation. Being able to start with a clean slate provides, in theory, the most suitable conditions to reach “perfection.” Yet the new capitals created since the turn of the 20th century have been, for the most part, great planning disasters. They are dreary, overpowering, underserviced, wasteful, and unaffordable. They encompass large, monumental spaces rather than friendly, usable streets. Public transportation and neighborhood services are seriously lacking. Instead of bringing the respective nations together, the new capitals are rife in social and ethnic inequalities. In other words, new capitals are dystopian.

Major failures are evident in both democratic and authoritarian settings; in postcolonial nations and places that had long been independent by the time they created their new capitals; in places with a socialist legacy and those which were always capitalist; in countries where the population majority is Black, White, or Asian; in poorer countries and wealthier ones; in national or regional capitals; in early capitals and very recent ones; in capitals built in greenfield locations and those created as extensions to existing settlements; in capitals built during the modern and postmodern eras, and so on.

What is then the common thread that connects these megaprojects in their shortcomings? Is it the very fact that they are deliberately planned – as opposed to “organic”? My argument in this book is that new capital cities are failures largely because they embody the patriarchal relations that govern the respective polities. They emerge out of political power rather than developing over time, guided by the needs and wants of the residents. Therefore, they magnify problems in an unfavorable manner in efforts to wield new power and majesty. As a result, new capitals are as, or even more, unfavorable to women and other disadvantaged groups than ordinary cities.

By way of definition, patriarchy is a structural phenomenon that assigns socio-economic and political power to men – to the detriment and without consideration of the interests and needs of women and feminized “others.” The latter are only allowed to make any advances toward equality within a broad patriarchal framework, which tends to be characterized by aggression, hierarchy, competition, and domination (Guarneri and Poston 2008). Arguably,
patriarchy subjugates and undermines many men in addition to women – for example, those who do not find themselves at the top of patriarchal hierarchies and those who reject aggressive and competitive environments (Hoffman 2001).

Whether expressed explicitly or implicitly, patriarchy has been a mainstay of human societies since ancient times. As such, it has always played a central role in city planning. Architectural gems such as Venice and Varanasi were created under patriarchal regimes. However, in the case of new capital cities, which are totally planned by those in power rather than gradually developed over the decades or centuries, expressions of political and socio-economic power and patriarchy have been crucial.

This book evaluates the planning processes and outcomes of seven forward capital cities, spread across cultures: Canberra, Australia; Chandigarh, India; Brasília, Brazil; Abuja, Nigeria; Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan; Naypyidaw, Myanmar; and Sejong, South Korea (Figure 1.1 and Table 1.1). These represent a well distributed, albeit small, sample of new capitals created in the modern era, since the turn of the 20th century (Figure 1.2). While modernity refers to a distinctive worldview that emerged in Europe alongside the Enlightenment, it was not until the 20th century that capital city formation exploded, following the disintegration of various colonial empires and other involuntary unions and federations. If in 1900 there were only about 40 capital cities in total, by the
new millennium that number had jumped to 200 (Gordon 2006). It is estimated that 40% of all countries have considered relocating their capital functions, either to another existing city or to a new, greenfield site (Kaufmann 2018). And new capitals keep being proposed or planned.

Table 1.1 Overview of case study capitals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capital</th>
<th>Inauguration year</th>
<th>Current population (compared to former capital)</th>
<th>Distance from former capital</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canberra, Australia</td>
<td>1913</td>
<td>0.4 million (5 million)</td>
<td>660 km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chandigarh, India</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>1 million (11 million)</td>
<td>264 km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brasilia, Brazil</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>2.5 million (6.3 million)</td>
<td>1100 km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuja, Nigeria</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>3 million (14.3 million)</td>
<td>700 km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>1 million (1.7 million)</td>
<td>1200 km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naypyidaw, Myanmar</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>0.6 million (7 million)</td>
<td>370 km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sejong, South Korea</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>0.3 million (10 million)</td>
<td>110 km</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this book, the socio-cultural and physical production of the seven selected cities and their contemporary planning issues are analyzed through the theoretical lens of feminism. While this work only covers seven new capital cities in depth, I suspect that my analysis applies to most, if not all, new capitals created since 1900. My perspective differs from other books on the topic of new capitals, which have taken a gender-neutral view. Unfortunately, neutral views tend to forget the interests and concerns of women. A feminist approach to what is normally an urban planning topic places at the center of the inquiry not only gender but also class, race, ethnicity, religion, and other systems of domination, in recognition of the fact that women may suffer from multi-layered forms of oppression depending on their station in life (Miranne and Young 2000; Warren 1997).

There are other differences between this book and prior volumes on new capital cities. Given the difficulty of undertaking fieldwork around the world, most existing books consist of edited collections of individual case studies, with limited comparative analysis across cities. By contrast, this book is structured around key themes for the purpose of synthesizing theory about new capital cities. The four themes include (1) the context of national history and international relations; (2) the symbolic manifestation of the new capitals; (3) the spatial manifestation of the new capitals; and (4) the capitals as everyday cities (based on Milroy 1993). In preparing this book, I relied on the existing literature, my site visits, and nearly seventy original interviews with planning experts in each of the capitals under study.
Figure 1.2  Timeline of new capitals built in the modern era
Introduction

While I do not quote the interviews directly in the text, this material has been invaluable in bringing research up to date, corroborating or refuting findings of prior studies, and comparing newer, less familiar, capital cities with older ones.

My interest in this topic stems from my personal journey across continents. I currently live in Australia, which is home to one of my case studies. More importantly, I was born and raised in a new capital: Tirana, the capital of Albania, to which I remain emotionally attached, despite its flaws. But I did not include my beloved hometown in this book as I have written about it (and critiqued it) at length elsewhere (see Pojani 2010, 2015, 2018; Pojani and Maci 2015). The capital of my adopted nation, the United States, is also a new city. However, I excluded Washington, D.C. from my list of case studies because my focus is on capitals created during the 20th and 21st centuries. During this timeframe, the patriarchy combined with other forces including modernism, technology, and globalization to produce a particularly problematic version of urbanism. The discussion of the case studies is prefaced by a brief overview of the feminist movement, as I understand it, and as it relates to this book.

Feminism as (Radical) Humanism: A Theoretical Perspective

While feminism is a diverse movement, a main schism within its ranks has been between ‘essentialists’ and ‘environmentalists’ – in other words, those who believe that differences between men and women have biological roots and those who regard gender as a cultural construct, not unlike race or class (Zwissler 2012). Gender essentialism casts women as “loving, egalitarian, mutual, holistic, ecological and spontaneous” and men (rather than the patriarchal system as a whole) as “oppressive, alienated, dualistic, rapacious and destructive” (Ruether 1980:844). I consider feminism as an offshoot of the ever-evolving project of humanism.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines humanism as a philosophy that “stresses an individual’s dignity and worth and capacity for self-realization through reason.” Meanwhile, feminism is, at its basic level, the advocacy of women’s rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes. The feminist
movement seeks to combat androcentrism and misogyny, both of which assume that the male experience is superior compared to female experience. Androcentrism is based on unawareness rather than malicious intent whereas misogyny is quite deliberate. However, both are damaging to women, which they cast as inferior or invisible (Zwissler 2012).

“First wave” feminists in the early 20th century considered feminism and humanism as inseparable. Simone de Beauvoir, for example, believed that women should not assert themselves on the basis of gender essence but rather seek to become fully “human” (Johnson 2015). By contrast, the “second wave” of feminism, which emerged alongside postmodernism in the 1960s and still influences feminist thought today, positioned itself as anti-humanist. Postmodern commentators became highly critical of the notion of an abstract, idealized, and universalistic humanity, as promoted by the Enlightenment and modernity. They charged that, while “our common humanity” was in theory a gender-neutral concept, in practice it was invariably identified with male gender (the white European man, more specifically). Humanism, framed as Man’s ambition and pretention to usurp God’s position, did not reflect lived realities and attitudes which were necessarily gendered and bound to physical and socio-cultural contexts. Many women activists embraced an essentialist view of gender: “male” signified cold reason, dominion, abstraction, and logic whereas “female” claimed the values of nurture, intuition, empathy, and community. Because of its homogenizing tendencies, humanism was accused of being “male,” totalitarian, and oppressive (Johnson 2015).

Johnson (1994, 2015) is among few philosophers who have sought to reconcile feminism and humanism, and the present analysis adopts her critical perspective. In her conception, humanism (or “radical humanism”) is primarily concerned with human beings and human affairs, rather than with “absolute knowledge” or self-deification. “Humanness” implies fallibility, partiality, and error of judgment. But humans of all genders are also capable of circumspection, self-criticism, revision, and improvement. This makes humanism an elastic project – constantly enriched and augmented as social struggles evolve from one generation to the next (Johnson 1994, 2015). The idea of a “human being” is dynamic too: while the whole species enjoys the same rights – for example, no one is “authorized for mastery” or “available for subjection” – particularities of gender, class, race, religion, sexual orientation, and so on are also respected (Johnson 2015:312). It is understood that the “images of the good life” are diverse and plural (Johnson 1994, 2015:312).

Seen through this lens, humanism is compatible with feminism, in all its contemporary fragments – rather than its ideological competitor. Both movements are progressive in that they seek to emancipate society from the bounds of tradition, drive social justice causes, fight prejudice, criticize inherited practices, and negotiate future actions. An undertaking that speaks for all women
(the “global sisterhood”), feminism may even be considered as one of humanism’s extensions or manifestations. Contemporary feminists would not be able to discuss intersectionality and acknowledge the plurality of human experience if humanism had not cleared socio-cultural ground to do so, by promoting the values of self-determination, freedom, and autonomy (Johnson 1994, 2015). A reconciliation or even merging of feminism and humanism is more urgent in the era of globalization, digital technology, and planetary urbanization, which have revealed more clearly our shared human condition. The creation of new cities can no longer be driven by hubris or paranoia but needs to place gender equality at the very center.

NOTES

1. Sometimes, a relocated and built-anew capital city is referred to as a “forward capital.” In this book, the terms new and forward are used interchangeably.
2. The term “feminized others” refers to individuals or groups that have qualities which are perceived as feminine, and therefore inferior.