

# INTRODUCTION

## Framing the Asian City

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*The Emerging Asian City* is a complex and capacious subject. It is about an urban landscape covering a third of the planet's land mass and the lives of nearly half of its inhabitants living in some of its oldest, largest and densest cities. It encompasses the histories of major world religions – Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity, some of the most dramatic colonizations and westernizations outside the Euro-American world and the world's tallest building – Dubai's Burj Khalifa, fastest growing city – Beihai in China, and two of the fastest growing economies – China and India. It includes more than half of the world's slum population. And according to the United Nations *2001 Global Report on Human Settlements*, by 2015, it will include an estimated 153 from a total of 358 global cities with populations exceeding 1 million and 15 from an estimated 27 megacities with populations exceeding 10 million, with migratory flows through, to and beyond these particular locations.

This book seeks to embrace the complexity and ambiguity of this ever-changing landscape and survey its bewildering array of multifarious urbanities and urbanisms to understand their place and relevance to emerging Asia at large. Framing Asia as the continental land mass along the Pacific and Indian Oceans – from Turkey to Japan, and Mongolia and China to Indonesia – it sets off with the claim that the histories and destinies of cities across various parts of Asia are far too enmeshed to unpack or oversimplify. It therefore avoids the categorization of Asian cities exclusively by geographic location (south-east, middle-east), or the convenient tagging of the term *Asian* on selective regional parts of the continent. In contrast to such 'either . . . or' categorizations, this book takes a broad intellectual view of the Asian urban landscape as a 'both . . . and' phenomenon; as a series of multifarious confluences – geographic, historic and political – extending from the deserts of the Persian Gulf region to the Pearl River Delta.

The term 'concomitant' in the book's subtitle emphasizes this pluralism. In a time when dialogues on Asian cities remain heavily romanticized through exclusive rubrics of globalization on the one hand, or its informal urbanisms on the other, the term concomitant reminds us of the pressing need to understand Asia's various urban trajectories as simultaneous and often criss-crossed forces that are evolving together, that are interdependent, that will continue to bear influences on each other and thereby collectively shape Asia's destiny.

The terms 'urbanities' and 'urbanisms' – both plural – are also significant in this regard, representing an enmeshed duality, each cross-influencing the other. Urbanities refers here to the myriad phenomenological traits of urban life and experience in Asia: polarizations of urban poverty and wealth; blurry lines separating the legal from illegal, urban from rural and public from private; or the unprecedented pace of growth in many Asian cities. Urbanisms in turn is intended to describe the diverse physical characteristics of Asian cities – the psychedelic streetscapes of Tokyo's Ginza, the hyper-densities of Hong Kong, Asia's seemingly anachronistic historic urban cores as well as its squatters and slums.

What are the concomitant urbanities and urbanisms shaping the discourse on Asia's future? What are the forces shaping them? What are the forces that they in turn are shaping? What are the dilemmas and challenges that underlie them? How are they different from the West? Are Asian cities treading a different path to their future? The twenty four chapters in this book reflect on these questions, re-contextualize the connections between the past and present of Asia's urban landscape, and argue for taking Asian cities seriously on their own terms.

## The Asian urban landscape in space and time

The Asian urban landscape today is comprehensible only as a dynamic mosaic of myriad landscapes that have somehow congealed into a unified entity. Some of these landscapes seem like ancient multilayered palimpsests, others brand new. Some appear to be rapidly changing; others relatively stagnant. Some spread across vast areas; others are concentrated but equally conspicuous. Similar landscapes appear at different times in different places denying the overall ensemble any linear evolutionary pattern. But more significantly they coexist and are all simultaneously evolving.

The oldest of these are Asia's virgin landscapes, whose patterns emerge as much from socio-religious beliefs as pragmatic responses to climate and geography. Here one finds the ruins of one of the world's earliest planned cities, Mohenjodaro (2600 BCE), with a citadel designed not around an *agora* or *piazza*, but a great public bath as its communal space. One finds the ruins of Parsa (Persepolis), the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid dynasty in circa 515 BCE in Iran, as well as those of China's first metropolis, Chang'an, built to the northwest of modern Xian, with an area of around 35 square kilometres, probably equalled only by Rome in size. One finds the remains of Asia's oldest universities in Nalanda and Taxila, and its oldest public policy document in Chanakya's

Arthashastra. And one finds the sacred landscape of Varanasi still wearing traces of its ancient ancestor, Kashi, around where the Buddha gave his first sermon.

The second landscape emerges through numerous intra-Asian hybridities, cross-cultural currents and socio-religious transfers. Even as Rome is being reborn from urban decay as a new ‘Christian-opolis’, the city of Kyoto is born in Japan as a new ‘Zen-opolis’, its urban grid based on its Chinese predecessor, Changan. The spread of Islam sees the emergence of great capitals in Timur’s Samarkhand in Uzbekistan and Shah Abbas’ Isfahan in Iran (Figure 0.1). This Islamic trajectory finds its way into the Indian subcontinent where new cities – Bijapur, Agra and Fathehpur Sikhri – generate new urban models simultaneously Islamic and Indian, while the Persian paradigms of the mausoleum and quadrangular ‘Char Bagh’ garden find their teleological end in the magnificent Taj Mahal. Such intra-continental trajectories both erode and erase older patterns while giving birth to Asia’s first ‘hybrid ethnoscapes’. The dilemmas of appropriation versus conservation in these historic places represent one of the most significant components of Asian cities today.

The third landscape is created by Asia’s various colonizations. The earliest western visitors to Asia are the Greeks, but the Alexandrian influence remains largely limited to Indian sculpture and art. From an urban standpoint, the Portuguese come first. As colonizers with a missionary zeal, they smear the verdant tropical landscape of Goa with an entire transect of churches, chapels and wayside crosses, and entire towns emulating their homeland. What the Portuguese



**FIGURE 0.1** The Maidan-i-Shah (main public square) in Isfahan, Iran (photo by Brian McMorrow)



**FIGURE 0.2** Manila's Intramuros (left) and Burnham's succeeding plan (right) (drawing by Christine Concepcion and Tiffany Dang)

do in Goa and Macau, the Spanish do in Manila: circa 1570, they destroy and replace the indigenous habitat with a new gridded walled city, the Intramuros. In 1905, under its succeeding American possession, planner Daniel Burnham designs a new plan for the city (partially built), creating a unique confluence of two concomitant 'western' urbanisms on a non-western landscape (Figure 0.2). Meanwhile, the British Raj in India becomes by far the largest colonial imprint in Asia, proclaimed as much by large public monuments as humble utilitarian structures such as bridges, canals, courts and cantonments. The histories and legacies of these imposed or infused landscapes gels into Asia's emerging identities (Figure 0.3).

The fourth landscape emerges from Asia's self-imposed westernizations. In 1868, the Tokugawa Era finds its end in the Meiji Restoration, and Japan opens its doors to western influences. In 1872, Ginza becomes Japan's first designed 'western' street, with British architect Thomas Walters replacing the fire-ravaged maze of traditional wooden structures with brick buildings and wide tree-lined boulevards. In the early 1900s, Denenchofu, a Tokyo suburb is designed along



**FIGURE 0.3** British colonial buildings along Strand Road, Yangon, Burma (photo by Brian McMorro)

British planner Ebenezer Howard's Garden City model, with concentric streets, radial boulevards and verdant open spaces, becoming the first such paradigm in the 'Far East'. Eventually Japan's defeat in World War II incepts a new nation under the American occupation, making it the first non-western democracy in the world. Meanwhile, in 1911, China enters the Republican era, and in 1949, Mao Zedong's proclamation ushers a new Communist goal of transforming consumer-cities into producer-cities. Beijing's 1950s' development plans, following Moscow's example, divide the city into functional zones with ex-urban industries surrounding an administrative urban core. Tian-an Men, the imperial forecourt is redesigned as a new socialist setting, creating one of the largest urban squares in the world.

The fifth landscape is formed through Asia's embrace of modern urbanism and architecture. Circa 1951, barely four years after the British depart from India, Le Corbusier designs his largest project ever in Chandigarh, the new capital of Punjab, fuelled by Prime Minister Nehru's mandate for a utopian city embodying the values of a new India. Circa 1961, the construction of the 130-metre-high Monumen Nasional in post-independence Jakarta is inspired by the Eiffel Tower, even as the city's massive southward expansion manifests an ambitious new 'Nation-Building' free from any colonial reminiscence. Meanwhile, as Japanese architect Kenzo Tange proposes an (un-built) utopian plan for Tokyo's expansion, with nine infrastructural loops and high-rise mega-structures spanning Tokyo Bay, the Chung King Mansions are completed at 36–44 Nathan

Road in Hong Kong, incepting a new high-rise housing prototype in Asia. Modern urbanism and architecture become the new emblems of socio-cultural progress across Asia.

The sixth landscape surfaces from the parallel offspring of rapid modernization across Asia. The squatter as a concomitant urbanism of significant socio-economic consequences garners attention. Here one encounters landscapes such as Dharavi, one of Asia's largest slums, located in suburban Mumbai. Spread over 0.67 square miles, it provides cheap, though illegal dwelling alternatives for over 600,000 people, with rents as low as US\$4 per month, while also nurturing a thriving micro-economy with a total annual turnover of around \$600 million. From Lebanon to Jakarta to Dhaka, the place of these illegal, informal habitats within the franchised city remains one of the most gripping issues in Asian urbanity today (Figure 0.4).

The seventh landscape comprises Asia's indigenous rural habitats that struggle to find their place within its rapid industrialization. Here one finds the *bang* (aquatic villages) of Thailand with their infamous floating markets, the agrarian hamlets of Borneo, the fast disappearing 'urban villages' of Guangzhou, the forgotten *qanats* and *karez* (subterranean indigenous water channels) of Yazd and Aleppo, and the tribal settlements of Inner Mongolia. The imposed conversion of these places, patterns and peoples into tourist magnets, their merciless absorption into cosmopolitan landscapes or their complete obliteration raise difficult questions on humanitarian values and social, economic and cultural justice that demand to be understood and answered.



FIGURE 0.4 Informal hilltop settlement, Tripoli, Lebanon (photo by Brian McMorrow)

The eighth landscape emerges from the ambivalent reception of modern urbanism in Asia. The idea of the contemporary city as a culturally appropriated model gains attention with planners and architects seeking to reflect a sense of history and regionalism at the urban scale. Baghdad's reconstruction experiments from 1979–1983 remain significant in this regard, when second and third generation Euro–American modernists gather to participate in an ambitious urban redevelopment fuelled by a booming oil economy. It includes significant conservation efforts in historic cores such as Rusafa and Gailani, and ambitious inner-city revitalizations such as the Khurafa Street Development, with regulations encouraging densification with the visual uniformity of arabesque street-scapes. Such efforts, essentially modernist in attitude, reveal a newfound sensitivity towards concepts of pedestrianization, street life, selective urban infill, and a renewed interest in local history and preservation. Asia in this sense provides a new intellectual canvas to both affirm the limitations of western modernism as well as redefine it.

The ninth landscape involves Asia's 'sudden' mega-cities, characterized less by size and more by their sheer pace of development, revealing dramatic regurgitations of their originating western modernisms. Here one finds the streetscapes of Shinjuku and Akihabara whose psychedelic electro-signage pales the consumerist expressionisms of Las Vegas and Times Square. One witnesses the dramatic evolution of Asia's most iconic vertical metropolis, Hong Kong, from a colonial port into a dominant centre of international finance and commerce. Its uniquely slender 'pencil skyscrapers' and multi-use high-rises linked by high-speed public transportation, elevated walkways and sophisticated subterranean worlds all seem like a 'hyper Manhattan', where the ideas proposed for 1920s' New York have been enacted and surpassed (Figure 0.5). Meanwhile, Dubai in four decades goes from a city of 58,000 to 1.5 million natives, with an additional 5.1 million annual visitors. Its southward expansion, before the collapse of the global economy, remains one of the most ambitious and dramatic developments in recent urban history (Figure 0.6). It includes plans for the largest infrastructure project in the world, the 75-kilometre-long Arabian Canal Development, as well as the world's tallest building, the Burj Khalifa, even as its landscape morphs into a vast collage of disconnected self-referential mega-projects. One finds Naypyidaw, the new 7,000 square kilometre administrative capital of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (also known as Burma), that is spatially reminiscent of Islamabad or Brasilia in its clear zone segregation, and vast intermediate spaces. From Tokyo in the 1970s to Shenzhen in the 1990s, this syndrome of 'instant' urbanization remains one of the most magical and scary characteristics of Asian urbanism.

The tenth landscape comprises Asia's emerging post-industrial urban models where new prerogatives of sustainability, pedestrian dominance, incrementalism, non-utopian planning and cultural appropriateness seem like antidotes to its rampant sprawl. Here, one finds Putrajaya, Malaysia's 11,300-acre built-from-scratch 'environment-friendly' administrative capital, developed to both alleviate Kuala Lumpur's congestion as well as become a new nationalistic



FIGURE 0.5 Pencil skyscrapers in central Hong Kong (photo by Brian McMorrow)



FIGURE 0.6 Palm Jumeirah and Palm Jabel Ali, Dubai (photo by Brian McMorrow)



manifestation. The American anti-sprawl movement – new urbanism – and its interconnected streets grids and figural open spaces are manifested in new towns such as Lavasa in India and Dos Rios in the Philippines (Figure 0.6). Meanwhile, nine new towns being built outside Shanghai are themed: Swedish, English, Italian, Spanish, American, Dutch, German, traditional Chinese, with an ecological one called Lingang, and with one of them, Thames Town, unabashedly replicating the classic English market town with cobbled streets, Victorian terraces and corner shops, a church, a pub and fish and chips shop. And the 700-hectare new city of Masdar in Abu Dhabi is designed to supposedly achieve carbon neutrality and supply all of its energy needs using state-of-the-art renewable technologies. While the efficacy of such models remains to be seen, they represent refreshing counterpoints to Asia's nihilistic urban trends of the recent past, bearing the potential to either chart new futures or conversely vanish into oblivion.

These landscapes, though shaped by diverse phenomenological forces, are all engaged in dynamic evolutionary processes, sharing complex relationships with each other. In fact they are often so intertwined that it is hard to pull them apart, metaphorically. True, Asia contains many nations and region-specific macro-cultures all trying to maintain their individual identities, but eventually the fundamental forces shaping Asian cities are neither isolated nor regionally unique: the Indian subcontinent for instance is historically entwined with the cultures of the Persian and Gulf region. China's or Dubai's rapid urbanization is an echo of Japan's unprecedented growth in the 1960s and 1970s. Informal urbanisms are seamlessly intertwined with metropolitan landscapes. Colonial landscapes are gradually taking on new post-colonial identities. And Asia's oldest cities – among the oldest in the world – are themselves cultural repositories and palimpsests of intertwined cross-cultural histories far too complicated to unpack.

### Framing the book

To embrace this ambiguity and pluralism, this book therefore purposefully avoids a place-based or chronological structure. Its framing instead comes down to reconfiguring these multiple, intertwined landscapes into three contingent broader lenses: *traditions*, *tensions* and *transformations*. Again, the plural mode of each of these terms is a conscious indicator of embracing diversities and complexities, and thereby negating a history of choice.

*Traditions* offers critical counter-narratives to the modernity of Asian cities. The resilience of Asia's indigenous urbanisms, the dilemmas surrounding the conservation of its historic urban cores and monuments, and the place of grassroots efforts and populist forces in city-making are all highlighted as contemporary pan-Asian phenomena that cannot be ignored. The voices in this section collectively lament on the increasing myopia towards or eradication of Asia's urban heritage, reminding us of the urgency to notice this loss and act upon it.

*Tensions* reflects on the legacies of the original collisions and infusions of western and Asian urbanisms. Colonialism and early modernism are gauged as parallel phenomena grappling with an East–West dialectic, whether by contention or will. Have these seemingly hegemonic places been assimilated, critiqued or rejected by the generations that have followed? Are these infusions little more than dormant symbols of a recent history or integral cultural components that have been long absorbed into the Asian ethos?

*Transformations* gleans into Asia's new emerging post-industrial and globalizing identities, weighing their intentions and aspirations against their price and promise. What are the forces and lineages that are shaping these new utopias? How should we read them? Are they little more than colossal Towers of Babel destined for catastrophe and collapse, or conscientious visions and experiments towards social, economic and cultural progress?

What does this tripartite framing do? It creates unbiased, neutral framework to examine Asia's urban landscape in an all-encompassing way. It helps catalogue the multifarious issues surrounding this landscape while simultaneously interrogating it. It enables the identification and highlighting of common themes, concerns and overlaps that exist in different places at different times. Like the ten landscapes discussed above, the issues discussed within the three sections also coexist and intertwine – issues discussed in any one section overlap or lurk behind the dominant narratives of the other two – making our understanding of Asian cities richer and far more sophisticated. On a practical side, this broad framing also allows the book to grow with updates or additional chapters, expanding its breadth and scholarship.

At one level, this book follows a simple hierarchical order, beginning with historic discussions, followed by commentaries on its colonial and post-colonial dilemmas, and finishing with studies on its post-industrial issues. As such this book may be read as an outline on the making of Asia. At another level, cities can be approached from a number of intellectual perspectives, as the authors demonstrate so well in this volume and the varied emphasis from chapter to chapter – descriptive, analytical, argumentative – unfolds a series of instigating perspectives, questions and conclusions provoking further debate. Each section contains an editor's introduction followed by eight essays. Some essays are abridged versions of larger studies, and readers inspired by particular writings are encouraged to both consult the original, full-length papers or books (listed in the notes), or contact the authors.

The voices in this book are both from academia and practice, and from both East and West, all woven together. Many of the authors have grown up, lived and worked in Asia, and offer us their deep understanding of Asian cities borne out of a continuous immersion in them. Others, from the US and Europe, have not only lived in Asia but used their work on Asian cities to reflect back on urban conditions at home, thereby creating a continuous feedback loop. It is the nature and quality of these authors – architects, architectural historians, planners, urbanists, anthropologists, historic preservationists who straddle multiple worlds

and thus multiple perspectives simultaneously – that enables this book to capture the rich urban pluralism of emerging Asia.

The timing of this book could not have been better. With Asia's re-emergence on the global stage there is an acute focus on its surfacing urban issues and identities, particularly from an economically weary West. What are Asian cities going to become? Will they surpass the economic and environmental debacles of the West? The focus on Asian cities today has as much to do with curiosity as hope. Addressed to architects and urbanists, practitioners and students, Asian and western, the broad framework of this book is offered to instigate and inspire that curiosity and hope, to enable the beginnings of understanding Asia in all its colours as both a fantastic frontier for informed engagement, and more significantly, a source of extraordinary knowledge that can challenge our very fundamental preconceptions of what cities are and ought to be.