

Urban Studies Journal – Special Issue

Royal agency in contemporary city building in Southeast Asia

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Rationale

This special issue showcases scholarship on the urban agency of contemporary monarchies in Southeast Asian cities. In contemporary times, royal institutions are often assumed to be archaic or residual social formations. Certainly, in western urban contexts monarchical power is largely framed as symbolic or performative (Cannadine 1980, 1983). Indeed, the assumption within urban theory more generally is that urban change, what we in this special issue dub as “city building”, is a result of a trilogy of driving forces, namely the state, the market and civil society.

Yet in any number of contexts where monarchy survives, royal institutions and individuals can and do play a part in urban development, and often in quite spectacular ways through megadevelopments. This is most evident in the Middle East and North Africa, where monarchies use their authority and wealth to encourage entrepreneurial initiatives in the property and development sectors (c.f. Moser et al., 2015; Molotch & Ponzini, 2019; Joghee et al., 2020). Bogaert (2011: 256) specifically argues that these modern royal regimes assume a “neo-liberal agency” that reshapes “political life” in and through urban megaprojects creating a “new state space.” (See also Bogaert, 2018).

This is a compelling argument that has implications for how we theorize urban regimes specifically, as well as the nature of city building generally. This special issue will extend this line of scholarship by considering the extent and scope of monarchical city building in cities of Southeast Asia. Southeast Asian monarchies are of interest because they operate in a range of political settings, from the authoritarian to the democratic. While there is existing scholarship on the symbolic and political powers of these monarchies, there has not been a consolidated consideration of their city building powers, including: (1) the way in which city building is a site of, and medium, for the realisation of their authority; (2) the novel and often opaque city building alliances that form between monarchical interests and those of the market, the state and civil society, and; (3) the ways in which this intersects with global logics of comparison and aspiration.

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