

DESIGNING POLITICAL POWER: CAPITOL COMPLEXES AS MODERN CITADELS

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Writing about the power structure of traditional societies, anthropologist Clifford Geertz comments that "At the political center of any complexly organized society... there is both a governing elite and a set of symbolic forms expressing the fact that it is in truth governing."¹ Through reference to the urban design of seven capital cities whose central areas have been expressly designed to articulate the dominant symbolic presence of government, this paper argues for the continued relevance of Geertz's notion of a symbolic "political center." The urban treatment and juxtaposition of important political institutions within such places as Washington, D.C., Canberra, New Delhi, Chandigarh, Brasília, Abuja and Dodoma provides evidence of the persistent necessity for maintaining a spatial component to political power which goes beyond the powerful presence of single buildings. While the specific styles and types of these symbolic forms have differed widely during the first few millennia of urban history and exhibit variety even among the seven examples mentioned here, the fundamental need to signal the presence of the ruler to the ruled has not diminished. As Geertz continues:

No matter how democratically the members of the elite are chosen (usually not very)...they justify their existence and order their actions in terms of a collection of stories, ceremonies, insignia, formalities, and appurtenances that they have either inherited or, in more revolutionary situations, invented. It is these-- crowns and coronations, limousines and conferences-- that mark the center as center and give what goes on there its aura of being not merely important but in some odd fashion connected with the way the world is built. The gravity of high politics and the solemnity of high worship spring from liker impulses than might first appear.²

While the activity of the center features a variety of rituals, nothing more directly "marks the center as center" or legitimizes a regime that claims to be democratically supported than the architecture and planning of the seat of government, or "capitol."

Capitols and Citadels

According to the etymologists of the Oxford English Dictionary, "capitol" originally connoted "a citadel on a hill." Rome's Capitoline Hill, site of the ancient Temple of Jupiter (within which the Roman Senate sometimes convened), provides us with a clue to both political and topographical origins for the word. Moreover, the notion of "citadel" suggests roots that

lurk even deeper in the past. The word "citadel," derived from the Italian *cittadella*--little city, is an imperfect translation of the Greek word *akropolis*--upper city. The ancient citadel, as an architecturally dominant mini-city within a city, combines both these notions. While it is a long way from the Athenian *massif* to a hillock above the Potomac, one must not easily dismiss the connections. The evolving etymology of the word *capitol* suggests that a *capitol* need not always be thought of as a single building. Rather, the phrase "*capitol complex*" is often more accurately descriptive of a situation whereby the most important institutions of a city are grouped together or otherwise formally related in one particular zone of the capital. It is this urban design notion of the *capitol complex*, I argue, that is the true heir of more ancient refuges of political and spiritual power.

Though the gap between an ancient citadel and a modern *capitol complex* may seem immense, important continuities remain. A *capitol complex* is expected to be a symbolic center. As such, it is not so distant from the primal motivations that inspired the first cities. According to Lewis Mumford, the "first germ of the city... is in the ceremonial meeting place that serves as a goal for pilgrimage."³ Even though the goal of pilgrimage has more often been supplanted by the quest for patronage or the diffuse pleasures of tourism, some cities (many of them capitals) have not fully forsaken their claim to wider significance.

While capital cities have become almost unrecognizably larger and more complex, and autocratic political power has often been transformed to include varying degrees of democratic participation, certain cities retain their symbolic centrality and importance. To the ancient Romans, the Capitol was not only the center of government but also the *caput mundi*, literally the "head" of the world.⁴ This direct connection between the symbolic center of a city and the rest of the universe is, of course, hardly a claim made by Romans alone; cosmic conjunction is explicit in Chinese geomancy and in Indian mandala plans, and is implicit in less well-understood ceremonial centers across six continents.⁵ Some modern capital cities-- such as Athens, Jerusalem, Cairo and Moscow-- have grown up around ancient centers of power (though, of these four, only the Soviet Union continues to use its Kremlin as the locus of national political control). In most other cities which have developed over many centuries any surviving notion of a *caput mundi* functions much less overtly or dramatically. Still, though the urban umbilicals to the heavens have been weakened or cut in the centuries since capitals first unknowingly vied for cosmic centrality, earthbound articulations of power have remained robust. The capitols of today continue to crown many a frail regime, and still tend to delineate the "head" of the city.

For centuries, it was conceivable for a *capitol* (in its various nascent forms) to exist almost independently from its surrounding city. In its walled precinct, the *capitol* appeared spatially separate, a ruler's refuge. As long as it was a sacred center, as well as an administrative and a military one, access was strictly limited to the priests and the privileged. In palaces and courts, temples and shrines, the concept of a "Forbidden City" extended far afield from China. In this view, *capitol* precedes capital or, as Mumford puts it, "the magnet

comes before the container."⁶ Magnetized by the presence of a monarch (or a religious institution), the capital container grew around this capitol center, designed for ritual and devoted to ceremony. For now, I wish only to suggest that the designers of modern capitol complexes often seek to regain or retain vestiges of the earlier notions of privileged acropolis and secure citadel.

Designed Capitals

Not all newly independent states have had the appropriate combination of political and financial resources necessary to mark this independence with the design and construction of a new capital city. On one hand, the commission of a new capital city-- or even just a new parliamentary district within or adjacent to an existing capital-- is often simply too costly even to be seriously contemplated. On the other hand, there is the temptation to expropriate and re-use the often opulent edifices of the colonial *ancien regime*. To be sure, in many cases, these two factors have been intimately connected. In some instances, however, the government leaders of newly independent states have spent lavishly on new facilities despite the overall poverty of their country or the availability of transformable colonial structures. The decision to build a new place for government is always a significant one; the decisions about where and how to house it are more telling still.

With capitals that are designed as well as designated, political will is underscored by a physical plan. A new capital city, designed according to the priorities of those who hold power, involves not only a new center of government but also a new "container" in which this center of government must be located. The spatial resolution of this capitol/capital relationship is always immensely revealing about the political relationship between the governors and the governed. While many, if not most, of the "evolved" capitals have large sectors that have been "designed," it is the largest of these design interventions that are the most useful indications of social/spatial fit and misfit.

Though the designed capital city is descended from colonially imposed cities of the past, its lineage may be traced to another important typology-- the palace and its gardens. For centuries, most largescale attempts at urban design were sponsored by the wealth of the court or the church, and were intended as extensions of the royal or priestly realm into the public domain. From the Versailles of Louis XIV to the Rome of Pope Sixtus V, political power was extended horizontally across the landscape. No longer confined by the walls of a citadel, power went public. By the sixteenth century, at least in Europe, the palace had begun to extend across the city and out into the countryside. As Mumford puts it, "Baroque city building, in the formal sense, was an embodiment of the prevalent drama and ritual that shaped itself in the court: in effect, a collective embellishment of the ways and gestures of the palace."⁷ Even after the age of royal residence cities, like the "suburban" capital at Versailles, had passed, remnants of palatial Baroque order continued to be set into the fabric of European capitals. In Paris, Madrid, Vienna and Berlin, in Wren's unexecuted plan for London after the great fire, and, most audaciously, in Peter the Great's founding of St. Petersburg on the swampy northwestern fringe of his empire, grand processional axes, long imposing facades, enormous squares and converging diagonals provided a common design repertoire for the European capital city.

Seven Capitol Complexes

For each of the seven designed capital cities mentioned here, the audacity of the enterprise has itself been an integral part of its purpose. At the broadest level, the sheer fact that any of these cities came into being at all is the most profound testament to the power of a regime to exert sustained control over the political and economic engines of its society. The siting of designed capitals is never without extreme controversy, and capitals are often built right on the political fault lines that continue to fracture states into quarreling nations. National capitals are not often "centrally located" on some "neutral ground." Even where their location is a hardfought product of hardfought compromise (as with Washington, Canberra and Abuja, for instance), the resultant site is an expression of the ongoing existence of the conflict rather than its demonstrated resolution.

Faced with such highly-charged and controversial sites, most architects and urban designers of capitol complexes attempt through spatial gestures to achieve a formal stability which political realities rarely are able to emulate. This formal stability would seem to take two forms, both of which are attempts by designers to create a kind of ideogram for the political system of the country. The first type, familiar from palace and fortress designs of the past, exhibits an emphasis on bilateral symmetry which places the most important building at the center, with all else flanking it in a subordinate manner; a second variety is focused not on a single building but on some sort of public plaza. The first kind of capitol complex urban design seems to be the preferred pre-modern approach, and is especially evident in the designs executed under conditions of colonialism, where imposed foreign governments made little pretense of practicing democracy.

New Delhi

This type of capitol complex planning reached its grand culmination in Lutyens' Plan for "Imperial Delhi," a design centered on an executive presence (the Viceroy's palace), intended to demonstrate British commitment to continued colonial rule over India [Fig.1]. Lutyens' plan is, quite possibly, the last example of an executive-centered capitol complex to be constructed anywhere in the world. Though Imperial Delhi was hardly the last example of a non-democratic regime, it may well represent the last time that a regime dared to design a capitol complex with something other than at least the pretense of a "people's" building at its center.

The other six designed capitals mentioned here each exhibit their planners' attempts to come to terms with certain ideals of democracy: the symbolic center of the city is given over to facilities for publicly-elected legislatures and public perambulation. In some of the designed capitals considered here as intended to reinforce the idea of rule "by the people," the pre-modern monarchy-driven idea of the central executive axis is retained but a parliament building is substituted for the royal palace as the terminus of the axis.

Washington, D.C.

With the inspired work of Major Pierre L'Enfant, the tools of Baroque order were combined with the primal symbolism of the capitol and applied in the service of democracy, and the world gained its first modern designed capital [Fig.2]. Washington, then, is the first case where a new capital city was explicitly designed to house a new form of government. Given the enormity

of the political change, from control by the colonial deputies of a European monarchy to a grand experiment in constitutional democracy, the physical design of the new city surely seems less than revolutionary. As Mumford comments:

Despite L'Enfant's firm republican convictions, the design he set forth for the new capital was in every respect what the architects and servants of despotism had originally conceived. He could only carry over into the new age the static image that had been dictated by centralized coercion and control. ⁸

While the diagonals and axes may be redolent of the cities and gardens of imperial Europe, Washington, D.C. is nonetheless a more democratically engendered product. In the choice of its site (a product of compromise rather than a ruler's decree) and in the nature and juxtaposition of its monumental buildings, Washington, D.C. is a notable attempt-- if only partially successful-- to free capital design from its association with autocratic control. Still, as John Reys puts it, it remains "a supreme irony that the plan forms originally conceived to magnify the glories of despotic kings and emperors came to be applied as a national symbol of a country whose philosophical basis was so firmly rooted in democratic equality."⁹

Canberra

Canberra's plan, while in many ways a derivative of Washington's, provides a useful counterpoint in that its axial focus is given over to a public park rather than a parliament building [Fig. 3]. In this sense, it provides a transition between the executive-centered and the people's plaza-centered types. The apex of Walter Burley Griffin's 1913 Master Plan, the point where the diagonals and the central mall come together is called "Capital Hill," but was not intended by Griffin to be the site of the Parliament house. Though Capital Hill is the most prominent of the many hills that lie within the city boundaries, and Griffin envisioned these hills as the "elevated foundations for... buildings of dominating importance," he reserved the prime symbolic location for a public park and ceremonial meeting area. Though he confused matters somewhat by labelling this point the "Capitol Building," Griffin's Capitol was purely for administrative offices and public gathering. The "Parliament House" was to be placed on axis in front of Capital Hill, atop the lesser eminence known as Camp Hill. As it turned out, Parliament did camp on the smaller hill until the 1988 completion of a large permanent Parliamentary complex, controversially sited on-- and in-- the previously open Capital Hill. Carved into the hillside, with most of the legislative functions located underground, Romaldo Giurgola's building is an extraordinary departure from the usual iconography of a capitol. With its roof partially covered in grass and intended for direct public access from the green swath of the Mall below it, Griffin's original idea of Capital Hill as a parkland meeting place for the public may actually be partly realized.

Chandigarh

In his preference for the axial vista leading to a privileged high place, Corbusier's design for the capitol complex at Chandigarh followed L'Enfant, Luytens and Griffin. In emphasizing the view beyond the privileged high place, however, he parts company with these earlier planners [Fig.4]. Le Corbusier does far more than lead the eye of the visitor to to

the capitol complex, his architecture leads the eye through it to the dramatic landscape beyond.

In his layout of the buildings within the capitol, Le Corbusier's work exhibits both remarkable continuity with Lutyens and significant departures. It seems especially noteworthy that he, like Lutyens, sought to place the "Governor's Palace"-- and not the Assembly-- in the premiere position, calling it the "crown of the capital."¹⁰ In the Corbusian view of political power, the executive still reigned supreme. Ironically, it would be through the exercise of this very power that the Capitol would take on a less-imperial form. At the urging of Pandit Nehru, sensitive to this decidedly undemocratic bit of architectural juxtaposition, the Governor's Palace was never built.

Though nearly every commentator on the Chandigarh capitol has stressed the primacy of the Governor's Palace over the other buildings, it seems likely that this was not Corbusier's intention. While it is true that the Governor's Palace presented both the highest and most active silhouette of Corbusier's government quartet, the architect simultaneously used a variety of architectural devices to diminish its apparent centrality. Whereas Lutyens designed the Governor's Palace as the single focus of a long perspective (and even managed, however unintentionally, to build it at the vanishing point), Le Corbusier's Governor's Palace was to be one building among many, a participant in a complex system of plazas and framed views. Significantly, when the Palace was dropped from the scheme, the need for a pavilion in that particular place did not disappear. Le Corbusier sought to replace the Governor with a Museum of Knowledge. Thus, the placement of the Governor's Palace was more than a symbol of political relationships. To Le Corbusier, it was also a necessary formal element, transcending programatic function, in a rich composition.

Whatever the formal qualities, what remained without the Governor's Palace was a different political ideogram, with Assembly and High Court facing each other across a pedestrian-defying expanse of plazas and pools. Taken overall, the most distinguishing feature of Chandigarh's capitol complex plan was its utter detachment of this "head" from the rest of the city. However significant its creation of a pedestrian plaza in place of an axial focus on a government building, the resultant composition still yielded an image of government as distant and inaccessible.

Brasília

Oscar Niemeyer's capitol complex at the head of Lucio Costa's Pilot Plan for Brasília provides a similar plaza-centered symbolism [Fig.5]. Through elaborate regrading, the portion of the "Monumental Axis" that is flanked by ministry buildings is made flat, enabling the capitol complex, oriented transversely at the end of the Axis, to rise abruptly above it. The pedestrian, wishing to reach the government buildings, is confronted by a glass acropolis, surmountable by a concrete ramp. Once up the ramp and past the propylaeum of the paired Secretariat, the pedestrian reaches the Three Powers Plaza. In Brasília, unlike Washington or New Delhi, the end of the axis is not the end of the capitol. Instead, as at Chandigarh, the ultimate destination is not a single building but a plaza with a panoramic view of the landscape beyond. In the transformation

from citadel to capitol complex, ramparts have become ramps and pedestrians have again become very tired.

Abuja

The urban design for Abuja, Nigeria's much-delayed new capital, exhibits elements of both the building-centered and the plaza-centered approaches to capitol complex design, and well illustrates the tenuousness of the connection between plan type and democracy. Here, during a brief period of democratic aspirations and oil-financed euphoria during the late 1970s, the Nigerians simultaneously adopted an American-style Constitution and sponsored a new capital city with a capitol complex modelled after Washington's Mall. This Mall is to culminate in a place known as the "Three Arms Zone," a name which seemingly prefigured Nigeria's prompt return to military rule [Fig.6]. In contrast to Chandigarh and Brasília, where a central plazas are places of public gathering from which the larger landscape may be viewed, Abuja's "Three Arms Zone" is to be a separate zone for government, divided from the rest of the city by distance and by topography. Abuja's capitol complex is the private terminus of an axis, like Lutyens' Viceroy's Palace, with extensive gardens behind. Moreover, when the architects (Kenzo Tange/URTEC) point out that the Three Arms Zone is supposed to represent the American notion of dividing government power into executive, legislative and judicial spheres,¹¹ they fail to acknowledge that the relationship among these three branches of government under the American Constitution is defined precisely by the desirability of their separation rather than their "together"-ness. Of course, it was just this sense of the "separation of powers" that was lost on Nigeria's politicians, as well.

Dodoma

One final example, still under construction in 1990, illustrates the potential for urban designers to develop new alternatives to the building-centered and the empty plaza-centered approaches to capitol complex design, but also reveals the persistent need of governments to cling to the age old idea of the citadel. In the Master Plan for Tanzania's Dodoma, and in the drawings for its "Capital Center" by consultants Conklin Rossant,¹² the inevitability of a megascale central area is challenged [Fig.7]. As envisioned in the Master Plan, the Capital Center is to be "A major mall, an avenue for walking and meeting, with its important buildings carefully modulated and articulated to human scale."¹³ The Conklin Rossant drawings for the Capital Center show an elaborate pedestrian path that traverses seven ascending terraces from the Uhuru ("freedom") plaza flanked by Museum of Social and Political History, the National Library and the Museum of Science and Industry to the city's major gathering place, "Ujamaa Square". This square, to be marked by a large monument in the form of an abstracted acacia tree (such shade trees remain the traditional village place of gathering), is faced by the High Court building and the offices for economic planning. A bit further on, but still connected to this main pedestrian spine, is the site for Presidential offices. Throughout this capital center, instead of a mall flanked by highrise megastructures, there are by two and three story structures sized and oriented to require neither elevators nor air-conditioning. In the drawings at least,

careful planting and terracing make the scale of the Capital Center seem almost unrecognizably different from the drawings submitted by the Tange firm for Abuja. Moreover, in contrast to other designed capitals, the planners of Dodoma envision a thorough intermixture of shopping, restaurants, apartments and cultural facilities with the various government ministries. The Conklin Rossant plan describes the center of Dodoma as "an immense stairway symbolising Tanzania's progress upward and forward."¹⁴ In short, the Dodoma Master Plan is ambitious in its very modesty, proposing nothing less than the first non-monumental capital city. Yet, just when one may think that this place represents a ringing critique of every other designed capital, it turns out that monumentality and hierarchy do not in any way truly disappear. In both the Master Plan by Project Planning Associates and in the subsequent development of the Capital Center by Conklin Rossant, the major buildings for the party and parliamentary leadership are to be located well outside of the pedestrian Capital Center [Fig.8]. Indeed, a separate set of Chinese consultants has been employed to design the buildings on "Parliament Hill." In the Master Plan, the High Court is located a mile away from the main square of the Capital Center, along a sinuous and tree-lined "Processional Way," and the Parliament and Party National Headquarters are located at the terminus of this Processional Way, another mile further on, atop a hilltop overlooking the rest of the city. In short, the Dodoma Master Plan makes no provision in the Capital Center for the government buildings housing the most powerful components of Tanzania's national government. Though the High Court and certain important executive offices are brought within the realm of this central sector and placed on "Ujamaa Square," Party and Parliament remain isolated on the hill, subject to the designs of a different consultant. As in Abuja, the leadership takes hilltop refuge, despite the availability of the egalitarian plane of the "Ujamaa Square." Even for socialist leaders or, perhaps, especially for socialist leaders, this sort of "levelling" is not to be desired.

In Dodoma as elsewhere, the capitol is detached from the capital. While Dodoma lacks the axiality (and the historical associations with axiality) present in Abuja and most other designed capital city precedents, its parliamentary complex lacks none of Abuja's association of natural forms with political power. While Abuja's "Three Arms Zone" is intended to be the culmination and focus of that city's urban design, Dodoma's parliamentary complex would dominate somewhat more surreptitiously. Perched at the top of a curving "Processional Way," the hierarchical separation between government and governed is maintained; big brother is well-placed to watch.

As long as Dodoma and Abuja remain essentially paper capitals, defined more by the hopes of their Master Plans than by any built realization, assessments must remain both partial and cautious. Yet, whatever the outcome, both plans are clear statements about the relationship between capital and capitol. In each case, as in Chandigarh and Brasília, the capitol is detached from the capital, but visually prominent.

Conclusions

All seven of these complexes so briefly discussed here have been designed to house the means of government and to communicate this government visually to those who are governed. As such they are necessarily infused with symbolism and are

revealing cultural products. In the designed capitals there is a separate and privileged zone for government, in contrast to most capitals that have evolved more naturally over longer periods of time, where government buildings are located in many different quarters of the city. Only in Dodoma is there a suggestion that the central portion of a capital city may be a series of pedestrian enclaves integrating many activities rather than a Mall of vast vistas or a plaza of heroic dimensions. Yet even here, the two buildings of greatest political consequence-- the Party headquarters and the parliament -- are to stand above the otherwise well-cultivated humility of the capital. This seemingly clear evidence of the politician's need for prominent refuge renders Dodoma consistent with the other examples of capitol complexes that have been cited. Even in an age that is arguably more democratic than any which has preceded it, the urban design clues to our political landscapes bespeak a persistent executive fearfulness, a lingering gap between governments and those they govern.

These seven city plans reveal much more about the persistence of the need to demonstrate political power than they do about any abstract ideals of democracy. Fortunately, politics usually changes even faster than the powerful traces of urban design-- political realities need bear no direct relation to the messages long ago encoded into these city plans by their designers. Buildings that were once provocative are transformed and re-used by new regimes and yield new and unpredictable meanings. What was once off limits may become wholly accessible, and vice versa. Yet somehow the worldwide persistence of citadels for democracy seems a contradiction well worth pondering.

¹ Clifford Geertz, Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretative Anthropology (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. 125.

² Ibid., p. 125.

³ Lewis Mumford, The City in History (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961), p. 10.

⁴ Peter Murray, The Architecture of the Italian Renaissance (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), pp. 178-9. One story has it that the Roman capitolium got its name from the word *caput* after workmen digging the foundations for the Temple of Jupiter (consecrated 509 B.C.) found "a skull of immense size which was regarded as prophetic of the future greatness of the city" [Paul Norton, Lafroba, Jefferson and the National Capitol (New York: Garland, 1977), p. 264, note 4.].

⁵ Kevin Lynch, Good City Form (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), pp. 73-7.

⁶ Mumford, p. 9.

⁷ Mumford, p. 375.

⁸ Mumford, pp. 403-04.

⁹ John Reps, from Monumental Washington (1967), cited in Lois Craig, ed., The Federal Presence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984) p. 21. While Reps is surely correct to emphasize the curious persistence of an anachronistic plan type, he would seem to overstate the new government's commitment to equality. The United States Constitution of 1787, from its infamous 3/5ths clause defining the status of slaves to the institution of the electoral college as a check upon the power of the popular vote, was premised upon many principles that are neither egalitarian nor fully democratic.

¹⁰ Le Corbusier, Oeuvre Complète 1952-1957, ed. W. Boesiger (Zurich: Girsberger, 1957), p. 102.

¹¹ Omar Take, "Abuja, the New Capital of Nigeria, and the Urban Design of Its Central Area," included in Continuity and Change: Design Strategies for Large-Scale Urban Development (Cambridge: Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, 1984), p. 54.

¹² Capital Development Authority, Urban Design for the National Capital Centre, prepared by the Tanzania Capital Development Authority and Conklin & Rossant, June 1980.

¹³ Capital Development Authority, National Capital Master Plan: Dodoma, Tanzania (1976), pp. 70-1.

¹⁴ National Capital Centre Plan, p. ix.

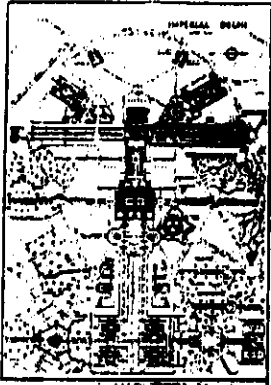


Fig. 1: Capitol Complex, "Imperial Delhi" Focus on Viceroy's House



Fig. 2: Center of L'Enfant Plan for Washington (1792 Version, Ellicott engraving)

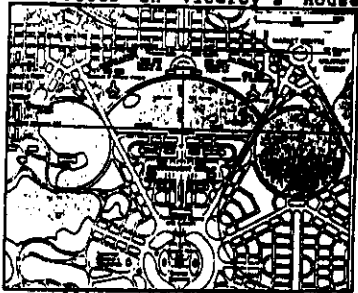


Fig. 3: Griffin's Plan for Canberra (1913 Version)

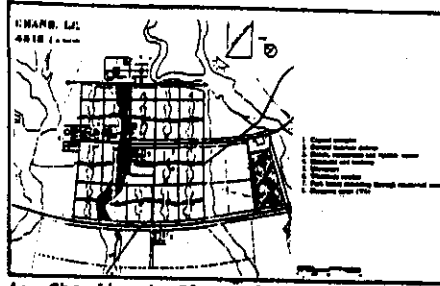


Fig. 4: Chandigarh Plan of 1950, As Adapted by Le Corbusier

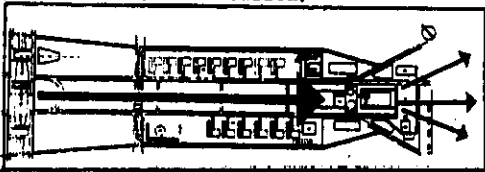


Fig. 5: Brasilia Plan (c.1960) Monumental Axis But Open to Landscape

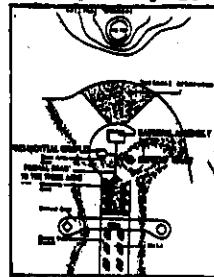


Fig. 6: Diagram of "Three Arms Zone," Abuja Plan (c. 1980)

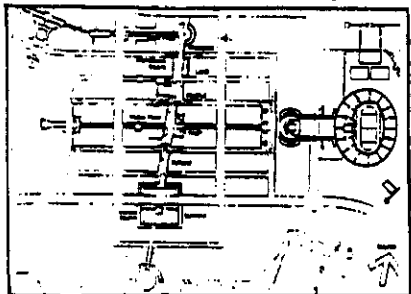


Fig. 7: Pedestrian Pathways, Plan for Dodoma (1980)

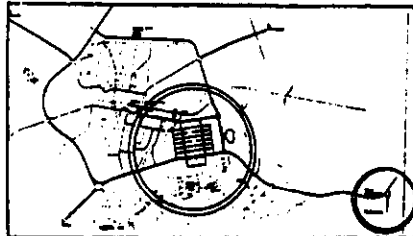


Fig. 8: Dodoma Parliament and Capital Center: Two Separate Realms