Global-Archaic Cities:
Nationalist, Nostalgic Mutations of the Global City
by
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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis including any required final revisions as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

In the past decade and a half, some urban megaprojects have hybridized the rhetoric and aesthetics of neoliberal globalization with inverse narratives of rebuilding lost national monuments or urban landscapes to return to a mythical past. This thesis gives this phenomenon a name — the global-archaic city — and examines the strategic motivations for and urban consequences of hybridizing two narratives and models of city building that appear so contradictory.

The thesis first surveys separately the two constituent elements of the global-archaic city: the global city trope (and its associated globalization narratives) and national mythscapes (and their associated narratives of rebuilding and return). Then, in three case studies of contemporary urban megaprojects, the thesis demonstrates how global-archaic cities hybridize these opposite geographic and historical imaginaries into anachronistic urban landscapes and narratives of national restoration through globalization.

The thesis suggests understanding the global-archaic city as a post-2008 mutation of the global city trope. In response to neoliberal globalization's crisis of legitimacy, global-archaic cities preserve the economic base of globalization while substituting the superstructure of cultural globalization for localist nostalgia. This seemingly benign shift in legitimizing rhetoric, however, has unexpected material consequences by creating incentives within the logic of neoliberal globalization for the simulated resurrection of historical urban geographies and landscapes.

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I
Introduction:
Digital Viking Villages
and Byzantine Crypto-Cities

Introduction

Over the past decade and a half, the spores of a mutant model of urban megaproject have been germinating on the edges of public discourse and among the urban landscapes of the world's economic semi-periphery. This model is at its core a temporal chimera, simultaneously from the future and from the past. When I first encountered this model in an unofficial masterplan for Jerusalem and a proposal for a deep-sea port on Georgia's Black Sea coast, I prompted the AI chatbot DeepSeek to generate a list of contemporary urban megaprojects that follow the same pattern.[1] The resulting list included the "digital Viking village" of "Tallinn Smart City" — equipped with a "wood-clad server farm resembling a medieval longhouse, [...] rune-stone-shaped data monuments, [and] 5G-enabled forest cities marketed as cyber-pagan retreats" — and Belgrade's "Byzantine Crypto-City" — which synthesizes "orthodox imperial nostalgia + Gulf-style speculative finance" in architectural features such as "a glass skyscraper with medieval Serbian cross motifs [and the] 'Silicon Balkan' tech hub inside a pseudo-Byzantine arcade."[2] Further research revealed that DeepSeek had hallucinated these urban developments. But while none of these places or proposals exist outside of that chat log, their crudeness perhaps unveils the fundamental, structural logic of the new megaprojects more clearly than any real-world example ever could.

1
Yehudah Etzion and Yoram Ginzburg, *The Book of Jerusalem Rebuilt: A Collection of Works from the Drawing Table* (self-published, 2014); Tekla Aslanishvili and Orit Halpern, "Scenes from a Reclamation," *E-Flux Architecture*, 2020, e-flux.com/architecture/new-silk-roads/313102/scenes-from-a-reclamation/.

2
Text generated by DeepSeek. DeepSeek AI, January 2026, deepseek.com.

Under one lens, these megaprojects look much like the hyper-futuristic, entrepreneurial new cities that have proliferated especially throughout Africa and Asia since the turn of the millennium.[3] Like these new cities, the emerging model of megaproject features all the urban and architectural tropes that have come to indicate the commitment of a place to progress: clusters of slick glass skyscrapers, bullet trains, smart-city infrastructure, ecological certifications. Marketing and publicity materials promise that these megaprojects can (read: will) transform a place into somewhere like the world's most successful "global cities" — especially Dubai, Singapore, and Hong Kong.[4] In other words, the megaprojects promise that they can accelerate a place into a prosperous future by linking it into the universal networks of the world economy.

Switch out the lens, however, and the megaprojects metamorphose into something practically antithetical to the hyper-futuristic new cities. Now, the megaprojects begin to speak a language of localist nostalgia in promises to return a place to a historical golden age: to the days of a glorious empire, to the triumphant founding of a nation, or to a past era of prosperity and power. Promotional renderings and plans of these cities propose to rebuild ruined or lost buildings, monuments, and infrastructures from national mythology or to revive the architectural aesthetics of a glorious past.

A pair of apparent contradictions, then, weave throughout the DNA of the germinating model of urban megaproject: they will accelerate a city into the future just as they will return it to the past; they will integrate a city into the placeless, global networks of the world economy just as they will ground it in place. For its hybridization of these opposite historical and geographic imaginaries, I propose to term the new model of megaproject the *global-archaic city*.

In global-archaic megaprojects, the apparent contradiction between accelerating into the future and returning to the past does not exist; neither does the apparent contradiction between reestablishing roots in local place and dissolving into the placeless flows and universal space of globalized networks. The megaprojects actively produce these contradictions only to integrate them into surprising hybrids of past and future, local and global, like, in the case of DeepSeek's hallucinations, Byzantine tech hubs or Viking server farms. The same flattening of past and future appears in the real-world case studies of this thesis, though not always so blatantly. In one example, a masterplan proposes to rebuild the Israelite-era Temple of Jerusalem alongside a megamall and stock exchange. In another, promotional materials depict a

3
Sarah Moser and Laurence Côté-Roy, "New Cities: Power, Profit, and Prestige," *Geography Compass* 15, no. 1 (2021).

4
Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton University Press, 1991); Quinn Slobodian, *Crack Up Capitalism: Market Radicals and the Dream of a World Without Democracy* (Metropolitan Books, 2023).



1.1

Silicon-Valley-backed new town, equipped with high-tech military and robotics manufacturing facilities, as a pastoral village. In every case, global-archaic megaprojects integrate nostalgia and neophilia, localism and globalism into a single narrative structure that appears in two mirrored variations.[5] In the first variation, which this thesis terms *restoration through globalization*, the city accelerates neoliberal globalization until it bends toward a mythical, local past. The initial historical trajectory is forward: a megaproject promises, for example, to use the most cutting-edge smart-city technologies to launch a place into the future. When you arrive in this high-tech future, however, it more resembles a twee fantasy of a prewar American town: clapboard and brick row houses, stars and stripes flying off flagpoles, kids playing on car-free streets. In the second variation, *globalization through restoration*, the city inaugurates a return to a mythical, local past that has been reimagined to resemble a neoliberal, globalized future. Here, history first appears to move backward: a megaproject promises, for example, to rebuild an ancient national monument and return a civilization to its origins. This ancient past, however, turns out to look strikingly like a contemporary global city: bullet trains, multimodal international transportation hubs, skyscraper condominiums.

That global-archaic cities so thoroughly weave together nostalgia with neophilia and localism with globalism makes it difficult to discount the resulting historical anachronisms and geographical contradictions as mere accidents or oversights. At most, megaproject authors and patrons have calculated and refined the model of the global-archaic city to cultivate the sympathies of their target audiences, to secure approvals, to generate investment. At least, they have responded intuitively to feedback signals within a cultural atmosphere that have pushed them toward this model. Either way, states, investors, and developers must derive some utility from the model of the global-archaic city and, consequently, it warrants serious examination. Viewing the model of the global-archaic city accordingly as an intentional strategy of urban development suggests some questions. Why do global-archaic megaprojects hybridize two urban imaginaries that seem so obviously contradictory? What utility does this hybrid provide for the authors and patrons of these projects? Why has this model of urban megaproject developed now, specifically, over the past decade and a half? And, finally, what would be the consequences — on the world's urban landscapes and geographies, on perceptions of the relationship between history and the future for those who inhabit or interact with these spaces — if the spores of the global-archaic city were to grow into a more dominant model of urban development?

5
I use the word neophilia as an antonym to nostalgia. If nostalgia is a longing for the old or a desire to return to the past, then neophilia is a desire for the new, a longing for the future.

↖ 1.1
Rendering of the winning masterplan of the urban design competition for New Kharakhorum City, Mongolia

New Kharakhorum City in Mongolia is an archetypal global-archaic megaproject. The Mongolian state has marketed the project as resurrecting Kharakhorum, the ruined thirteenth-century capital of the Mongol Empire, as a contemporary smart-city and administrative capital. At once, the project reaches backward to the glorious age of Mongolia's imperial past while launching the country into a high-tech globalized future.

Methodology

The following chapters suggest understanding the global-archaic city as a post-2008 mutation of the global city trope, which has begun to justify itself in terms of national-historical myth as a supplement to (rather than a replacement for) increasingly faulty globalization narratives. As backlash to the economic and cultural changes wrought since the end of the 1970s by neoliberal globalization has mounted, especially since the 2008 global financial crisis, globalization narratives (and their supreme monuments — global cities) have faced an image crisis. Backlash has produced a cultural atmosphere in which globalization and the global city increasingly must rebrand or at least supplement their old legitimizing narratives with new alternatives. For global-archaic cities, that supplement comes from national mythology and nationalist nostalgia. This thesis, then, treats the global-archaic city at the most schematic level as the result of the heuristic equation: *global city trope + national mythscape = global-archaic city*.

The first element of this equation, *the global city trope*, is a type of urban megaproject that bundles the characteristic urban design, governance, and branding formulas of successful, established global cities (especially Dubai) into a mobile model of urban development. This model promises to accelerate any place

into which it is inserted toward prosperous futures by linking it into the global economy. Wherever there is the common marketing claim that an urban megaproject will transform a place into "the Dubai/Singapore/Hong Kong of [insert region here]," there is the global city trope.

The second element of the global-archaic city equation is a *lost national mythscape*. A national mythscape is the *idea* of an urban landscape — a city, a piece of infrastructure, a complex of buildings — that features in national mythology and that shapes and grounds national identity. Examples from later in this thesis include the idea of Israelite-era Jerusalem (especially the Temple), the idea of the American Wild West (especially the homestead), and the idea of the Silk Road (especially the ancient Chinese capital of Chang'an). From the Holy Roman Empire to post-independence Greece to fascist Italy, states and political movements have presented urban interventions as rebuilding lost national mythscapes to generate consent, support, or enthusiasm for themselves and their policies.[6] The global-archaic city supplements the faulty legitimizing narrative of globalization with the tried-and-true narrative of rebuilding and return to legitimize itself, its authors, and its patrons.

The second major proposition of the following chapters is that the global-archaic city is defined by its narrative structure. The following cases of global-archaic megaprojects vary by almost every criterion: in their architectural aesthetics and urban form, in their politics, in their authorship and patronage, in the economic and practical functions that they perform. These megaprojects, however, all tell the same story about themselves and their place in the world and in history, in which they accelerate globalization until it bends toward the past, or in which they return a place to a past reimagined in the style of a neoliberal, globalized future. One megaproject, for example, claims that by accelerating contemporary globalization, it will revive the ancient Silk Road. Another claims that by releasing Silicon Valley from the constraints of regulation, democracy, and taxation to build tech-hub settlements from scratch, it will reopen the American frontier. While the content of these stories varies between global-archaic megaprojects, they share a narrative structure that — more than a particular aesthetic, politics, or type of urban form — bundles them together into an identifiable phenomenon.

This thesis uses a set of conceptual tools to analyze and compare the stories that different models of urban development tell about themselves. Stories create their own internal worlds with their own geographies and histories. These narrative worlds — in the

6
Rand Carter, "Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Project for a Royal Palace on the Acropolis," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 38, no. 1 (1979); Aristotle Kallis, "The Uses of Romanità in Fascist-Era Urbanism," in *Rome and the Colonial City: Rethinking the Grid* (Oxbow Books, 2022).

cases, for example, of literature, cinema, or folktales – may be self-consciously imaginary, or – in the cases of academic scholarship, political narratives, or news media – may claim to model the world around us as it really is. How a story imagines the spatial characteristics and contours of the world (the sort of "world map" that it implies), I have called its *spatial environment*. The spatial environment of a narrative world may be homogeneous or heterogeneous, isotropic or anisotropic, smooth or striated.[7] The narratives studied in this thesis also *position* their protagonist – the city – variously within the world. Sometimes the city sits at the centre of the world, sometimes on its peripheries; on a frontier, or in a hinterland. Together, the spatial environment and the position of the protagonist within it make a story's *geographic imaginary*. How a story imagines the temporal characteristics and contours of the world, I have called the *temporal environment*. Time may run along a linear track, it may bend back on itself, it may cycle incessantly. As the narratives studied in this thesis position the city differently within the world, so do they position the city differently within history. Frequently, they position the city in a prosperous future, a paradisaic past, or a decaying present. Together, the temporal environment and the position of the protagonist within it make a story's *historical imaginary*. Table 1.1 provides a summary analysis of the three urban models of the global-archaic city equation in terms of their geographic and historical imaginaries.

The final major theoretical assertion of this thesis is that narratives are material forces and that how they present geography, history, and the position of the city within them has material consequences. The *authors* (developers, states, investors) of urban megaprojects use narratives – in the form of marketing materials, public statements, spatial branding – to do work on *audiences* (the public, potential investors, municipalities). By presenting an urban megaproject as being situated in the world and in history in a particular way, authors induct audiences into ways of seeing the project that may encourage them to give their consent, invest in the project, or grant necessary approvals. A narrative, for example, that positions an urban megaproject historically in a national golden age and geographically as a replacement for a ruined national monument on its original site can activate patriotic feelings that may encourage the public to support a project that they would otherwise have difficulty seeing their own interest in. Legitimizing narratives not only define the form and aesthetics of urban megaprojects but can make the difference between what gets built and what does not. The variations in the structure and content of these narratives, then, are not just a matter of marketing rhetoric; they actively shape the world's urban landscapes.

7
By *heterogeneous space*, I refer to the perception that there are many *types* of space – that there is a difference between, for example, local space and foreign space, the sovereign space of country and the sovereign space of another, and so on. By *homogeneous space*, I refer to the opposite perception: that there is only one type of space – that though there may be differences between places, these differences do not concern the quality of space itself. Relatedly, by *striated space,* I refer to an understanding of space marked by boundaries and borders that mark the edges of or restrict flows between different types of space. By *smooth space,* I refer to an understanding of space unmarked by boundaries and borders, in which flows travel freely and unimpeded across the earth.

↗ 1.2
Geographic and historical imaginaries of the global city trope, national mythscapes, and the global-archaic city

		Global city trope, globalization	National mythscapes, rebuilding and return	Global-archaic city, restoration through globalization
Geographic imaginary	Position of the city	Hyperconnected node of polycentric network	Grounded in place	Grounded hub of polycentric network
	Spatial environment	Isotropic, smooth space	Anisotropic, striated, heterogeneous space	Anisotropic, smooth heterogeneous space
Historical imaginary	Position of the city	In the future	In the past	In an archaic future or a futuristic past
	Temporal environment	Linear time	Recursive time	Bent time

1.2

Thesis Structure

The structure of this thesis follows the heuristic equation *global city trope + national mythscape = global-archaic city*. The three main chapters of the thesis each examine one element of this equation, focusing especially on their legitimizing narratives, geographic and historical imaginaries, and the instrumental work performed by these narratives.

Chapter two examines the global city trope and globalization narratives. The chapter unfolds as a genealogy, demonstrating how the global city trope models itself after the successful Asian global city states of the 1990s and 2000s, inherits the globalization narratives of the earliest global cities of the 1980s and 1990s, and rests upon the foundations of the postwar city. Through each generation of this genealogy, the chapter reconstructs the geographic and historical imaginaries of globalization narratives. The former positions the global city as a hyperconnected node within the smooth, isotropic, homogeneous networks of the world economy; the latter positions the global city in the future as an engine of linear acceleration into prosperous futures.

Chapter three examines lost national mythscapes and rebuilding and return narratives. The chapter contains three case studies

of national mythscapes, each characterized by a distinct spatial form. The first case study examines Jerusalem and the idea of the centre. The second case study examines the American West and the idea of the frontier. The third case study examines the Silk Road and the idea of the network. Each case study focuses on how these historical, material landscapes became national mythscapes — as memories or metaphors — and how groups have conceptualized, reconceptualized, and instrumentalized these mythscapes throughout history. The case studies focus especially on how spatial form influences the instrumentalization of rebuilding narratives. Following logically from a belief in the uniqueness of place, the geographic imaginaries of rebuilding and return narratives vary more than those of globalization narratives. However, they consistently position the national mythscape as grounded in place, within a world traversed by boundaries that mark different types of space — most importantly, the local and the foreign. These narratives position the national mythscape in a golden past, but within recursive or cyclical time where the past reappears in the present.

Chapter four examines the hybridization of the global city trope and national mythscapes into global-archaic cities, and the hybridization of globalization and rebuilding and return into narratives of restoration through globalization or its mirror, globalization through restoration. The chapter contains three case studies of global-archaic megaprojects, each of which presents itself as resurrecting one of the national mythscapes studied in chapter three. The first case study examines two megaprojects (Jerusalem 5800 and Jerusalem Rebuilt) that attempt to reestablish the earthly Jerusalem as the uncontested national and religious centre of the Jewish people, while also establishing the city as a financial, commercial, or tourist centre of the global economy. The second case study examines Donald Trump's Freedom Cities proposal, which claims to reopen the American frontier by building "deregulated new cities."[8] The third case study examines China's New Silk Road, which claims to revive the ancient Silk Road by upgrading and expanding the infrastructure of neoliberal globalization. All three case studies hybridize the universal geographies of globalization and the local geographies of national mythscapes into geographic imaginaries of a world deeply segmented by boundaries between the local and the foreign yet tightly interwoven by networks of global capital. In their historical imaginaries, the case studies hybridize the seemingly contradictory accelerationist temporality of globalization with the recursive temporality of return and rebuilding into a narrative of acceleration into the past or return to the future.

8
Mark Lutter and Nick Allen, "Building Freedom Cities," *City Journal*, December 6, 2024, city-journal.org/article/building-freedom-cities

Chapter five elaborates the case studies from chapter four into synthetic insights about the global-archaic city. First, the chapter returns to the proposition that global-archaic cities are defined by their narrative structure, supplementing this notion with examples from the case studies to show how narratives of restoration through globalization are materially enacted – in renderings and images, in logos and slogans, in the rhetoric of marketing materials, in the form and aesthetics of buildings. Second, the chapter inspects the historical causes for the development of the global-archaic city in the 2010s and 2020s, expanding on the proposition that the global-archaic city is a mutation of the global city trope in response to the legitimacy crisis of globalization narratives. The thesis ends by speculating on the consequences of a scenario in which the global-archaic becomes a more dominant model of urban development. In this scenario, the urban geographies and landscapes of the world would simultaneously accelerate into the future and rewind into the past as global-archaic cities simulate resurrections, through the logic of neoliberal globalization, of lost national mythscapes from historical memory.

II
The Global City Trope, Globalization

Interpol and Deutsche Bank
FBI and Scotland Yard
Interpol and Deutsche Bank
FBI and Scotland Yard
[...]
Business, numbers
Money, people
Business, numbers
Money, people
[...]
Time, travel
Communication, entertainment
Time, travel
Communication, entertainment

– Kraftwerk, *Computer World*, 1981

Introduction

At the turn of the millennium, states and developers began to promote a model of urban megaproject that mimics the aesthetics, branding, and policies of prosperous global cities. According to their proponents, these megaprojects are magnets for foreign direct investment and global capital, and a surefire formula for replicating the seemingly overnight economic successes of the cities on which they are modelled — typically Hong Kong, Singapore, and especially Dubai. On top of creating explosive economic growth, proponents claim, the megaprojects "[promote] positive international attention," increasing the recognizability, status, and cultural capital of a city, region, or country.[1]

The model of global-city-style urban megaprojects as a scheme for instant economic development and global status, I have called the *global city trope*. The global city trope (which overlaps with trend of entrepreneurial new cities, but also includes proposals to restructure, reinvent, or expand existing cities) is related to but distinct from the *global city*.[2] The latter concept refers to the handful of cities — New York and London as the archetypal examples — that perform the critical command-and-control functions of the global economy.[3] Global cities tend to share certain types of urban form and narrative branding, but their economic function rather than their form, aesthetics, or brand-

1
Centenary City FZE, "Abuja Rising," Brochure, 2015, www.centenarycityfze.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/CC_Main-Brochure-edit-for-lanscape-printing_compressed.pdf.

2
Moser and Côté-Roy, "New Cities"; Wade Sheppard, "Why Hundreds of Completely New Cities Are Being Built Around the World," *Forbes*, December 12, 2017, www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2017/12/12/why-hundreds-of-completely-new-cities-are-being-built-around-the-world/.

3
Sassen, *The Global City*.

ing makes them global cities. The concept of the global city trope, on the other hand, describes a bundle of urban design, governance, and narrative formulas modelled after established, prosperous global cities. The megaprojects that deploy the trope rarely, if ever, come to perform the critical functions within the global economy that would designate them global cities proper.

This chapter examines the global city trope's characteristic legitimizing narratives, its implicit historical and geographic imaginaries, and how it encodes these imaginaries into urban form. The global city trope comes wrapped in an especially zealous brand of globalization narrative that positions the city in the future and in placeless space where there is no "local." In this imaginary, the world is a smooth, isotropic surface, and archetypally depicted in images of networks that wrap the world in vectors of capital, goods, information, and people. Global flows travel unimpeded by boundaries or barriers. Technology has annulled distance and hierarchies of centrality and peripherality. Places are defined by their links to other places and processes, not by absolute locations.[4] The narratives depict the global city within global networks as a node of exceptional hyperconnectivity, a position that the mimetic megaprojects promise to replicate. In its historical imaginary, the global city trope contains an implicit ideal of linear acceleration into the (always neoliberal and always globalized) future. Time is a horizontal track; toward the future is progress, toward the past is regression, and the engine of progress is the global economy. A place accelerates into the future by linking into global networks. As epicentres of global interconnectivity, global cities almost always brand themselves as "cities of the future" that will pull the region or nation forward with them. Urban and architectural design signals their futurity through "smart" and "eco" technologies, parametric design, impossible feats of engineering, and skylines of LED-emblazoned glass skyscrapers. The historical and geographic imaginaries of the global city trope are, respectively, neophilic and universalist.

To track the origins of the global city trope's historical and geographic imaginaries, this chapter is organized as a genealogy. The genealogy begins with the postwar city and its associated modernization narratives, continues to the earliest global cities of the 1980s and 1990s and their associated globalization narratives, then to the Asian global city states of the later 1990s and early 2000s and their hyperglobalization narratives. The genealogy concludes by examining how tales of the seemingly overnight economic successes of the Asian global city states transformed them into a portable model for urban and economic development. At each generation, this genealogy examines

4
Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Blackwell, 1996), 378.

how the global city trope has inherited elements of its historical and geographic imaginaries from its predecessors. The postwar order established the preconditions for the later development of the global city. 1980s and 1990s globalization narratives contributed the image of the world as a smooth, isotropic surface traversed by global networks of capital, information, goods, and organizations, and the image of the global city as a hyperconnected node within these networks. The Asian global city states contributed models of urban form (especially of urban spectacle) and of urban governance (especially the special economic zone) and an especially zealous neophilia. Ultimately, drawing this genealogy suggests a way of looking at the global-archaic city as a mutation of the global city trope that inherits much of its predecessor's DNA while hybridizing it with lost national mythscapes and nationalist nostalgia.

The Postwar City and Modernization

The period following World War II laid the foundations for the later development of the global city trope. The postwar international order — the first global order in a truly modern, institutionalized sense — later developed into the global economic networks that define the global city trope. Postwar modernization narratives later mutated into globalization narratives. Postwar technophilic modernism paved the way for the neophilic urban spectacles of global-city-style megaprojects. Despite these genealogical continuities, however, the geographic and historical imaginaries of the postwar period differ significantly from those of the global city trope. In the postwar geographic imaginary, the world was not a smooth, isotropic surface traversed by connecting flows, but subdivided by (primarily national) boundaries into discrete economic units. The city was embedded not into global networks, but into a national territory. In the postwar historical imaginary, progress into the future was not contingent, but a universal, teleological inevitability.

The Bounded Spaces of the Postwar World Map

Toward the end of the Second World War, after a half-century of military conflict, political instability, and economic disorder, the

allied powers drafted a vision of a new, prosperous, and peaceful world order defined by national borders.[5] Building on wartime expansion of industrial capacity and centralization of state control, inter-state agreements like the Declaration by United Nations and the Bretton Woods Agreement imagined a world of harmonious relations between self-sufficient, industrial nations led by strong states. National borders subdivided the world into distinct, self-contained political-economic units. Increased (but still modest) international trade would entangle countries' economic interests and dissuade military conflict. Controls designed into the Bretton Woods system kept corporate capital within national borders, which gave states the power to intervene in the economy to mitigate boom and bust cycles. Within each country, domestic mass production and consumption would stitch together the differentiated economic activities of the city, the region, and the country into a nationally integrated, mutually enriching urban hierarchy.[6] National territory was a continuous plane within which the city was inextricably embedded.

As a strategy of Cold-War geopolitics, Western industrial powers exported the model of the nationally self-sufficient capitalist mass-consumer economy to nonaligned lower-income and unindustrialized countries. As these countries adopted the Western model, political strategists calculated, living standards would improve, they would become materially invested in capitalism, and immune to ideological capture by the Soviet bloc. To execute this strategy, the US (and, to a lesser extent, other industrialized capitalist countries) invested in infrastructure, education, and institution building in lower-income nonaligned countries through government aid organizations like USAID.[7] As an added benefit, developing countries would eventually provide new consumer markets for (largely American) multinational corporations (MNCs), which had expanded into foreign markets alongside foreign aid. Although MNCs operated across borders, they maintained strong ties to their countries of origin and many assisted import substitution industrialization (ISI) programs designed to *increase* the self-sufficiency of newly industrializing economies.[8] The emerging economic internationalism of this period was neatly contained within national borders.

5
Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore, "Cities and the Geographies of 'Actually Existing Neoliberalism,'" *Antipode* 34, no. 3 (2002): 349–79.

6
Sassen, *The Global City*; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Blackwell, 1990).

7
Masao Miyoshi, "A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism and the Decline of the Nation-State," in *Trespasses: Selected Writings* (Duke University Press, 2010).

8
Sassen, *The Global City*, 35; Trevor J. Barnes and Brett Christophers, *Economic Geography: A Critical Introduction* (Wiley Blackwell, 2018).

Modernism and Modernization: Linear Time and Placeless Space

Postwar historical and geographic imaginaries were quintessentially modernist: universal space overwrote place and history moved forward toward progress. These imaginaries shaped the

↗ 2.1
The Bijlmermeer, Amsterdam

↗ 2.2
Cheung Sha Wan Factory Estate, Hong Kong

↗ 2.3
Big Six Co-Op, Queens



2.1



2.2



2.3

modernization narratives that Western institutions developed to gain the consent of countries targeted for foreign aid. By following the model of capitalist industrial modernization, the narratives promised, recipients of foreign aid and FDI could expect, one day, to develop into prosperous mass consumer societies like the West and Japan.[9] For example, in his 1960 book, *The Stages of Economic Growth,* Walt Whitman Rostow identified five, predictable phases of national economic development: 1) Traditional society, 2) Preconditions for take-off, 3) Take-off, 4) Drive to maturity, 5) Age of high mass consumption.[10] In grand-historical fashion, Rostow's model presented history as progressing inevitably down a linear track toward the perfection of human freedom (understood as the freedom of consumer choice). In its geography, the model was universal: place did not modify teleology. Everywhere, whether New York, Hong Kong, or Lagos, modernization looked the same and pushed the places touched toward Western-style capitalist, liberal, democratic, and secular futures.[11] If the modernization models were to be believed, the world was heading toward a future in which the differences between places would be dissolved.

The same modernist imaginaries of linear progress and isotropic space shaped the postwar city. After the war, modernism – which had until then been associated with both Left and Right radicalism – became the official design language hegemony.[12] If industrial technology drove the postwar project of (economic and consumer) freedom for the masses, then technophilic modernism provided an appropriate legitimizing narrative and aesthetic.[13] Everywhere from America to Europe to Asia proliferated modernist mass housing projects, suburbs, institutional buildings, and urban infrastructure (see figures 2.1 to 2.3 on previous page). These new urban landscapes – which embraced functionalism and new industrial materials, and rejected historicism – became optimistic symbols of technologically driven progress toward a prosperous, comfortable future. And, like the modernization models, this vision of the future also contained an implicit model of isotropic space. In modernist logic, the universal overwrote the local. The design of Le Corbusier's Maison Dom-ino (which, though published in 1914, provided the template for postwar modern architecture), for example, derived from the universal principles of reinforced concrete and had no site because it could be built anywhere. Place no longer determined form. The postwar modernist spatial imaginary contained an implicit belief in the isotropy of space and rejected the premodern belief in the specificity of place.

9
Neil Smith, "The Satanic Geographies of Globalization: Uneven Development in the 1990s," *Public Culture* 10, no. 1 (1997).

10
Walt Whitman Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge University Press, 1960).

11
Smith, "The Satanic Geographies of Globalization."

12
Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (Verso, 1989).

13
Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*.

The End of the Postwar Order

The postwar period saw the most widespread accumulation of wealth in recent Western history, but it barely lasted for two decades. Strong unions and labour organization, strong states that imposed high corporate taxes, and the need to pay high wages to stimulate consumption limited Fordist industries' profit rates, which, beginning in the mid-1960s, began to decline steadily.[14] To bypass local labour power, regulation, and taxation, some firms began to relocate routine manufacturing to cheaper regions abroad and imported the goods to retain access to profitable Western mass-consumer markets.[15] Then, a barrage of economic crises throughout the 1970s accelerated the trend. In 1971, the Bretton Woods agreement collapsed. The spike in energy costs following the 1973 Oil Shock further eroded industrial profitability. The resulting offshoring of manufacturing jobs undermined the foundations of the Fordist economy while the increasing mobility of capital blunted the state's power to intervene in the market, thus undermining the foundations of Keynesian economics. Failed efforts to resolve the decade of stagflation triggered by the Oil Shock further damaged the credibility of Keynesian policies. By the end of the 1970s, many economists, policymakers, and members of the public had come to believe that the postwar model no longer worked.

14
Sassen, *The Global City*.

15
Saskia Sassen, *The Mobility of Labour and Capital: A Study in International Investment and Labour Flow* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 14–15.

The Global City and Postmodern Globalization

Over the decades following the breakdown of the postwar order, ascendant neoliberal parties and institutions built a new, global order that produced the first global cities and that they legitimized through globalization narratives. Neoliberal globalization erased the defining boundaries of the postwar order and promoted a new geographic imaginary of a world interconnected by global free-market flows of capital, goods, finance, information, and people. The new geographic imaginaries positioned emerging "global cities" (especially New York, London, and Tokyo) within global networks of flows as prosperous, hyperconnected nodes. Neoliberalism also produced new historical imaginaries. Modernization narratives, delegitimized by the crises of the 1970s, mutated into globalization narratives, which softened the inevitability and universalism of their predecessor while maintaining an implicit ideal of acceleration into a prosperous capitalist future. As modernism too faced its own credibility crisis, postmodernism became the official style of the global city and of global capital. Postmodernism introduced a nostalgia and contextualism that complicated but did not fully displace modernism's neophilia and universalism. By hybridizing neophilic universalism and nostalgic localism, postmodernism produced in the early global city a predecessor to the global-archaic city.

Globalization: The World as a Network

When neoliberal governments and institutions came to power, they dismantled the boundaries that had defined the postwar order and produced a new global order of smooth transnational flows and global interconnection. Throughout the 1970s, neoliberal economists, spokespeople, and think tanks had propagated the idea that unregulated markets were the most efficient and effective mechanism to create prosperity and could resolve the crises of the postwar order. By the end of the decade, that idea had caught on – in 1979, Margaret Thatcher won the UK election and in 1980 Ronald Reagan won the US election.[16] Neoliberals looked favourably upon the increasing nomadism of capital, which, their thinking went, would discipline states into market-friendly reforms. If a state did not oblige, capital could punish it economically by moving elsewhere.[17] Once in power, then, neoliberal states and institutions reconfigured the political, economic, and legislative infrastructure of the global order to facilitate the smooth global flow of capital. Neoliberalized Bretton Woods institutions (the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank), for example, granted loans to indebted, generally low- and middle-income countries on the condition that they remove protectionist policies and open their markets to FDI and MNCs.[18] After decades of strict regulation that had contained financial capital within national borders, neoliberal institutions and states also pushed to deregulate, integrate, and expand financial markets. In the 1980s, transnational financial flows exploded to a scale that dwarfed earlier flows of FDI.[19] Together, widespread economic deregulation and new transnational financial markets dramatically increased the mobility of capital and the smoothness of global economic space.

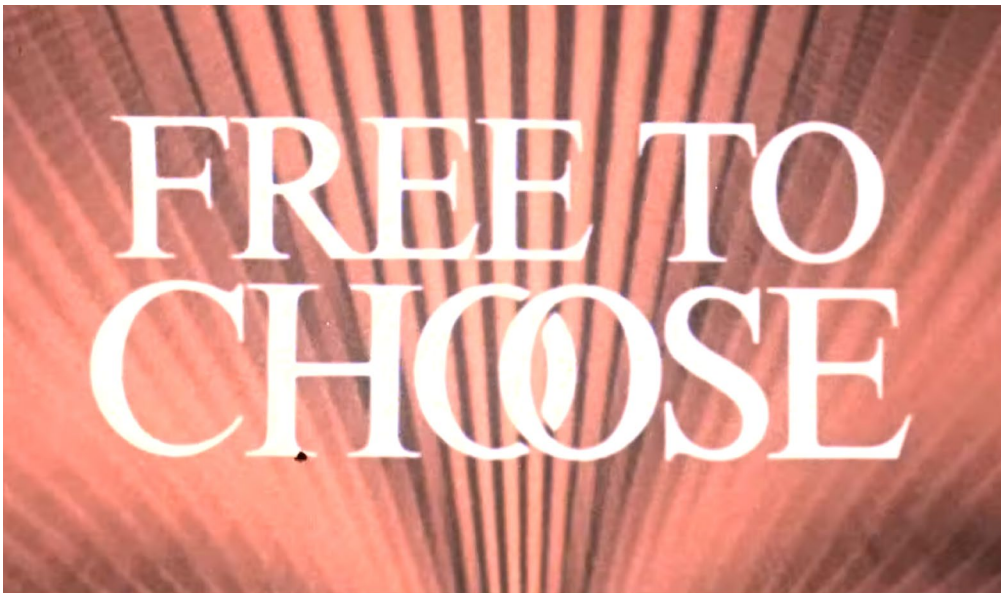
The neoliberal project to reconfigure the infrastructure of the postwar order shifted economic power from the national scale toward the global scale. As neoliberalization let MNCs cross national boundaries, simultaneous developments in communication and information technologies enabled them to decentralize their organizational structures. This new, more nomadic type of firm analysts dubbed the transnational corporation (TNC). Unlike MNCs, TNCs had no strong ties to home countries. Instead, they spread and fragmented across borders in search of legislative and economic environments that most enhanced profitability. Headquarters, for example, might relocate to tax havens, research and development departments to established innovation centres, and each stage of production throughout countries with cheap land and labour. By the mid-1980s, a World Bank report found that of the 100 largest economic units in the world

16
Per H. Hansen, *"From Finance Capitalism to Financialization: A Cultural and Narrative Perspective on 150 Years of Financial History,"* Enterprise and Society 15 (2014).

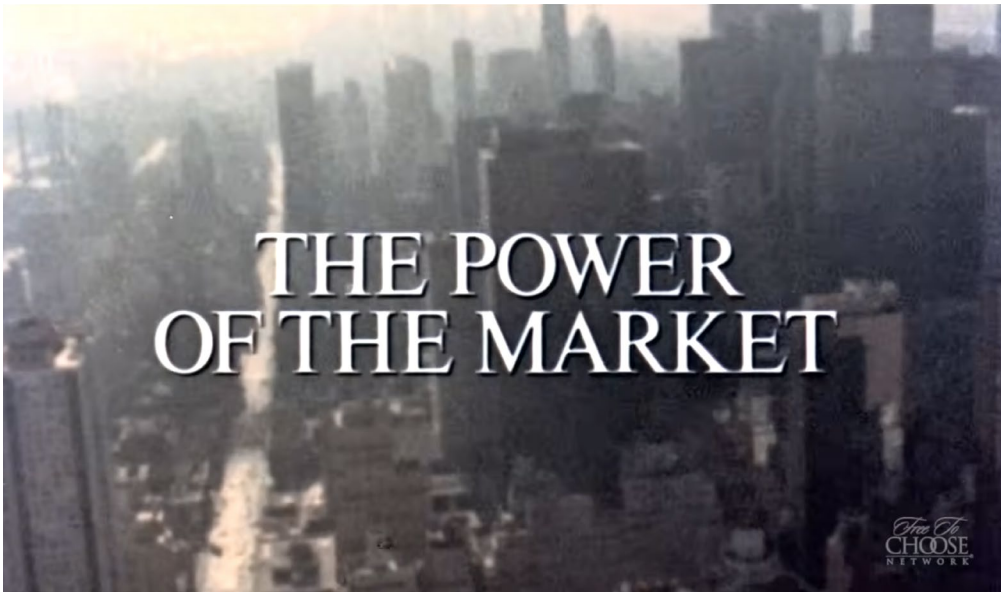
17
Brenner and Theodore, "Cities and the Geographies of 'Actually Existing Neoliberalism.'"

18
Brenner and Theodore, "Cities and the Geographies of 'Actually Existing Neoliberalism.'"

19
Unlike bank-mediated loans and FDI, which moved slowly and were subject to strict regulations, capital in financial markets flowed almost instantly over national borders and eluded regulation and taxation by states. Sassen, *The Global City*; Miyoshi, "A Borderless World?," 139.


FREE TO
CHOOSE

2.4


THE POWER
OF THE MARKET
Free To
CHOOSE
NETWORK

2.5

– including entire countries – more than half were TNCs. While postwar power had been grounded in national territory, neoliberal power became increasingly deterritorialized.[20] Economic geographies became more isotropic: distant places were subject to the same economic power and increasingly became interchangeable touchdown sites for mobile global flows.

As power shifted in scale from the national to the global, so too did hegemonic narratives; national modernization became globalization. The close of the 1970s had not only marked the decisive victory of neoliberalism but also delivered two major blows to the credibility of modernization narratives. In 1979, the Islamic Revolution in Iran reversed the country's decades-long trajectory of modernization, liberalization, and Westernization in favour of an antimodern, antiliberal, and theocratic politics. The same year, CCP Chairman Deng Xiaoping began to liberalize China's economy. While China subsequently developed toward a mass-consumer economy, as per the modernization models, the country did not democratize. Instead, China's centralized one-party state appeared compatible with – and perhaps conducive to – rapid economic growth. While the Islamic Revolution undermined the credibility of modernization's teleological inevitability, China's alternative, non-democratic path to development challenged the universality of modernization's liberal ideal.[21] In response to this crisis of credibility, modernization narratives in the 1980s mutated and became globalization narratives.[22] The typical story went that global economic liberalization and advancements in communication, information, and transportation technologies had interwoven and compressed the world into a single economic system; and by linking into the global economy, places could expect to accelerate into prosperous futures. If modernization had focused on the economic development of the country as a bounded unit, then globalization focused on the entanglement of national economies into a world system. Under globalization and in keeping with broader neoliberalizing trends, however, economic development was subjected to market competition; there would be winners and losers. If an economy failed to become competitive, it might backslide (like Iran) or may not succeed (like much of the Global South). But these failures were still measured against a linear model of development and progress and generally attributed to deviance from neoliberal best practices. An economy *should* liberalize, open itself to transnational capital, and cut state interventionism and if it did, it *should* prosper.[23] Globalization may have softened the inevitability and universality of modernization, but it retained an implicit model of linear progress and neophilic temporality.

20
Miyoshi, "A Borderless World?," 136–39.

21
Smith, "The Satanic Geographies of Globalization."

22
Theodore Levitt's 1983 article "The Globalization of Markets" is often cited as popularizing the term.

23
Barnes and Christophers, *Economic Geography*.

↖ 2.4
Still from *Free to Choose*

↖ 2.5
Still from *Free to Choose*

With new hegemonic narratives came new geographic imaginaries. While borders defined the geographic imaginary of the post-war order, neoliberal globalization celebrated global interconnection and smooth transnational flows. These themes shaped the recurring images and catchphrases of globalization: the world shrinking (figure 2.7), the world becoming flat, and the era's defining world-image, the global network — where nodes across the world are tied together by lines that fly over national borders (if borders are depicted at all) (figure 2.8). Scholarship rendered similar spatial imaginaries in different (generally less celebratory) language. In 1989, David Harvey suggested that the world was undergoing "time-space compression."[24] In 1996, Manuel Castells suggested that globalization had transformed "spaces of places" into "spaces of flows."[25] These ways of depicting the world all made similar implicit claims: the profound interconnection of places into worldwide networks had made global space smooth and isotropic. "In this network, no place exists by itself, since the positions are defined by flows," declared Castells.[26] Globalization was abolishing the differences between places. Centres and peripheries were being annulled. Any place could link into the global economy regardless of its geography and history. The technological and economic developments of the previous decades had made it possible to bend or fold space; New York, London, and Tokyo might as well be adjacent. *New York Times* journalist Thomas Friedman summed up the typical story when he enthusiastically claimed that

> the playing field is being levelled, [...] the world is becoming flat. Several technological and political forces have converged, and that has produced a global, Web-enabled playing field that allows for multiple forms of collaboration without regard to geography or distance — or soon, even language.[27]

Whatever differences remained between places (between, for example, the West and the left-behind geographies of the Global South) remained because disadvantaged places did not participate in globalization and resisted flows of transnational capital. Everywhere that globalization touched, on the other hand, space became smooth, flat, compressed, interconnected.

The Global City: A Node in the Network

While neoliberalism scaled power up from the nation to the global network, it also scaled it down to the urban node. As TNCs and other global organizations grew and decentralized, they required more specialized service inputs to manage increasing organizational complexity, to operate advanced communica-

24
Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*.

25
Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 378.

26
Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 412.

27
Daniel Pink, "Why the World Is Flat," *Wired*, May 1, 2005, www.wired.com/2005/05/friedman-2/.

tion and information technologies, to access knowledge about international markets and regulatory environments, and to navigate financial markets.[28] Unlike the large, nomadic corporations that they served, however, the smaller firms that provided these "producer services" were subject to agglomeration economies which funneled them into a handful of major cities.[29] In places like New York, London, and Tokyo, new lucrative economies tied into growing transnational markets sprouted from the ruins of declining, nationally-oriented industrial economies. Consequently, the economic fortunes of these cities disentangled from their national hinterlands and became intertwined with other major cities across the globe. The place of the city in the world had changed — it had disembedded from the continuous plane of national territory and re-embedded into spatially discontinuous global networks. In 1991, scholar Saskia Sassen dubbed such cities *global cities.* While the term initially had critical connotations, developers, writers, and municipalities quickly appropriated and rebranded it as a marketing buzzword.

Now economically intertwined, global cities all over the world converged toward the same types of urban form. Under Fordist-Keynesian modernization, local technocrats had implemented grand urban visions on behalf of a large, prosperous middle class. Under neoliberal globalization, disempowered, cash-strapped local municipalities had little choice but to compete to draw global capital to their cities.[30] Nomadic transnational corporations and their supporting service industries now reshaped the city for themselves and the class of highly mobile urban professionals who worked for them. Cities as far apart as the US, UK, and Japan were suddenly subject to the same urban market forces, which produced the same urban landscapes. Fierce competition among global firms for real estate in central business districts drove up property values and birthed the hyperdense clusters of glass skyscrapers which have become the defining monuments of the global city. Developments around central business districts addressed young urban professionals' needs to live, work, and play (and their increasingly universal tastes). Throughout the 1980s, global cities "revitalized" rundown neighbourhoods, and on central vacant land created new developments of office spaces, apartments and houses, and lifestyle amenities. The largest and most publicized of these developments included New York's Battery Park City, a primarily residential development for urban professionals on vacant land next to Manhattan's central business district, and Canary Wharf, a cluster of office spaces for finance and professional services within the larger London Docklands redevelopment.[31] As similar developments proliferated throughout the prosperous major

28
Sassen, *The Global City.*

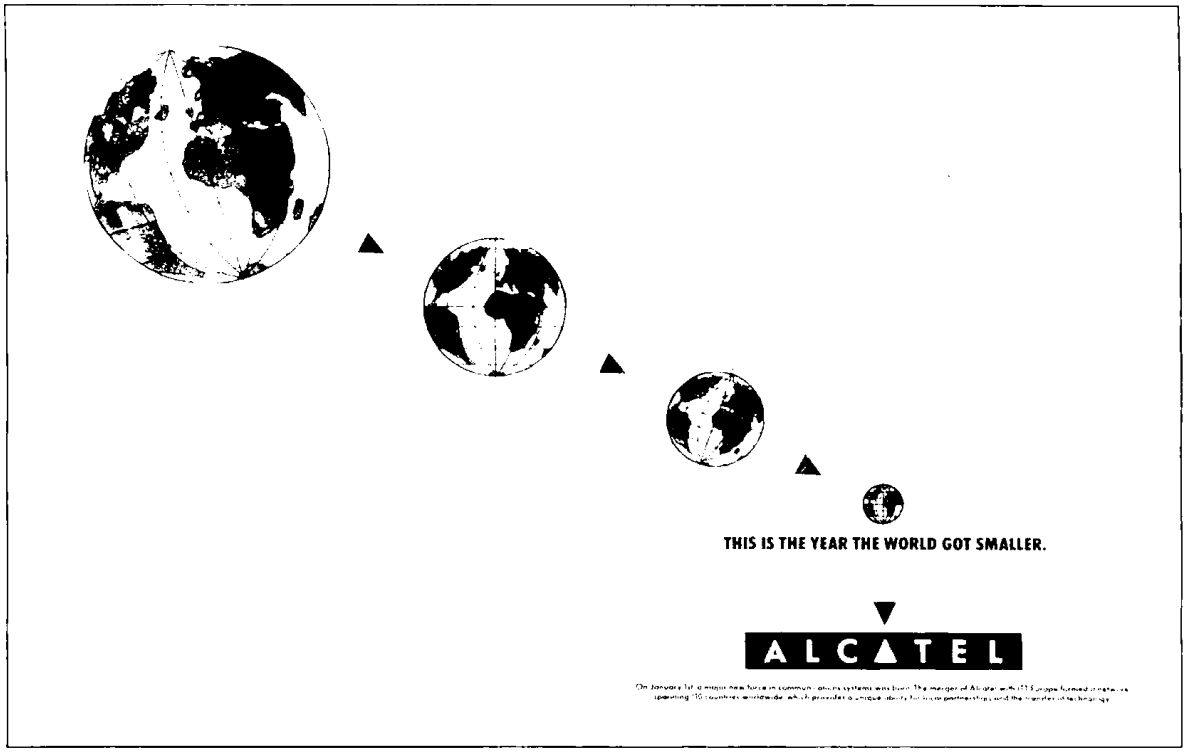
29
Some of these agglomeration forces included: the need to access expensive and immobile telecommunication infrastructure, the geographic "stickiness" of certain types of knowledge and information, access to other firms that produce key inputs or for collaboration, and access to cultural and lifestyle amenities preferred by professional classes. Sassen, *The Global City*; Barnes and Christophers, *Economic Geography*.

30
Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century,* 3rd ed. (Blackwell, 2002).

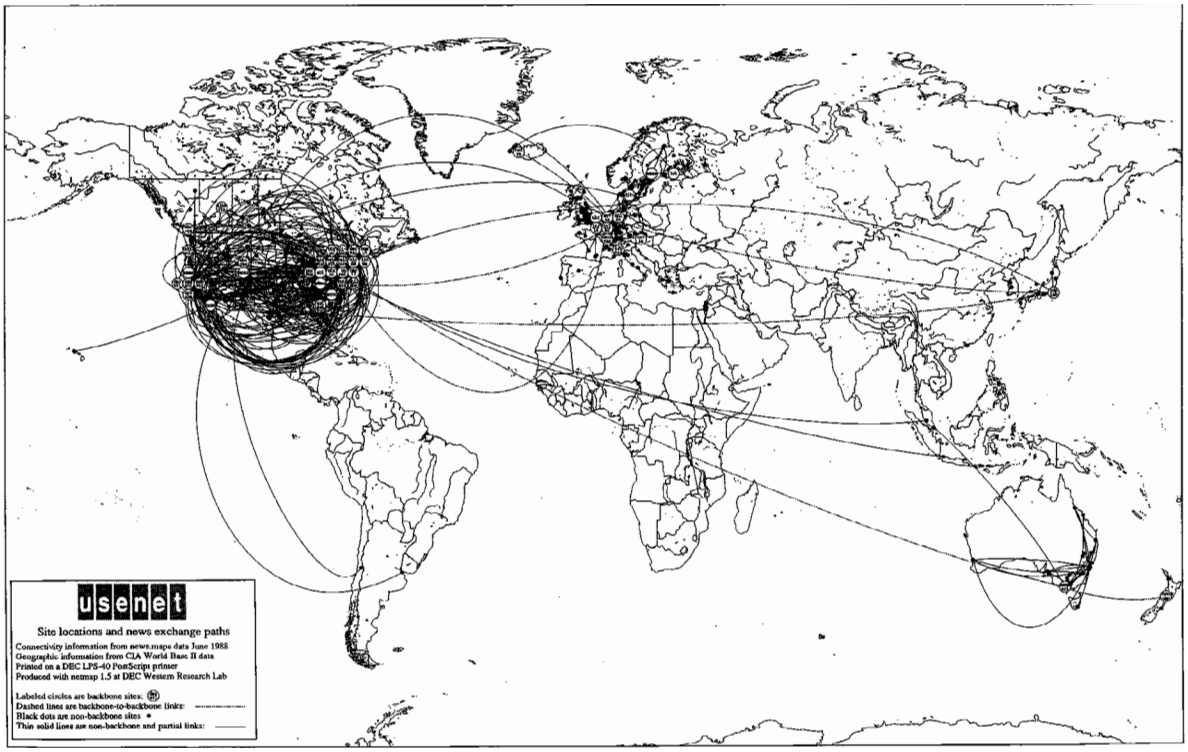
31
Some other large-scale global city developments from this era include: in New York, the Times Square Redevelopment; in London, King's Cross; in Tokyo, Tokyo Teleport City, Makuhari Messe, and New Tokyo Plan 2025. Sassen, *The Global City*.

↘ 2.6
Alcatel advertisement, 1987

↘ 2.7
Map of Usenet exchange paths, 1988



2.6


usenet
Site locations and news exchange paths
Connectivity information from news.maps data June 1988
Geographic information from CIA World Base II data
Printed on a DEC LPS-40 PostScript printer
Produced with netmap 1.5 at DEC Western Research Lab
Labeled circles are backbone sites.
Dashed lines are backbone-to-backbone links:
Black dots are non-backbone sites
Thin solid lines are non-backbone and partial links:

2.7

cities of the world, the term "global city" increasingly evoked not only a type of urban economy, but also a type of urban form.

Corporate Postmodernism, Nostalgia, and Localism

As home to many of the first postmodern urban megaprojects, the early global city complicated the modernist universalism and neophilia of the postwar city with a new contextualism and historicism. Breaking from New York City's earlier modernist megaprojects that intentionally rejected their urban context, the Battery Park City masterplan recreated the city's traditional street grid (see figures 2.9 and 2.10 on following pages).[32] The London Docklands was peppered by historicist tropes that modernism had tabooed: a very Renaissance sensibility in the composition of monumental axes and plazas, an almost Baroque styling of facades, pitched rooves, ornamental column (see figure 2.8). Contextualism and historicism, however, did not replace but supplemented modernist neophilia and universalism. An Art-Deco pyramidal roof may have topped One Canada Square, the centrepiece of Canary Wharf, but it remained a fifty-floor skyscraper clad in a curtain wall of stainless steel and reflective glass. Mirroring these hybrids of futurism and historicism, marketing and branding materials invoked simultaneously excitement for a globalized future and nostalgia for local pasts. A 1988 promotional video for the London Docklands development, for example, celebrated all the cutting-edge communication, information, and transportation technologies that made the area "the best-connected place in London." According to this rhetoric, the Docklands was a futuristic node in networks of global flows. The same video, however, opened with a voiceover — set to an orchestral rendition of "Rule, Brittania!" ("Rule, Brittania! rule the waves") — recounting the history of the Docklands, originally called the Victoria Docks, as a maritime hub of the British Empire. Through this framing, the video claimed that the redevelopment would "restore once again the Royal Docks as an international gateway."[33] Acceleration into an increasingly placeless, globalized future was at the same time a return to a local past. Already in the 1980s, then, the postmodern global city had developed a prototype of the global-archaic city's defining narrative of restoration through globalization.

The postmodernism of the global city, however, performed a return of history and place only in the abstract — as "the historical" and "the local" — rather than a return *to* history and place. While the bespoke New Urbanist postmodernism of Battery Park City did attempt to ground itself in local urban form, the

32
Jon Lang, "Shifting Urban Design Paradigms in the Development of Two New York Projects: Battery Park City and Hudson Yards," *International Journal of Ekistics and the New Habitat* 84, no. 1 (2024): 11–14; David L. A. Gordon, *Battery Park City: Politics and Planning on the New York Waterfront* (Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1997), 65–68.

33
Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, *Docklands: The Expanding City (1988 LDDC Corporate Video)*, 2021, YouTube video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=_-62ElSd8FI.

↗ 2.8
Cabot Square, Canary Wharf, London

↘ 2.9
Site plan of Battery Park City (1979), Manhattan

↘ 2.10
Site plan of Co-Op City (1966), The Bronx

↘ 2.11
TC Energy Centre (1983), Houston

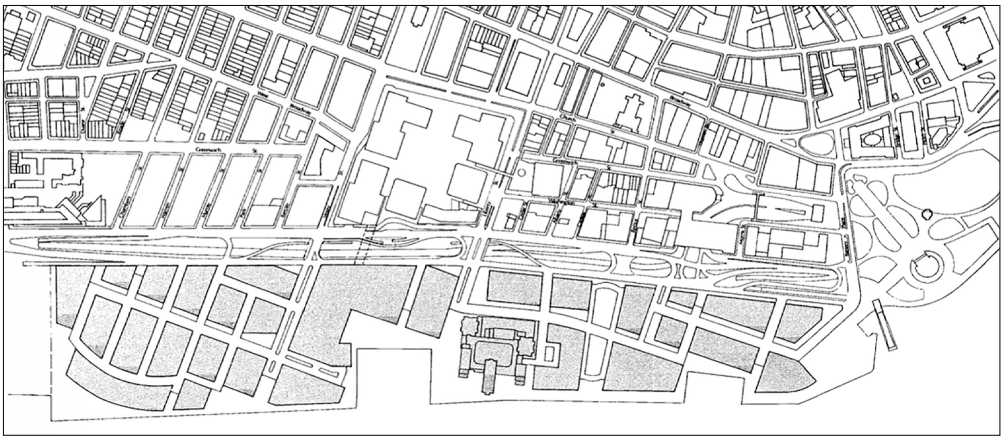
↘ 2.12
One Worldwide Plaza (1988), New York City

↘ 2.13
Messeturm (1990), Frankfurt

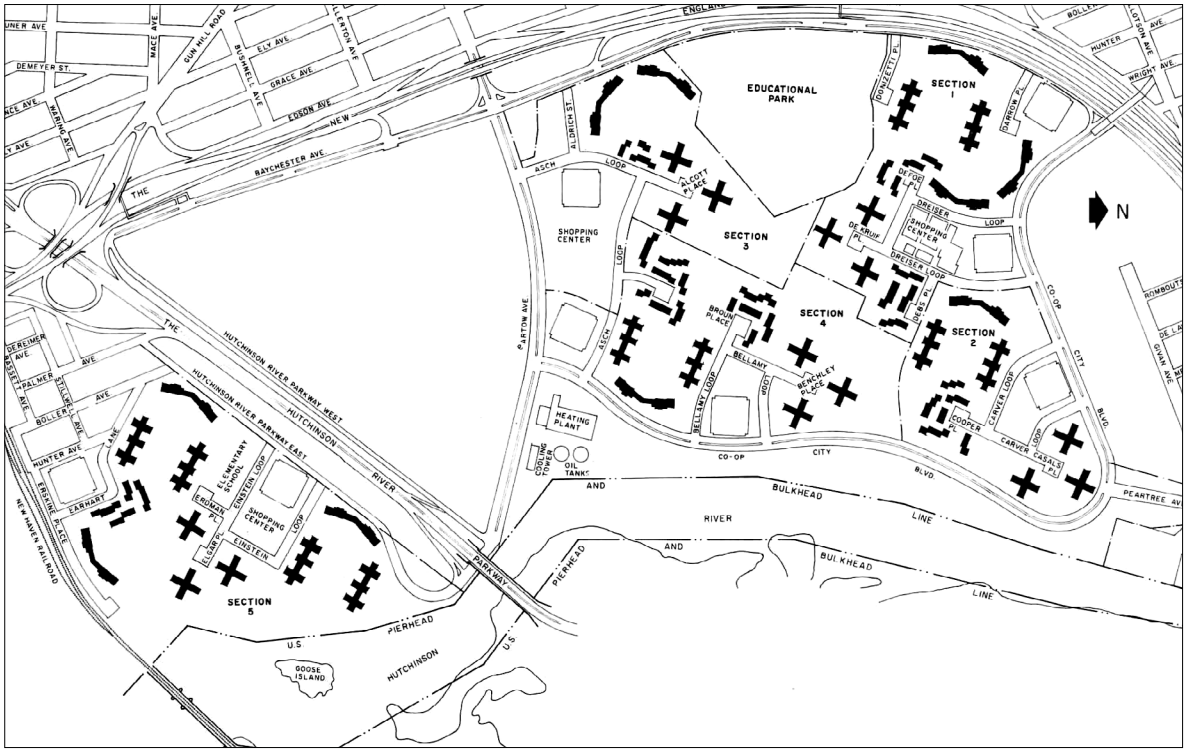
↘ 2.14
Chang-Gu World Trade Centre (1992), Taipei



2.8



2.9


EDUCATIONAL PARK
SECTION 1
SECTION 2
SECTION 3
SECTION 4
SECTION 5
SHOPPING CENTER
HEATING PLANT
OIL TANKS
N
HUTCHINSON RIVER PARKWAY WEST
HUTCHINSON RIVER PARKWAY EAST
BAYCHESTER AVE
EDSON AVE
CO-OP CITY BLVD
BULKHEAD LINE
PIERHEAD AND BULKHEAD LINE
RIVER
HUTCHINSON
GOOSE ISLAND
NEW HAVEN RAILROAD
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
DE GRUY PL
DREISER LOOP
COOPER PL
CARVER LOOP
BELL ANT LOOP
BROUN PL
BERKELEY PLACE
ASCH LOOP
CASALS PL
EINSTEIN LOOP
ERDMAN PL
ELKIN PL
EARHART
ERSKINE PLACE
HUNTER AVE
BOLLER AVE
PALMER AVE
DEMEYER ST
WACE AVE
SUN HILL ROAD
BUSHNELL AVE
ELY AVE
GRACE AVE
WEBING AVE
LELAND AVE
LAFAYETTE AVE
DURKIN PL
WRIGHT AVE
PEARTREE AV
ROMBOUTS
CLINTON AVE
DORIC CITY PL

2.10



2.11



2.12



2.13



2.14

dominant architecture of the early global city more closely resembled the corporate postmodernism of Philip Johnson's AT&T Building, the first and most canonical postmodern tower. Rather than resurrecting a historical architecture, corporate postmodernism combined varied references from architectural history into anachronistic collages. Speaking of the AT&T building, for example, Philip Johnson did not claim that it revived a traditional New York architecture, but that it represented

> a new use of eclectic choices to suit the place and the program: the base an open colonnade for scale and human reference; the middle a shaft from the '20s, and the top, a broken pediment complete with cornice.[34]

By mixing historical quotations into fragmentary compositions, corporate postmodernism took a position not within but *outside* of the continuity of history because, as Manuel Castells explains, "only if we are at the end of history can we mix up everything we knew before."[35] And as the official style of an increasingly universal elite culture, corporate postmodernism became, despite its occasional gestures at contextualism, a symbol of placelessness and a force of geographic homogenization.[36] Everywhere from Houston to Frankfurt to Tokyo, corporate headquarters and new developments adopted the same pseudo-historicism (see figures 2.11 to 2.14 on previous pages). The centrepiece towers of Canary Wharf and Battery Park City, for example, both styled in quintessential postmodern historicism, look nearly identical (see figures 2.15 and 2.16). Their resemblance is no coincidence; they materialize the same market forces. Both towers were designed by the same architect (César Pelli), for the same developer (Olympia and York), and marketed to the same TNCs and professional classes. More than a return to place and history, the global city's corporate postmodernism expressed the new position of cities as interchangeable touchdown points for global flows of capital.[37]

34
Michael Sorkin, *Exquisite Corpse: Writings on Buildings* (Verso, 1991), 12.

35
Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 417, 419; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991).

36
David Harvey argues that the cultural elite of the 1980s and 1990s so enthusiastically adopted postmodernism because the movements turn away from modernism's mass-consumer universalism toward bespoke eclecticism created a scarcity that lent postmodern design objects to functioning as signifiers of prestige and cultural distinction. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*.

37
Manuel Castells compares postmodernism to the then-emerging experience of browsing the internet, diagnosing it (perhaps counterintuitively) as markedly placeless and ahistorical: "architecture escapes from the history and culture of each society and becomes captured into the new imaginary, wonderland world of unlimited possibilities. that underlies the logic transmitted by multimedia: the culture of electronic surfing." Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*.

↗ 2.15
Three World Financial Centre, New York City

↗ 2.16
One Canada Square, London



2.15



2.16

Asian Global City States, the Global City Trope, and Hyperglobalization

In the 1990s and 2000s, the expanding geographies of globalization drove the rapid development of new global cities in Asia. Asian global cities – especially the city states of Hong Kong, Singapore, and Dubai – adopted and exaggerated the geographic and historical imaginaries of their 1980s predecessors. In their vision, the world became even smoother, and global networks even more intertwined. Technology still accelerated history toward a prosperous future, but with a rediscovered tenacity purged of postmodern uncertainty. This new futurism shaped urban landscapes that ditched postmodernism in favour of neophilic spectacles. To attract global capital in increasingly competitive markets, the new global cities developed novel approaches to urban governance, including zones of exception. After the turn of the millennium, states and developers abroad attempted to recreate the economic successes of the Asian global city states through urban megaprojects that mimicked the city states' urban design, governance structures, and legitimizing narratives. This phenomenon – which I have called the global city trope – transformed the Asian global city states into a replicable, portable model of urban and economic development.

The Neophilia of the Asian Global City States

Unlike New York, London, and Tokyo, the Asian global city states had by the 1990s relatively short and modest histories. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Hong Kong and Singapore were both villages with populations of only a few thousand each. Beginning in the 1950s, they industrialized and developed mass consumer markets and regionally oriented finance and producer service sectors. By the 1990s, they had begun to relocate manufacturing to cheaper locations and restructured their economies around transnational finance and producer services. The cities had established themselves as regional economic hubs when China opened its economy to the rest of the world and East and Southeast Asian markets exploded, propelling the city-states to global centrality. Dubai developed even more quickly. At the end of the nineteenth century, it had a population of only 12,000 people. The city first discovered oil within its territory in 1966 and began to export it in 1969. When the 1973 Oil Shock spiked prices, Dubai became rich almost instantly. Immediately, the city began to invest its new wealth into reinventing itself as a global financial centre. In 1974, a year after the Oil Shock, the city began to build the Middle East's first skyscraper: the Dubai World Trade Centre. Over the next three decades, the city built extensive legislative and urban infrastructures to attract transnational business, finance, and tourism: free trade zones, special economic zones, urban spectacles, and a national airline (see figures 2.17 and 2.18). Dubai had successfully transformed itself into the Middle East's financial centre when the Gulf region experienced a second economic boom as oil prices surged after the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003.[38] By 2010, research institutions ranked Dubai amongst the world's most elite global cities.[39]

The speed at which the new global cities developed fueled zealously futuristic legitimizing narratives. London, New York, and Tokyo could use their centuries- or millennia-long histories as national, industrial, imperial, or civilization centres to brand their transformations into command-and-control centres of the global economy as recurrences of their glorious pasts. Hong Kong, Singapore, and Dubai, on the other hand, had no such opportunity. Instead, speed and newness had dominated the cities' histories and urban landscapes. In popular culture, this newness made them symbols of the future. Already in 1982, for example, *Blade Runner* used Hong Kong as a template to imagine what Los Angeles would look like in a sci-fi 2019. Rather than manufacturing a sense of antiquity, private and state actors from the Asian global city states cultivated and promoted as a brand identity the futuristic image of their cities. Of all the Asian global city states,

38
Slobodian, *Crack Up Capitalism.*

39
Globalization and World Cities Research Network, "World Cities 2010," Globalization and World Cities, gawc.lboro.ac.uk/gawc-worlds/the-world-according-to-gawc/world-cities-2010/.

↘ 2.17
Dubai skyline, 1979

↘ 2.18
Dubai skyline, 2015

↘ 2.19
Hong Kong skyline

↘ 2.20
Still from the science-fiction film *Ghost in the Shell* (2017)



2.17



2.18



2.19



2.20

Dubai has most vigorously pursued this approach. In 2023, the city's Crown Prince, Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, claimed that "Dubai has developed a world-class framework to imagine, design and create the future."[40] Over the past decade, the Crown Prince has attempted to reinforce this identity through projects like the Museum of the Future, "the first museum that looks to the future" rather than the past; and the Dubai 10 X initiative, a project "to put Dubai 10 years ahead of other global cities."[41] Private organizations like the Dubai real estate developer Emaar have also used futurism to market the city. The company brands its properties as, for example, "the future of urban living," "one of the world's most advanced financial centres," or "future ready office spaces."[42] Through variations on these approaches to urban branding and myth-making, the Asian global city states have promoted historical imaginaries that position themselves firmly in the future.

Zones and Spectacles

Shaped in their early development by more mature forces of neoliberal globalization than their 1980s predecessors, the Asian global city states fine-tuned the legal software and urban hardware of the global city as a model to attract transnational capital. Of these legal innovations, the *zone* has become exceptionally influential. A zone is a spatially bounded area subject to different legislation than its host country or city. Typically, zones offer low corporate taxes, few labour regulations, and provide some form of active corporate incentive (occasionally even land or labour paid for by local states). The zone traces its lineage to colonial Hong Kong when the city served as a transshipment port in the opium trade and had no customs duties, tariffs, or other Chinese and British trade restrictions. Dubai, however, took the zone to new extremes and articulated it into a spatial strategy at the foundation of its economic development.[43] The city established its first zone, the Jebel Ali Free Zone, in 1985 to attract foreign investment as part of its broader strategy to diversify its economy. Following the success of Jebel Ali, the city created twenty-five more zones, each with legislative frameworks tailored to specific industries, including, for example, the Dubai Design District, Dubai Healthcare City, and Dubai International Financial Centre.[44] Nomadic transnational capital looking to settle down can pick and choose, within a single city, between legal and tax frameworks that maximize their profits and streamline their processes. To compete, aspiring global cities are now practically obliged to include zones within their development models. As the Asian global city states made the zone the hegemonic

40
Gulf News Report, *Dubai Has Emerged as a Model for Cities of the Future: Sheikh Hamdan*, April 5, 2023, www.gulfnews.com/uae/government/dubai-has-emerged-as-a-model-for-cities-of-the-future-sheikh-hamdan-1.94957822.

41
UAE Ambition, *Mohammad Al Gergawi Tours CNN Inside the Museum of the Future*, 2022, YouTube video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=OL6Q-j2PD4xw&t=2s; Dubai Future Foundation, "About Dubai 10X," 2023, dubai10x.dubaifuture.ae/about-dubai-10x/.

42
Dubai International Financial Centre, "DIFC," *DIFC*, n.d., www.difc.com/.

43
Slobodian, *Crack Up Capitalism;* Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow.*

44
Slobodian, *Crack Up Capitalism.*

legislative software for enticing flows of global capital to settle within their borders, so did they make urban spectacle the hegemonic hardware for the same task. As neoliberal globalization matured, real estate markets between global cities became increasingly homogeneous. From America to Asia, global cities were dominated by the same producers (developers, architects, engineers) and consumers (TNCs, mobile professional classes, real estate firms) of urban space. The more crowded and competitive global city real estate markets became, though, the more that urban developments needed to differentiate themselves to create scarcity and prestige. To navigate the seemingly contradictory incentives toward homogenization and differentiation, globalizing real estate markets turned to the non-localized, culturally unspecific logic of extremes ("the most") and the spectacle.[45] As with the zone, Dubai pushed this strategy to new limits. The city has built, for example, the world's tallest building, the world's only seven-star hotel (which doubles as the world's tallest hotel), the world's largest mall, the world's largest indoor theme park, and the world's longest driverless metro system. The city's futurist branding, similarly, transforms the logic of "the most" into "the newest." Here, the most recent technologies are used precisely for their newness rather than their use value to build novelty and scarcity into spatial products. Publicity for the city's Museum of the Future, for example, markets the project's use of digital modelling and manufacturing tools as a technological breakthrough that "sets the standard for what's to come in digital design."[46] In the Asian global city states, such neophilic spectacles have replaced the nostalgic curiosity of earlier global cities' postmodernism.

The Global City Trope

Since the early 2000s, states and private developers have pursued economic growth by building urban megaprojects modelled after the Asian global city states. This model of global-city mimesis, I have called the global city trope. The marketing brochure of Centenary City, an urban megaproject in Nigeria, typifies the logic of the trope:

> The successes of such cities as Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, [...] Canary Wharf in the United Kingdom, [and other similar urban megaprojects] have shown that the development of a certain class of city – an economic city – is the strongest social, political and economic tool for securing foreign direct investment, promoting positive international attention and signalling a new national economic renaissance.[47]

45
Davide Ponzini, *Transnational Architecture and Urbanism: Rethinking How Cities Plan, Transform, and Learn* (Routledge, 2020).

46
Tobias Bauly, "Museum of the Future Sets Standard for What's to Come in Digital Design," *American Society of Civil Engineers*, March 1, 2023, www.asce.org/publications-and-news/civil-engineering-source/civil-engineering-magazine/issues/magazine-issue/article/2023/01/museum-of-the-future-sets-standard-for-whats-to-come-in-digital-design.

47
Centenary City FZE, "About," *Centenary City FZE*, 2026, www.centenarycityfze.com/about/.

↘ 2.21
Centenary City, Nigeria

↘ 2.22
New Clark City, Philippines

↘ 2.23
The New Capital, Egypt

↘ 2.24
Eko Atlantic, Nigeria

↘ 2.25
Forest City, Malaysia

↘ 2.26
Songdo Landmark City, South Korea



2.21



2.22



2.23



2.24



2.25



2.26

This logic transforms the Asian global city states into a replicable model of urban development, design, branding, and governance that promises, when inserted into a peripheral or declining economy, to drive rapid economic growth and a rise (or return) to global prominence. The claim that a development will become "the Hong Kong/Singapore/Dubai of [insert region here]" condenses the same logic into a common marketing catchphrase. Global city states and their local firms have amplified the promises of the trope by exporting and practically franchising their development models through consulting and financial partnerships with aspiring global city projects.[48] The Dubai developer Emaar, for example, is a major collaborator on Centenary City, while UAE partners have invested 18.5 billion dollars in the project.[49] While Centenary City aspires to become a hub of business and finance, some mimetic global city megaprojects aspire to perform other command-and-control functions within global networks, whether as administrative centres, logistics hubs, or incubators of technological innovation. What unites all the variations of the global city trope, however, is the idea that a Dubai-esque model of urban development can reliably produce prosperity and status.[50]

The global city trope mimics the spatial and temporal imaginaries, urban form, and urban policies of the Asian global city states. Like Dubai, Hong Kong, or Singapore, the global city trope brands itself as a hyperconnected node of global networks. A promotional video for New Clark City in the Philippines, as a typical example, describes the project as "an emerging hub for innovation and trade in Asia and the Pacific."[51] The trope also inherits the global city states' neophilia and futurism. Branding positions aspiring global city megaprojects in the future: New Songdo City is "the city of tomorrow," to invest in Eko Atlantic City is to "invest in the future of Lagos."[52] The branding of Egypt's New Capital as "Egypt's future city – a world-class smart hub" encapsulates both the trope's rhetoric of global interconnectivity and its typical neophilia.[53] This neophilia often overlaps with the characteristic Dubai-style spectacular urban design of mimetic global city megaprojects. As the ubiquitous symbol of progress and prosperity, aspiring global city megaprojects almost always feature a central business district with a cluster of lustrous, slick skyscrapers twisting or contorting themselves in extreme feats of engineering that could only be accomplished with modern structural analysis, CAD, and manufacturing technologies (see figures 2.21 to 2.26 on previous pages). Recently, the convergence of urban spectacle and futurism takes the form of smart- or eco-city proposals. Taking the spectacular logic of extremes to the defining crisis of the new millennium, the eco-

48
Moser and Côté-Roy, "New Cities," 8.

49
Centenary City FZE, "Abuja Rising."

50
Sheppard, "Why Hundreds of Completely New Cities Are Being Built Around the World."

51
New Clark City, *One Clark: The Launchpad of a Nation in Motion*, 2025, YouTube video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=CuVEPVmFCUA.

52
Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates, "New Songdo City," *KPF*, n.d., www.kpf.com/project/new-songdo-city; Eko Atlantic, "This Is Eko Atlantic," *Eko Atlantic*, 2026, www.ekoatlantic.com/.

53
Administrative Capital for Urban Development, *New Capital*, n.d., www.acud.eg/new-capital.

city variation of the global-city-style megaproject competes to become the most sustainable, to incorporate the newest sustainability technologies, and to attain the most prestigious sustainability awards and certifications. These recurring formulas of marketing and urban design present the mimetic global-city megaprojects as dependable instruments for propelling places out of local historical conditions and into the universal space-time of global capitalism.

Conclusion: Backlash

As an urban command-and-control centre of the global economy, the global city is, strictly speaking, an economic concept. By extension, as a mimetic model of the global city, so too is the global city trope an economic concept. Yet, in practice, the global city and the global city trope have also become cultural concepts; they have come wrapped in and fused to marketing and legitimizing narratives that describe a particular vision of geography, history, and the place of the city within them. According to these narratives, as the world has become a smooth, isotropic, homogeneous surface crossed by global networks, history has accelerated toward prosperous futures.

These narratives did accurately describe experiences of globalization for an emerging class of global professionals, including those who had conceived and promoted the narrative in the first place. For members of this new class, the world became smaller and flatter. For an American financial analyst, a Japanese CEO, or a British management consultant, ties to place and the local unravelled as their patterns of movement and settlement increasingly mirrored the universal geographies of the global economy. Regardless of their place of origin, global professionals attended the same elite academic institutions, relocated internationally to work at prestigious firms, and identified with an emerging

universal elite culture.[54] For global professionals, loyalty to transnational corporations, groups, and institutions began to compete with place and nation as the foundations of personal identity.[55] And for this shift in loyalty, they were rewarded; the new professional class may have been small, but never had so many people had access to elite commodities, experiences, and lifestyles. For members of the new global professional class, globalization really was accelerating the world into a prosperous future.

Hegemonic narratives of globalization, however, did not match the experiences of those outside the new global professional class. For many, globalization did not homogenize but differentiated space. Despite its claim to be "global," the investment and development promised by globalization skipped over entire countries and regions, particularly in the Global South. Within the countries where globalization did touch down, it left out entire regions. As a result of offshoring, for example, the economies of many traditionally industrial rural regions crumbled, leaving behind half-abandoned landscapes like the American Rust Belt. Even within global cities, the epicentres of globalization, investment swerved the neighbourhoods of the new precariat and informal populations. At all scales, globalization created new geographic divides between globalized space and left-behind space, between "usable" space and "unusable" space. Rather than smoothing space, then, globalization drew new boundaries and borders to stabilize the geographic inequalities that it had produced. Even, for example, as capital faced fewer barriers to movement, many wealthy countries fortified their borders with new technologies and infrastructures to contain growing flows of informal migration, itself driven by widening geo-economic divides.[56] For those on the wrong side of these new boundaries and confined to the world's left-behind or unusable geographies, globalization not only stalled but actively eroded economic fortunes and material wellbeing. In the old social democracies, neoliberal policies and offshoring subjected the previously strong middle class to deskilling and labour precarization, leaving them poorer than their parents' and grandparents' generations.[57] Contrary to the global professional class's historical experience of globalization as linear acceleration into a prosperous future, many experienced globalization as a return to a more precarious and economically deprived past that had only recently been overcome.

Not only the masses of the hollowed-out middle class and expanding precariat found themselves on the wrong side of globalization, but also some sections of capital's elite. While some industries (pharmaceuticals, finance, entertainment) of the

54
Sassen, *The Global City*.

55
Miyoshi, "A Borderless World?"

56
Barnes and Christophers, *Economic Geography*, 196–98.

57
Sassen, *The Global City*.

long-industrialized wealthy countries benefitted from the globalization of markets, others (textiles, steel, heavy industry) did not. The elites of those industries – CEOs and shareholders, for example – thus rallied against the "unfair conditions" of the new global marketplace. Some invested in media to challenge optimistic narratives of globalization. Nucor, the second-largest American steel company, for example, funded the film *Death by China,* which depicted the CCP exploiting globalization as part of a sinister plot to crush the American industrial heartland. Others lobbied their governments to implement protectionist policies that would safeguard their financial interests. Private-equity CEO Wilbur Ross, for example, did not mince words when he told reporters that his advocacy for tariffs on foreign steel was "absolutely" to protect his investments in the American International Steel Group. Unlike backlash to globalization "from below," backlash "from above" had the power and capital to sway politics and hegemonic discourse.[58]

In the 2010s, backlash from above and below converged into a politicization of globalization that threatened the credibility of globalization narratives. From the 1990s on, by transferring global economic matters to unelected, supranational institutions like the WTO and NAFTA, the doctrine of New Constitutionalism had largely depoliticized globalization at the national level. That began to change, however, with the political lobbying and migration into politics of some of globalization's elite losers. In 2017, for example, Wilbur Ross entered the Trump administration (as secretary of commerce) alongside other elite anti-globalization advocates tied to the US steel industry, Robert Lighthizer and Peter Navarro.[59] Similar shifts in political personnel produced for the first time explicitly anti-globalization rhetoric coming from the highest ranks of government. Now beholden to the dynamics of electoral politics, elites framed their gripes with globalization in terms of the immiseration of the masses, as when Donald Trump declared as president that

> globalization has made the financial elites who donate to politicians very wealthy, but it's left millions and millions of our workers with nothing but poverty and heartache – and our towns and cities with empty factories and plants."[60]

In contrast to those "towns and cities with empty factories and plants" – where the disenfranchised heroes of anti-globalization narratives lived – global cities – as public monuments of global capital's decadence – became targets of resentment. The three-decades-long reign of optimistic globalization narratives and the yuppie dream of the global city was crumbling and giving way to new global and urban imaginaries.

58
Quinn Slobodian, "The Backlash Against Neoliberal Globalization from Above: Elite Origins of the Crisis of the New Constitutionalism," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 38, no. 6 (2021).

59
Stefanie Walter, "The Backlash Against Globalization," *Annual Review of Political Science* 24 (2021); Slobodian, "The Backlash Against Neoliberal Globalization from Above."

60
Trump White House Archives, "President Trump: 'We Have Rejected Globalism and Embraced Patriotism,'" *Trump White House Archives*, August 7, 2020, trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/articles/president-trump-we-have-rejected-globalism-and-embraced-patriotism/

III
National Mythscapes, Rebuilding and Return

The urban renewal taking place in the present is no longer futuristic but nostalgic; the city imagines its future by improvising on its past. The time of progress and modern efficiency [...] is not the defining temporality of the contemporary city. Instead there is a pervasive longing for the visible and invisible cities of the past, cities of dreams and memories that influence [...] new projects of urban reconstruction.

– Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*

Introduction

States, monarchs, religious authorities, and nationalist movements have throughout history presented city-building projects as rebuilding lost or ruined urban landscapes from national mythology. Stories about rebuilding have in turn buttressed larger narratives about returning the nation to a lost golden age. For example, Karl Friedrich Schinkel's unrealized 1834 proposal to restore and rebuild the then-ruined Acropolis as a royal palace framed the newly-independent Kingdom of Greece as a revival of classical Hellenic civilization.[1] Similarly, Mussolini's state used the aesthetics of *Romanità* (Romanness) in urban and architectural design to present Fascist rule as a continuation of the Roman Empire.[2] In these cases, stories of rebuilding and return function as legitimizing narratives, both for the urban interventions themselves and for their authors. As legitimizing narratives, however, they invert the story that globalization and the global city trope tell about themselves. While time in globalization narratives accelerates into the future, time in rebuilding and return narratives moves backward. While space in globalization narratives is smooth and isotropic, space in rebuilding and return narratives is striated and anisotropic; places are not interchangeable and there are distinct *types* of space, namely the local and the foreign. The global-archaic city nevertheless hybridizes these opposite historical and geographic imaginaries into a

1
Carter, "Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Project for a Royal Palace on the Acropolis."

2
Kallis, "The Uses of Romanità in Fascist-Era Urbanism."

single model of urban development. Chapter two analyzed the neophilic, globalist face of the global-archaic city; this chapter examines its nostalgic, localist face.

Nationalist rebuilding narratives necessarily equate a proposed future urban landscape with a mythical, ruined urban landscape, a *lost national mythscape*. By *mythscape*, I mean the idea in collective imagination of an urban landscape. By *national mythscape*, I refer specifically to mythscapes that feature in national mythology and ground and shape national identity.[3] Capital cities are the archetypal national mythscapes. Though most citizens of a country will never set foot in their national capital, the *idea* of the capital (produced and reproduced through standardized education, representations in film and television, tourism campaigns, official state imagery) grounds understandings of the nation as a territory, a historical entity, and an identity, and the place of the citizen within these symbolic structures. By *lost mythscape*, I refer specifically to mythscapes that have outlived their historical, material referents – where the idea of the place outlives the place itself. The memory of a ruined ancient capital, for example, can play a role in national identity and founding mythology long after the material city has disappeared. The idea of the city of Persepolis, in ruins for nearly two and a half millennia, grounded pre-revolutionary Iranian national mythology and narratives of the state's origins in the Achaemenid Empire. Because lost national mythscapes are not material but imaginary, they are malleable and constantly reinvented as collective memories mutate throughout time. As material experiences of a place fade into history, its mnemonic, imaginary double may drift toward a form with only a tenuous relation to the "original." Although material, historical places beget mythscapes, the latter are wholly imaginary constructions. To an extent, then, projects of "rebuilding" – including global-archaic megaprojects – produce themselves the historical pasts that they promise to rebuild.[4]

Through three case studies – on the idea of Jerusalem as the centre of the world, the idea of the American frontier, and the idea of the Silk Road – this chapter examines the production of national mythscapes and the process in which urban landscapes evaporate from matter into memory. As this process unfolds, urban landscapes are emptied out of their original meaning and transformed into increasingly malleable signifiers. After the closing of the American frontier, for example, its memory was so progressively abstracted that by the 1980s and 1990s, hackers saw themselves as new frontiersmen and the internet as a virtual double of the landscape of the American West. This transforma-

3
Monuments and landscapes ground national identity, understandings of the nation, and national mythology by giving a tangible expression to abstract concepts and institutions. The idea or image of the White House, for example, often substitutes for much more diffuse concept of "the state," or the institution of democracy more broadly. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford University Press, 1992).

4
Megaproject authors, however, are not entirely free to invent the past, but are constrained by existing historical imaginaries among their target audiences. If megaproject authors construct a mythscape unfamiliar to their target audience, it will lack the emotional associations that would make it a successful affective trigger. If authors stretch too far the comparison between a mythscape and a proposed megaproject, audiences will likely not find the narrative convincing. Mythscapes, then, do not come fully formed out of collective memory or the annals of history, but are produced and reproduced in relation to authors' material interests, audiences' perceptions of history, and the possibilities of discourse between the two.



3.1

tion of material places through remembering, forgetting, and misremembering into malleable signifiers engenders the very possibility, by equating unlike historical and future landscapes, of rebuilding projects and the global-archaic city. The semiotic malleability of lost national mythscapes makes it possible, for example, to narrate a network of modern transportation infrastructures, special economic zones, and logistics hubs as a restoration of the ancient Silk Road. As signifiers, mythscapes perform strategic work for those that wield them — they are produced and reproduced constantly by groups that push certain ways of remembering to legitimize or naturalize their contemporary political, economic, and material interests. *How* landscapes are remembered as mythscapes, then, shapes the potentialities and consequences of rebuilding projects and global-archaic megaprojects.

This chapter focuses especially on how the imagined *spatial form* of a mythscape shapes how rebuilding narratives function as material forces. Spatial forms have inherent characteristics that lend themselves more readily to certain strategic maneuvers than others. The relationships between form, strategy, and meaning, however, are not absolute. That a border divides while a network connects derive from their inherent formal properties — but the former's associations with order and security and the latter's associations with egalitarianism are culturally mediated. Global-archaic megaprojects manipulate the immutable spatial characteristics and malleable cultural associations of lost national mythscapes in ways that work toward (or against) their strategic goals. The mythscapes that provide this chapter's case studies are each characterized by a clear spatial form: the idea of Jerusalem is a centre, the idea of the American West is a frontier, and idea of the Silk Road is a network. Each case study, then, first explains the relevant spatial form and its cultural associations before examining how that form shapes the mythscape's instrumentalization throughout its history.

↖ 3.1
Section of Schinkel's plan for a royal palace on the Acropolis


Monialium Ebstorfensium Mappamundi
quae exeunte saeculo XIII. pictum videtur picta. Hannoverae nunc adservatur. edidit Conradus Miller.

3.2

Centre: The Idea of Jerusalem as the Centre of the World

The Idea of the Centre

Narratives of the centre typically present the centre as a *foundation* – both structurally, as the solid ground upon which the structure of a world rests, and historically, as that which brings a world into being. A centre is, for Derrida, the "very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality."[5] Necessarily unique and absolute (there can only be one centre in a given system and it is never defined in relation to another point), a centre establishes a foundational absolute within a world. Many religions, for example, view the centre of the world as the earthly dwelling place of divinity, or as an *axis mundi* that links the eternal, sacred heavens and the labile, profane earth.[6] This original, foundational absolute gives the rest of a world its stability; a centre functions as the ultimate yardstick which gives all things an absolute rather than relative measure. The origin of a cartesian grid, for example, reduces the infinite possibilities for defining the position of a point relationally in terms of vectors defined with respect to other points to a single absolute coordinate (X,Y,Z). A centre founds a world by fixing its structure. In the process, it establishing hierarchies within space: of centrality and peripherality, of localness and foreignness. These distinctions make space heterogeneous and struc-

5
Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1980).

6
Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History* (Princeton University Press, 2005); Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959).

↖ 3.2
Lithograph of the Ebstorf world map

Many medieval European maps locate Jerusalem at the centre where the three old-world continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa intersect; in other words, at the centre of the known world. The early-thirteenth-century Ebstorf Map depicts the Earth as the body of Christ, and at its centre, Jerusalem (illustrated as a square walled city).

ture it into a world in which orientation is possible.

Centres (and frontiers and networks) may exist only in conceptual space or only in physical space, but the two often map onto each other. A centre may refer to the foundational presumptions that lend a conceptual system its stability. Derrida, for example, describes the history of Western metaphysics "as a series of substitutions of centre for centre" in reference to the succession of concepts – God, presence, the human subject – that have served as the foundational absolutes of Western metaphysics. None of these "centres" describe a particular geographic place, and some of them are difficult to conceptualize in spatial terms at all. But such conceptual centres do often map onto a geographic place. The example of the *axis mundi* is one such case, where the metaphysical centre (God) maps onto a place (often a temple or a holy mountain) understood as the geographic centre of the earth. Some places may function not as the centre of *the* world but as the centre of *a* world. Historical national capitals, for example, are often understood as the "birthplace" of a civilization, the purest expression of a cultural or national identity, and are sometimes even understood as sitting in the geographic centre of a country. While conceptual and geographic centres, frontiers, and networks do not always map onto each other, the following cases concern instances in which they do.

The Idea of Jerusalem as the Centre of the World

The idea of Jerusalem as the centre of the cosmos is the archetypal centre narrative throughout the historically Christian and Jewish worlds. Although not Christian doctrine, Christian cultures have traditionally understood the city as the geographic centre of the world (see figure 3.2 on previous page). In Judaism, the idea of Jerusalem as the centre of the world is official doctrine. Judaism connects the idea of the centre to foundation through the belief that Mount Moriah in Jerusalem is the site of the foundation stone out of which the world sprung in the process of creation. It was from the centre – from Jerusalem – that the chaos of pre-creation was given order. The notion of Jerusalem as a cosmic centre also establishes spatial hierarchies and boundaries. The understanding that God's earthly presence dwelled in the city's ancient Temple on Mount Moriah provides for Jewish sacred geography the ultimate distinction between sacred and profane space. To preserve the purity of God's dwelling place, the Temple itself was designed in a concentric hierarchy of increasingly sacred spaces, which, in turn, served as a model of the cosmos. As the centre, Jerusalem ordered the world.

Whether as a material place or as a memory, the idea of Jerusalem has set the foundations of Jewish religious experience, and occasionally of political experience too. Ancient Israelite monarchs used the material city to reify their rule, and the physical presence of YHWH in the Temple grounded Israelite theology. In diaspora, rabbinic Judaism shifted the site of God's presence from the sacred Temple to sacred events. The centre moved from space to time. Preserved in ritual, liturgy, and material culture, however, the memory of the city continued to shape Jewish theology precisely through its conspicuous absence. The following section traces the changing relationship between Jerusalem as a material place and as a memory. In this history, the city is sometimes the uncontested centre of the cosmos, sometimes secondary to a centre in time. Sporadically, the tension between these two ideas of the city erupts into movements to return to the Holy Land and rebuild the Temple. In every variation, however, notions of the centre establish foundational hierarchies and order, and set the terms of the experience of space, God, nation, and history.

Establishing a Centre in Israelite Theology

Twin notions of Jerusalem as political and cosmic centre grounded ancient Israelite nationhood and religious cosmology. These two notions of the centre cross-legitimized each other, as political power consolidated Jerusalem's status as religious and cosmic centre while religious power in Jerusalem buttressed the monarchy. According to the biblical narrative, the city's Hebrew history began when king David conquered the city Jebus from the Canaanites, renamed it Jerusalem, and designated it the capital of his kingdom of newly united Hebrew tribes. To bolster his political credibility, David relocated to his capital priests from throughout the tribes.[7] David's successor, Solomon, continued the project of consolidating political power in the city through religious authority by building a Temple in Jerusalem. As a strategy to establish legitimacy among the tribes, Solomon combined in the Temple's innermost sanctuary religious artefacts from the kingdom's many tribal traditions.[8] Even after the unified Israelite kingdom fell apart, the Judahite kings of Jerusalem continued to strategically consolidate religious power in the city. In the late eight century BC, for example, King Hezekiah destroyed the holy places throughout the kingdom, centralized worship in Jerusalem, and institutionalized pilgrimage to the city, which forged personal, economic, and religious bonds between village dwellers and the capital city.[9] Centuries of similar policies cemented Jerusalem as the centre of Israelite ritual and political

7
Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (Summit Books, 1987).

8
Robert Jan Van Pelt, *How Beautiful Are Your Dwelling Places, Jacob: An Atlas of Jewish Space* (Park Books, 2022).

9
Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?*

life and bound Israelite nationhood and theology to the city. In Israelite theology, Jerusalem was the centre of the cosmos because the city's Temple was the dwelling place of YHWH; the centre was grounded in the earth.[10] This notion derived from the Israelites' quasi-anthropomorphic view of YHWH and their belief that his divine presence could inhabit a particular earthly site. A psalm with origins at least as far back as the monarchic period, for example, tells that "YHWH has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His dwelling place: 'this is my resting-place for ever; here I will dwell; for I have desired it.'"[11] The idea that YHWH physically resided in Zion shaped ritual practices at the Temple, which were the focal point of Israelite religious life. At festivals, priests offered sacrifices of incense, bread, and animals to YHWH. He received these offerings as gifts, as when Noah offered a sacrifice after the floods receded and "YHWH smelled the pleasing odour," suggesting that he might "smell" and be "pleased" by the odour of roasting meat as a person might.[12] The Temple and the Holy City functioned as a spatial interface between man and divinity.

The physical presence of divinity within the world made space heterogeneous and hierarchical. Where YHWH dwelled, space became sacred and ontologically distinct from the profane space of the rest of the world. To preserve this sacred hierarchy, Solomon's architects organized the Temple in a series of concentric zones that, towards the centre, required increasing ritual purity to access. Tradition restricted access to the Holy of Holies – the innermost chamber of the Temple and the site of YHWH's presence – to the high priest alone, and only on a Yom Kippur.[13] The Temple's concentric hierarchies of sacrality in turn served as a model of the cosmos in miniature (see figures 3.3 and 3.4).[14] To the ancient Israelites, then, a sacred spatial hierarchy organized the world and placed Jerusalem at its centre.[15]

10
The Hebrew word YHWH is typically interpreted as Yahweh or Jehovah and is the name of the primary god of ancient Israelite religion.

11
Psalms 132:13-14

12
Genesis 8:21

13
Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?*

14
Robert Jan Van Pelt, *Tempel van de Wereld: De Kosmische Symboliek van de Tempel van Salomo* (Hes Uitgevers, 1984); Raoul Bunschoten, "Ladder or Smokestack: An Enigmatic Tale," *AA Files*, no. 9 (1985).

15
This concentric model is elaborated explicitly later in the Midrash Tanhuma: "The land of Israel sits at the centre of the world; Jerusalem is in the centre of the land of Israel: the sanctuary is in the centre of Jerusalem; the Temple building is in the centre of the sanctuary; the ark is in the centre of the Temple building: and the foundation stone, out of which the world was founded, is before the Temple building."

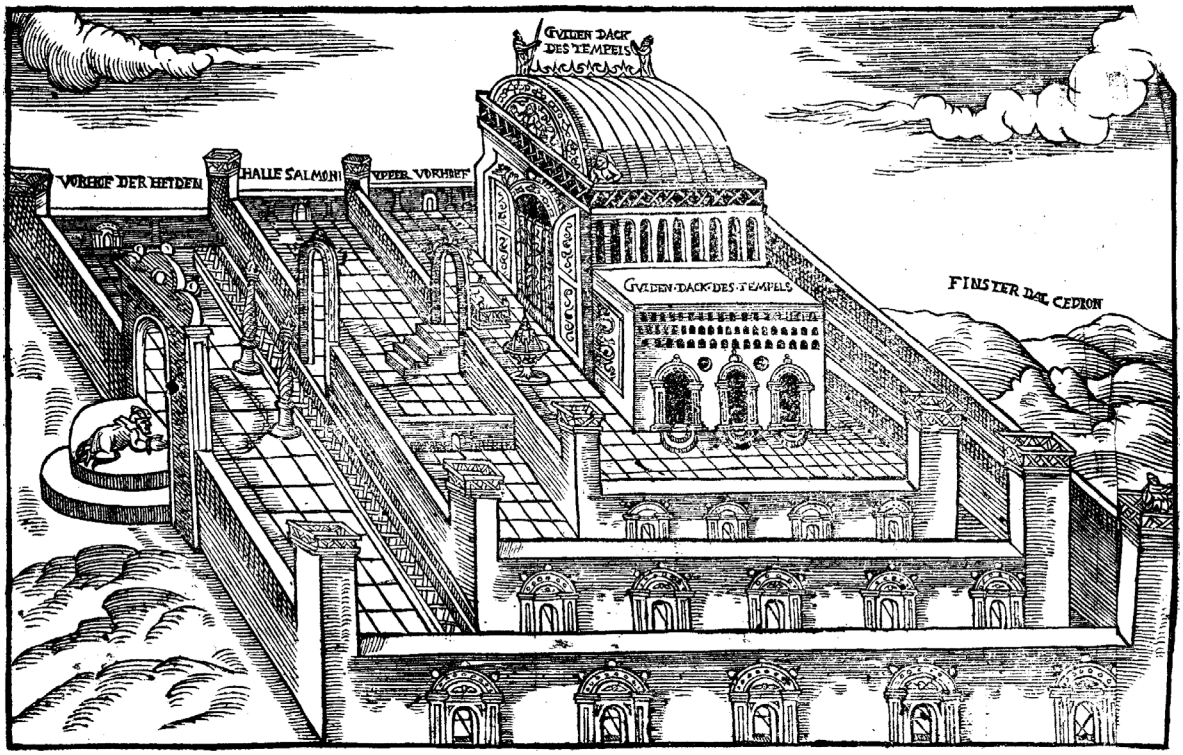
Diasporic Decentring, Rabbinic Judaism, and Messianic Recentring

If Israelite religion and nationhood centred on Jerusalem and its Temple, then rabbinic Jewish religion and identity resulted from an unfinished process of decentring the Temple and the Holy City in worship and ritual life. In the sixth century BC, the Babylonian empire conquered the Kingdom of Judah, destroyed Solomon's Temple, and exiled thousands of Judean elites, including, importantly, the priests and the scribes. Without land, monarchy, or their Temple, the captives recentred their identity and religious practices around the portable artefacts and ideas

↗ 3.3
Illustration of Solomon's Temple in *De Kleyne Wonderlijcke Werelt*

↗ 3.4
Jewish cosmological diagram

The Jewish Temple as a model of the concentric arrangement of the cosmos. At the centre of the cosmos is the earth; at the centre of the earth is Jerusalem. At the centre of Jerusalem is the Temple. At the centre of the Temple is the Holy of Holies, which sits above the foundation stone from which the earth sprung forth in the process of creation.


GVLDEN DACK DES TEMPELS
VORHOF DER HEIDEN
HALLE SALMONI
VPPER VORHOFF
GVLDEN DACK DES TEMPELS
FINSTER DAL CEDRON

3.3



3.4

that could travel with them — the holy texts of the Torah, communal practices, and sacred time. Recentering produced on one hand a new Jewish rather than Israelite identity and on the other hand a new approach to religion, both of which had become mobile and had loosened their roots in the land of Israel and the Temple. Even when the Persian King Cyrus allowed the Babylonian captives to return to the land of Israel, these changes in identity and religious life persisted. For an entire generation, the returned captives made no attempt to rebuild the Temple. When, in seventy AD, the Roman empire destroyed the Second Temple and exiled the Jews from the land of Israel, they scattered with a religion and an identity designed to survive in diaspora. Immediately after the siege of Jerusalem began the development of Rabbinic Judaism, which systematized the practice of Judaism without the Temple, without the priesthood, and without territorial sovereignty.[16] By about 600 — around the time of the codification of the Babylonian Talmud — rabbinic Judaism had become the dominant form throughout the Jewish world. The Roman exile had consolidated and formalized the decentring of Jerusalem, the Temple, and the land of Israel.[17]

While Israelite religion had centred sacred space, Rabbinic Judaism centred sacred time. This shift transformed the quasi-anthropomorphic Israelite conception of YHWH into the Jewish conception of a singular, infinite, and immaterial God. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel describes the theological harmonies between time and the Jewish conception of God:

> There is no quality that space has in common with the essence of God. There is not enough freedom on the top of the mountain; there is not enough glory in the silence of the sea. Yet the likeness of God can be found in time, which is eternity in disguise.[18]

Space could contain the presence of the Israelite God, in His dwelling place in the Temple. The infinitude of the Jewish God, however, could not be contained within finite space, whether physical or conceptual. The medieval rabbi Maimonides developed a theology of negative declarations that grasped fragmentarily at God's contours while maintaining His infinite openness because positive declarations on God's nature would inappropriately bind Him within conceptual finitude.[19] Rather than in the Being and presence of space, the God described by negative theology resides in the Becoming and never-quite presence of time — ephemeral, infinite, and ungraspable.

As God's dwelling shifted from space to time, distinctions between sacred and profane followed; while Israelite religion had been concerned with structuring space, Jewish theology was

16
A historically contested but popular folktale tells that during the Roman siege of Jerusalem, rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai faked his own death, was smuggled out of the city in a coffin, and fled to Yavne, where he established a religious school that cultivated the early development of rabbinic Judaism. Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin,* 56a-b.

17
Van Pelt, *How Beautiful Are Your Dwelling Places, Jacob*.

18
Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005), 16.

19
Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedländer (Dover, 1956).

concerned with structuring time. "The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals," says Heschel. On Shabbat, for example, the sacred erupts into profane time as pure eternity, marking the day as ontologically distinct from the rest of the week. The prohibition of labour on Shabbat reinforces the hierarchy of sacred and profane time and encourages one to experience Shabbat as pure temporality and contemplation. In a Talmudic formulation, Shabbat prohibits exactly those acts associated with building the first sanctuary in space – the Tabernacle – as if a reminder that, though communion with God is necessarily mediated through space, He truly dwells in time.[20]

For most of Jewish diasporic history, a rabbinic consensus held that decentring had enriched the religion by drawing it away from the profane realm of material things. In the Talmud, "Rabbi Elazar said: Prayer is greater than sacrifices, as it is stated: [...] 'I [God] do not desire the blood of bulls and sheep and goats' (Isaiah 1:11)."[21] A millennium later, the sentiment persisted and Maimonides wrote that sacrificial worship at the Temple had merely served as a transitional phase from paganism to monotheism and was thus tainted by idol worship.[22] The destruction of the Temple – though catastrophic and mourned every year on the *Tisha B'Av* – had perfected Jewish religious thought and practice by redirecting them to God's true, elusive nature.

But the necessary mediation of God through space and remnants of Israelite theology left the process of decentring incomplete. Jews in diaspora still viewed Jerusalem, the Temple, and the foundation stone as the centre of the world, and a hierarchy of sacred space persisted. The sacrality of these holy places, however, derived no longer from some inherent property, but rather from their connection to sacred events. Space was no longer sacred on its own, but only in connection to sacred time. Jewish spatial practices expressed the incompleteness of decentring by symbolically sublimating the old centres of Jerusalem and the Temple. The home and domestic ritual, for example, replaced the Temple and Temple ritual: the dining table became the symbolic altar, and, on Shabbat, ritual handwashing and candle lighting symbolized the ritual bathing and candle lighting of Temple priests.[23] Temple motifs adorn wedding rings, wedding contracts, and much of Jewish material culture (see figures 3.5 and 3.6 on next page). In a particularly poetic example, tradition recommends leaving a patch of wall in the home unpainted to commemorate the missing Temple. Although Judaism deemphasized the centre in space, it persisted partially, as if a form of negative theology, as a trace of absence.[24]

20
Heschel, *The Sabbath*.

21
Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 32b

22
"The custom [...] in which the Israelites were brought up, consisted in sacrificing animals in those temples which contained certain images [and] to bow down to those images [...] Man [...] generally cleaves to that to which he is used [...] for this reason God allowed these kinds of service to continue; He transferred to His service that which had formerly served as a worship of created beings [...] By this Divine plan it was effected that the traces of idolatry were blotted out, and the truly great principle of our faith, the Existence and Unity of God, was firmly established." Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, 322–27.

23
Dalia Marx, "The Missing Temple: The Status of the Temple in Jewish Culture Following Its Destruction," *European Judaism* 46, no. 2 (2013).

24
One could see the motif of the missing Temple as a spatial instantiation of negative theology. The Temple persists from its destruction into Jewish diasporic space as absence. By not totally dispensing with the memory of the Temple, Jewish spatial practices highlight absence in space.



3.5



3.6

Traces of archaic Israelite ideas about the centre in space remained especially in prophecies about the end times. Rabbinic speculations on the end times derived largely from texts in the biblical books of prophets (Hosea, Amos, Isaiah) that predicted the reestablishment of the Davidic Kingdom. These predictions, written in the immediate aftermath of the Assyrian destruction of the Kingdom of Israel, were essentially national and political in character; a ruined kingdom anticipating its retribution. In their commentaries on these prophetic texts, however, rabbinic sources transformed the national-political idea of the end times into a cosmic-spiritual one. The Last Days would be of an utterly different nature from earthly history, a return of the harmonious world of paradise before Adam's sin. But the rabbinic, spiritualized account of the end times did not entirely overwrite the earlier national-political version.[25] The Talmud and other rabbinic texts generally describe leading into the advent of the messiah and the end times a series of events that would undo the fundamental transformations of decentring: the Jews would return from diaspora to Zion, the Temple would be rebuilt, and the sacrificial rites restored. In rabbinic thought, these messianic beliefs mingled with those that celebrated the demise and spiritualization of Temple-era practice. Apparently contradicting his denunciation of Temple ritual as an idolatrous holdover from the Israelites' pagan forebears, for example, Maimonides predicted that

> the Messiah will arise and restore the kingdom of David to its former might. He will rebuild the sanctuary and gather the dispersed of Israel. All the laws will be reinstituted in his days as of old. Sacrifices will be offered and the Sabbatical and Jubilee years will be observed exactly in accordance with the commandments of the Torah.[26]

These traces of old Israelite beliefs generated a tension in rabbinic Judaism between ideas of Jerusalem and the Temple as sublimated memories and as earthly national and spiritual centres. This tension sporadically erupted in messianic movements in which adherents prepared for the pre-apocalyptic recentering of Jerusalem and the Temple. In 614, for example, with the help of Jewish rebels, the Sassanian empire conquered Jerusalem from the Byzantines and granted the Jews political sovereignty over the city. Some Jews interpreted these events as signs of the impending apocalypse, prepared to rebuild the Temple, and declared the Jewish leader of the revolt, Nehemiah ben Hushiel, to be the Messiah ben Joseph – the penultimate messiah who precedes the harbinger of the end times. Three years later, however, the Sassanians' revocation of Jewish political control over Jerusalem dashed messianic hopes and extinguished the final

25
Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah,* Laws Concerning Kings and Wars, 11:1

26
Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (Schocken Books, 1995).

↖ 3.5
Jewish spice tower with Temple motif

↖ 3.6
Jewish wedding ring with Temple motif

moment in which the messianic impulse had durable territorial and political consequences.[27] In the mid-seventeenth century, for example, the largest messianic movement in Jewish history erupted from the Ottoman Empire across Europe and North Africa around the rabbi Shabtai Tzvi. Tzvi's capture by Ottoman authorities and his subsequent conversion to Islam, however, cut his movement short. Anticipating the coming of the end times, small groups of Tzvi's followers had migrated or prepared to migrate to Palestine. But overwhelmingly, Tzvi's followers prepared for the end times spiritually, not territorially. For centuries after his death, based on speculations that the *halakhah* (religious law) would be lifted or inverted in the end times, some of Tzvi's followers profaned the sabbath, ate unkosher foods, and engaged in ritual orgies.[28] For over a millennium after the Sassanian conquest of Jerusalem, then, even the largest movements had few territorial or political consequences.[29] Similarly, Jews did not conceive of messianic aspirations to reverse the diaspora, rebuild the Temple, and reinstate the sacrificial rites, like the biblical prophets, as retribution for a ruined kingdom, but as a pathway to the end times. These brief and unsuccessful movements of recentering were fundamentally spiritual in both motivation and consequence.

27
Frederick Cornwallis Conybeare, trans., "Antiochus Stratego's Account of the Sack of Jerusalem in 614," *The English Historical Review* 25 (1910).

28
Based on prophecies of the inversion of *Halakhah* in the end times, some of Tzvi's followers interpreted his apostasy not as a sin, but as proof that he was indeed the messiah. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 75, 99.

29
Messianic movements remained internal affairs that would have gone largely unnoticed outside of Jewish communities. Even within Jewish communities, they were consistently denounced by rabbinic authorities. Scholem speaks of the "great and totally consistent opposition to messianic movements during the 1600 years from between the destruction of the Temple and the Sabbatian movement." Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*.

Israeli Nation Building: Recentring Through Decentralization

At the close of the twentieth century, almost exactly 100 years after the death of the last major self-proclaimed messiah, Jacob Frank, some Jewish groups in Europe began to envision a recentering of Zion of a very different character. The Zionist movement did not conceive of the land of Israel like the ancient Israelites had as the dwelling place of YHWH, nor like messianic movements had as the site of the Third Temple and the pre-apocalyptic ingathering of the Jews, but in terms of a modern, secular nation-state. In typical postwar nation-building fashion, they privileged the national territory and the border over the Temple or the Holy City. Within the borders of the nation state, Jerusalem may have enjoyed an elevated cultural and symbolic status, but the early Israeli state actively worked to decentralize the spatial hierarchies of the country. And unlike diasporic messianic movements, Zionism mustered the necessary political power to transform its vision into a territorial reality.

Many early Zionists used utopian literature as a medium to visualize a future national-political recentring within the land of Israel. Both Elhanan Leib Levinsky's 1892 novel *A Trip to the Land of Israel in 2040* – the first utopian text in modern He-

brew – and Theodor Herzl's 1902 novel *Altneuland* imagine in detail a distinctly agricultural territory of a future Jewish state in Palestine. Hard agricultural work and connection to the land, Zionist texts speculated, would collectively transform diaspora Jews (described as weak and neurotic in a strange internalization of antisemitic tropes) into strong, healthy, native *sabras* – a sort of proto-Israeli national identity. Half a decade before establishing a state, then, Zionist literature sketched in conceptual space a national territory that would ground a project of national reinvention.

After the Israeli Declaration of Independence in 1948, the utopian agricultural vision of early Zionist writers informed the first Israeli national masterplan. In 1948, the state established the Planning Department and appointed architect Arieh Sharon to its head. In 1951, Sharon's Planning Department published the first national masterplan, *Physical Planning in Israel*. At its core, the masterplan promoted a spatial strategy of decentralization and deurbanization. Most Jewish migration to Palestine before 1948 had clustered in the coastal cities of Tel Aviv and Haifa, and Jerusalem. The masterplan proposed to establish hundreds of new towns, villages, and agricultural settlements throughout the country, and to redistribute the population evenly between them. Decentralization would reify Israeli territorial claims by settling more of the land with smaller Jewish communities. And, if Jewish immigrants to Palestine remained in the cities, the architects of the national masterplan argued, they would stay disconnected from the land. Only after relocating to towns and villages and adopting agricultural lifestyles would Jewish immigrants become "native" Israelis.[30] Decentralizing the largely urban population amongst more rural towns and villages would ground the new Israeli national identity in the land.

While the state never officially adopted Sharon's decentralizing masterplan, for nearly three decades the territorial development of Israel and public building projects conformed almost exactly to its specifications.[31] The reterritorialization of Palestine into Israel, however, was not just a project of construction, but also one of violent destruction. New settlements following the national masterplan systematically overwrote the traces of an erased Palestinian national territory. During the Nakba (Arabic for "catastrophe") of 1947-1949, proto-Israeli militias and then the Israeli army had destroyed and depopulated over 400 Palestinian villages, killed 13,000 Palestinians, and turned 750,000 more into refugees. The new Israeli settlements built by the state in accordance with the national masterplan equaled almost exactly the number of destroyed Palestinian villages and were often built

30
Zvi Efrat, *The Object of Zionism: The Architecture of Israel* (Spector Books, 2018), 63–64.

31
Efrat, *The Object of Zionism*, 63–64.



3.7

directly on their ruins.[32] These hundreds of new villages and towns, however, rarely succeeded. By and large, city-dwellers did not willingly relocate to the villages and take up lives of agricultural toil. Those who did end up in the new settlements were mostly Sephardic and Mizrahi immigrants who had settled there not of their own choice but by the direction of the Israeli state.

Although the project of spatial decentralization largely failed, the larger Israeli territorial project achieved its goals. Many Israeli Jews now understood the physical Land of Israel as the foundation of their national identity. By the mid-1970s – when neoliberal, market-driven urbanism supplanted Sharon's master-plan – the Israeli territorial project had half-reversed the millennia-long process in which the centre evaporated from physical space; Zionism had established a self-proclaimed Jewish national-political centre in the land of Israel. The state of Israel, however, was a modern, secular nation-state; the decentring of God from space into time and the Temple from territory into memory remained.

32
Efrat, *The Object of Zionism*, 26, 63.

↖ 3.7
Detail from a poster for the Israeli national masterplan

The title reads: "Distribution of Israel's Population: Planning or *Laissez-Faire*." The explanatory text reads "A) Present distribution of population. As a result of unplanned growth, 80% of the population today is concentrated in the coastal plain between Haifa and Tel Aviv [illustrated on the left]. B) Proposed distribution of population. The national plan aims at a more balanced distribution of population over the whole area of the country [illustrated on the right]."


THE TRYON ILLUSTRATED AMERICAN HISTORY MAPS
PRESENT CONTINENTAL UNITED STATES, EXCEPT ALASKA, AS IT APPEARED IN 1790
OREGON COUNTRY
CLAIMED BY ENGLAND, RUSSIA AND SPAIN
LOUISIANA
NORTH WEST TERRITORY
SOUTH WEST TERRITORY
MAINE
NEW YORK
PENNSYLVANIA
VIRGINIA
NORTH CAROLINA
SOUTH CAROLINA
GEORGIA
FLORIDA
CLAIMED BY SPAIN
MEXICO
GULF OF MEXICO
ATLANTIC OCEAN
PACIFIC OCEAN
BAHAMA ISLANDS
CUBA
SIOUX
CHIPPEWA
IOWA
POTTAWATOMI
PAWNEE
COMANCHE
APACHES
CHOCTAW
SEMINOLE
LEGEND
U. S. Boundary
State Boundary
British Boundary
Spanish Boundary
Sealed Territory Limits
Forts
Missions
Places restricted to Fur
Centers of Population
Names of Indian Tribes appear in Red
65 Miles to one Inch
Scale of Miles
Tropic of Cancer
Longitude West of Greenwich
(General Period Covered, 1765-1790)
WEBER COSTELLO CO., Chicago Heights, Ill.
PRESENT CONTINENTAL UNITED STATES, EXCEPT ALASKA, AS IT APPEARED IN 1790

3.8

Frontier: The Idea of the American Frontier

The Idea of the Frontier

Frontier narratives typically present the frontier as an edge between worlds. A frontier is the inverse condition of the centre, located at the periphery of a system, at the boundary where the world's foundational laws no longer apply. As Mary Douglas notes, "any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins" — toward the periphery, the foundational laws of a world begin to break down.[33] The territory beyond the border has different, foreign laws, which, from a local world-view may not appear to have any order or coherence at all. On the frontier, then, a world encounters that which its internal logic excludes; it is where the inside meets the outside, the local meets the foreign, where order meets disorder. Frontiers are often depicted as sites of *hybridity* or as sites of *conquest*. Where worlds interact, they may absorb traits from the other and syncretize them with their own. The borderlands of a country, for example, are often perceived as frontiers of civilizational or national worlds, where syncretic cultures hybridize the local and the foreign. Where the centre is the purest expression of a world's essential characteristics, the frontier is a hybrid. When exchanges across the frontier become asymmetrical and one-sided, the frontier becomes a site of *conquest*. By conquering territory beyond the frontier, a world

33
Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Routledge, 1966), 35.

↖ 3.8
Map of colonial boundaries and settled territories in contemporary USA, 1790

Popular histories of American colonial expansion depict the westernmost edge of settlement (shaded in bright yellow in the above map) as a frontier where the world of the American colonists meets that of Indigenous peoples and landscapes.

expands. Although unconquered territories have their own organizational logics, to the conqueror, they may appear disordered. When the conqueror dominates the conquered, the former generally subjects the frontier territories to its own logic. When new territories are integrated into the capitalist world, for example, their resources (natural or otherwise) are transformed into commodities through enclosure and privatization. The frontier, then, has two guises – it is at once a generative condition that produces the new, and a condition of violence and destruction.

The Idea of the American Frontier

The popular history of the American frontier – referring to the Westward-moving borderlands of British colonial and then American settlement from the early seventeenth to twentieth centuries – is a typical frontier narrative. Accounts of the "Wild West" often describe in heroic terms how settlers and the state reordered what they perceived as "savage" or "untamed" peoples and landscapes according to spatial, economic, legal, and cultural logics more legible and instrumental to the settler world-view. In these histories, the frontier is sometimes a site of conquest where the genocide of Indigenous peoples and the destruction of Indigenous landscapes are depicted as triumphs of civilization over nature. The frontier, however, is sometimes also a site of creation, as when settlers incorporate natural landscapes and resources into emerging American systems of property and economy by imposing a cadastral grid and establishing farms and cities. Similarly, encounters with the frontier landscape produce American democracy and nationalism by imbuing settlers with the patriotic values of self-sufficiency, individualism, and egalitarianism. In popular history, the frontier creates America.

The transformation of frontier history into an American founding mythology has made it a useful metaphor for modern governments and private organizations or individuals to narrate their endeavours. Through "new frontier" narratives, groups have connected their projects, programs, or agendas to the values of American innovation or independence and have instrumentalized the patriotism of American publics. As an instrumental metaphor, the frontier is sometimes grounded in the landscape of the American West through imagery of homesteads, prairies, cowboys, and Indians. In other cases, the frontier dissolves into an abstract condition where it signifies the conquest of new technological or economic opportunities. The following section traces a particular lineage of frontier mythscapes and narratives

of "new frontiers" that culminates in the "electronic frontier" narrative in the 1980s and 1990s. Throughout this lineage, the frontier is sometimes a physical landscape, sometimes a mobile economic condition, a state of consciousness, or a virtual space. In every variation, however, the frontier is imagined as a zone liberated from legal and social convention, and works to legitimize or naturalize contemporary projects to recreate that condition.

Yeomen and the Western Frontier

Early narratives of the American frontier transformed the uncolonized West into a symbol of American republicanism. In the late eighteenth century, as American resistance to the British Empire spread from the elite to the broader citizenry, revolutionaries began to frame the movement as a grand struggle against European aristocratic politics.[34] Although emerging market economies had begun to empower a growing capitalist class in Europe, landed aristocratic families still held power, ruling, managing, and drawing wealth, as rent, from commoners.[35] Revolutionary American discourse symbolized the aristocratic order in the idea of the European landscape – densely populated and marked by cities and agricultural estates where commoners without land or capital laboured under harsh conditions, enriching their aristocratic employers and landlords, and with little promise of socio-economic mobility. By contrast, the American landscape, and especially the land beyond the frontier, was vast, fertile, and (to the eyes of European settlers who conveniently erased the presence of Indigenous peoples) untouched and unrestrained by historical convention. For revolutionaries, the frontier landscape promised an alternative politics: a democratic republic of farmers who cultivated their own land and managed their own lives.[36]

Thomas Jefferson's vision of a yeoman republic has particularly influenced American frontier narratives and forged enduring conceptual links between democracy, agriculture, private property, and the frontier. For Jefferson, a society of small-scale farmers (yeomen) who owned and cultivated their own land would create the ideal conditions for a republican democracy. Widespread land ownership would annul distinctions between landlords and tenants. The "middle landscape" of the farm – the golden mean between the city and untamed wilderness – would promote a morally virtuous and moderate lifestyle of neither want nor excess.[37] The yeoman's independent disposition would limit state overreach. However, to support the necessarily low

34
Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York University Press, 1984), 12–13.

35
Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order*.

36
Where, as the French-American writer Hector St. John de Crevècœur put it, there "are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one, [and where] the rich and the poor are not so far removed from each other as they are in Europe, [because] we are all tillers of the earth." J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (Fox, Duffield, and Company, 1904).

37
Jefferson made his idealization of the farming life clear in his assertion that "those who labor the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue." His vision was fundamentally anti-urban and anti-industrial: "let our workshops remain in Europe," he wrote. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (The University of North Carolina Press, 1955).

population density of a small-scale farming society, which Jefferson stipulated at roughly ten people per square mile, the yeoman republic would require abundant, fertile land.[38] For Jefferson and other republicans, then, Westward expansion became an important political cause. After attempts to distribute land to citizens throughout his career as a lawmaker, Jefferson facilitated a major step toward his agrarian vision when as president in 1803 he ratified the Louisiana Purchase, acquiring 828,000 square miles of Midwestern territory from the French Empire, doubling the area of the United States, and accelerating Westward expansion toward the Pacific.[39]

The Revolutionary vision of a yeoman republic on the frontier became so essential to American political identity that it persisted even as industrialization threatened the viability of small-scale agriculture. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the effort to preserve the agrarian dream produced many of the most iconic symbols of the frontier. Beginning in 1862, for example, Homestead Acts distributed federal land at nominal prices for families to establish small farms on the frontier. The homesteads – often modest wood huts surrounded by small gardens – became symbols of the frontier values of self-sufficiency and temperance.[40] But the Homestead Acts and similar policies could not prevent steam power, railways, and connection to national and international markets from driving the growth of large industrial cities and displacing small-scale farming by commercial-industrial agriculture throughout the old frontier region.[41]

As the frontier itself disappeared, the nostalgic *idea* of the frontier migrated from geography into mythology. In 1893, the same year that the American census declared the frontier closed, historian Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his canonical essay "On the Significance of the Frontier in American History." In the essay, the frontier became the primary source of all the essential elements of American political identity – individualism, democracy, and nationalism. For Turner, the frontier's isolation from law and cultural-historical convention accelerated innovation in politics, culture, and national identity. The "untamed" frontier landscape possessed an almost mystical power to Americanize the European settler and compress social hierarchies by forcing settlers into survival conditions.[42] The danger of the frontier naturally selected for the pioneering, risk-taking men whom he transformed into the protagonist of the frontier narrative: the frontiersman. Cut off from the administrative centres of the East by wilderness and mountain ranges, the legal and cultural indeterminacy of the frontier empowered frontiersmen to build a new society, informed by their values of individualism and egali-

38
Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Harvard University Press, 1978), 10.

39
Smith, *Virgin Land*, 128.

40
Carl Ortwin Sauer, "Homestead and Community on the Middle Border," in *Land and Life: A Selection from the Writings of Carl Ortwin Sauer*, ed. John Leighly (University of California Press, 1963); John Brinckerhoff Jackson, "The Westward-Moving House: Three American Houses and the People Who Lived in Them," in *Landscapes: Selected Writings of J.B. Jackson*, ed. Ervin H. Zube (The University of Massachusetts Press, 1970).

41
Smith, *Virgin Land*, 155.

42
In one instance, for example, he imagines how in their encounter with the frontier, settlers began to adopt egalitarian elements of Indigenous cultures: "[The wilderness] finds [the colonist] a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought, [...] puts him in the birch canoe, [...] arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin, [...] puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois, and runs an Indian palisade around him." Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *The Frontier in American History* (Dover, 1996).

↗ 3.9
Daniel Boone's cabin

↗ 3.10
Great Planes frontier home

The American frontier landscape comes in two guises. At its outermost edge, the frontier is a landscape of conquest – of nature and of Indigenous peoples. In American national mythology, the frontiersman Daniel Boone ventures into uncharted territory, dwells in a makeshift cabin amid untamed wilderness (pictured in figure 3.8), and battles Indigenous peoples. Behind the edge of conquest, the frontier is a "middle landscape" – where forests have been cleared and converted into fields and an idyllic, almost Edenic agricultural life prevails (pictured in figure 3.9).



3.9



3.10

tarianism, which would become American democracy.[43]

Turner's essay presented the frontier not as a geographic location, but an economic condition – as, reformulated in Marxian terms, the possibility of primitive accumulation. There was, according to Turner, not one frontier but many frontiers for different industries, constantly shifting with economic conditions and the depletion of resources. While the deforested plains were exhausted for the logger, they may have been an untapped frontier for the farmer. By abstracting the frontier into a mobile economic condition, Turner transformed the frontier into a flexible narrative device that dominated dominated American culture for much of the twentieth century. These narratives would inherit from Turner a set of concepts encoded into his thesis about the West as an indeterminate legal zone, a blank slate charged with a mystical power of cultural regeneration, where pioneers experiment with alternative cultural and political systems that outcompete and transform America at large.

Hippies and Outlaw Areas

By the middle of the twentieth century, the frontier metaphor could describe conditions without any tangible geography. In John F. Kennedy's famous 1960 New Frontier Speech, for example, he used the metaphor of the frontier to describe the cultural, technological, and economic uncertainties at the beginning of a new decade. The 1960s counterculture embraced the history and aesthetics of the frontier as a signifier of cultural experimentation and escape from social convention. Within the counterculture, in the largest wave of communalization in American history, hundreds of thousands of young people emulated frontiersmen and "dropped out" to rural communes, mostly located in the same Western landscapes of frontier history.[44] This group of "back-to-the-landers" embraced not only the Turnerian "spirit" of the frontier, but also the rural landscapes to which that spirit was historically attached.

Although the counterculture presented itself as a radical movement, it harboured a deep nostalgia for a lost American past. The manifesto of the Morningstar Commune in Sonoma County, California, for example, suggested that the solution to "the stresses and strains of modern living" was to "explore our common ancestral heritage – a simple shelter, a garden, some goats or a cow, some chickens and plenty of fresh air and sunshine."[45] This vision of a simpler, pastoral life often explicitly included frontier imagery and hippies portrayed themselves simultane-

43
Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History."

44
Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), 32–33.

45
Morning Star Commune, *Open Land: A Manifesto* (Wheeler Ranch Defence Fund, 1970).

ously as "cowboys and Indians."[46] Native Americans symbolized the traditionalist aspirations of the counterculture; they were keepers of ancestral knowledge and a more authentic way of life. Communards wore buckskins, lived in tipis, built shelters using Indigenous construction techniques, and experimented with traditional forms of agriculture (see figures 3.11 and 3.12 on following pages). Stewart Brand – author of the *Whole Earth Catalog,* which provided communards with "access to tools" for getting back to the earth – wrote that "Americans dwelling in the wilderness of changing eras [were] re-learning to be natives from the most Native Americans, the Indians, studying with the new clarity the ancient harmony of a shared land heritage."[47]

For the counterculture, however, returning to "ancestral ways" was not an end in itself, but part of a project to revolutionize conservative Cold-War industrial society; to return to the past was to chart the future. The counterculture found an appropriate symbol for the revolutionary component of this formula in the cowboy: an outlaw, like Turner's frontiersman, who escaped to the periphery of society, returned to vernacular customs and experimented with alternative ways of living. A letter published in the *Whole Earth Catalog* described the communards as

> COWBOY NOMADS TODAY, LIVING IN ANOTHER LIFESTYLE, AND WAITING FOR ELECTRONIC MEDIA, [...] TO BLOW THE MINDS OF THE MIDDLE-CLASS AMERICAN SUBURBANITE. WHILE THEY WAIT THE COWBOY NOMADS (OUTLAWS) SMOKE LOCO WEED AROUND ELECTRIC CAMPFIRES.[48]

The countercultural vision of a world that synthesized ancestral ways with new technologies was informed by the emerging disciplines of ecology and cybernetics. In ecological and cybernetic models of nature and machines as complex, self-organizing systems governed by internal feedback loops, hippies saw a prototype for alternative forms of social organization without the hierarchies and centralized power of traditional politics. Consequently, hippies shunned politics and used new media and communication technologies to effect a return to tribal social forms, experimenting with alternative, decentralized, spontaneous models of social organization and cultural change, including markets. As Stewart Brand put it, "I've yet to figure what capitalism is, but if it's what we're doing, I dig it."[49]

According to the counterculture's mystical-cybernetic theory of social change, the communes would not transform society from the inside through politics; instead, by "dropping out," communards would create from scratch a parallel society so attractive

46
Michael Allen, "'I Just Want to Be a Cosmic Cowboy': Hippies, Cowboy Code, and the Culture of a Counterculture," *Western Historical Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2005).

47
Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 59.

48
Portola Institute, "Other People's Mail," *Difficult But Possible Supplement to the Whole Earth Catalog*, July 1969.

49
Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 99.

↘ 3.11
Tipis and geodesic domes, New Buffalo commune

↘ 3.12
Traditional building techniques, New Buffalo Commune



3.11



3.12

that it would outcompete mainstream, Cold-War America for hearts and minds.[50] But to create a new society, the back-to-the-landers needed a blank slate and isolation from social, political, and legal convention — somewhere, according to an article by Brand in the *Catalog,* like "space, the oceans, mountains, deserts, Northwoods and tundra, jungle, [...] molecular biology, your mind, [or] other state-of-the-art frontiers whose languages are still foreign to lawmakers."[51] Borrowing a term from Buckminster Fuller (the counterculture celebrity-architect and designer associated with the geodesic dome), Brand called this condition "the outlaw area." In an earlier interview, Fuller had rewritten the entire history of civilization and technology in terms of the outlaw area.

> Ninety-nine percent of humanity has lived on only about five percent of the earth, and anyone who went outside of it — the tiny minority that went to sea, for example — immediately found himself *outside the law* (emphasis added). And the whole development of technology has been in the outlaw area, where you're dealing with the toughness of nature. [...] All improvement has to be made in the outlaw area. [...] When you've made things so good out there in the outlaw area that they can't help being recognized, then gradually they get assimilated.[52]

To Brand, the communes were contemporary outlaw areas, where back-to-the-landers experimented with alternative social technologies like "barter and tribal democracy." In the face of an impending ecological catastrophe, however, communes needed to become full-out laboratories of political, cultural, economic, and ecological innovation. Brand used a thought experiment he called "Mountain Fantasy" to imagine this next step in the commune movement. The Mountain Fantasy would be called "Place," located in a remote mountain valley, and owned by the "Place Company" that would collect rent and manage the location. A permeable fence would divide Place in two, and teams on either side would compete in a game of "trying stuff" — "different political response systems," "different economic systems," and new technologies. From its remote location, Place would transform the outside world by broadcasting its innovations through new communication technologies. Although Brand's Place Company was only a thought experiment, in the following decades, those influenced by him would realize the model of a privately owned, administered, and legislated zone where market forces accelerate cultural, political, and economic innovations.

50
"It will change politics only as its final act." Charles A. Reich, *The Greening of America* (Bantam Books, 1971).

51
Stewart Brand, "The Outlaw Area," *Difficult But Possible Supplement to the Whole Earth Catalog*, January 1970, 21.

52
Calvin Tomkins, "In the Outlaw Area," *The New Yorker*, December 31, 1965.

↗ 3.13
Still from *Easy Rider*

The 1969 counterculture film *Easy Rider* sketches a modern Western landscape inhabited by new outlaws: drug dealers, vagrants, homesteaders, commune dwellers, and longhaired hippies. In the film, lawyer George Hansen says to the two hippie protagonists, "this used to be a helluva good country [...] everyone got chicken [...] what you represent to them is freedom." Hippies, on their motorcycles instead of horses, are the new cowboys.



3.13

Hackers and the Electronic Frontier

In the 1990s, two decades after the peak of the back-to-the-land movement, the frontier narrative moved into virtual space as ex-communards working with Silicon Valley developed the "electronic frontier" narrative to market the early internet. As hippies left failing communes throughout the 1970s and searched for livelihoods among the decade's economic turbulence, many saw new technologies as an opportunity to reengage with mainstream culture while holding on to their ideals. In 1977, for example, Brand published the book *Space Colonies* inspired by NASA scientist Gerard K. Oneill's research into space habitats. Oneill's research, published a year earlier as *The High Frontier,* had described a sci-fi, neo-Jeffersonian society in space where every inhabitant would receive five acres of land. In *Space Colonies,* Brand transposed the counterculture vision of a decentralized, post-national society to technology and space, which he described as "an outlaw area too big and dilute for national control."[53]

In the 1980s, some ex-hippies saw early internet technologies – being developed within blocks of San Francisco's old countercultural spaces – as one such new outlaw area. Though not a physical space, the internet was one of those "state-of-the-art frontiers whose languages are still foreign to lawmakers," and which seemed to provide the necessary infrastructure for a decentralized, cybernetic society.[54] Some ex-hippie web enthusiasts made careers for themselves as spokespeople for the internet, framing the protagonists of the web revolution as the successors of the counterculture. In 1990, for example, John Perry Barlow (a rancher and member of the iconic counterculture band Grateful Dead) founded the Electronic Frontier Foundation, "to convey to both the public and the policy-makers metaphors" that would "illuminate the more general stake in liberating Cyberspace."[55] The most consequential of Barlow's "metaphors" was "the electronic frontier," which he coined in 1990. According to Barlow, cyberspace had "a lot in common with the nineteenth century West:" it was "vast, untapped, culturally and legally ambiguous, verbally terse, [...] hard to get around in, and up for grabs."[56] Hackers were the new frontiersmen, or as Brand put it, "magnificent men with their flying machines scouting the leading edge of technology."[57] As the electronic frontier, the history of the American West may have gone virtual, but it remained in popular imagination a legally indeterminate territory where pioneering men were reinventing society.

In the 1990s, Silicon Valley's new counterculture of self-styled

53
Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 126–27.

54
Brand, "The Outlaw Area," 21.

55
Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 172; John Perry Barlow, *Crime and Puzzlement*, 1990.

56
Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 172.

57
Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 117.

frontiersmen and libertarian Republican politicians entered a counterintuitive strategic alliance held together by a shared vision that the internet could supplant the state.[58] Silicon Valley's vision of a stateless future was a social utopia inherited in part from the hippies and which conveniently empowered themselves as the custodians of the technologies that would allow society to self-organize. Libertarian Republican politicians, on the other hand, were attracted to the internet by their market fundamentalism and a vision in which electronic markets, rather than the state, organized society. The mingling of these ideologies produced a distinctive politics characterized by social liberalism and economic libertarianism that, in 1995, Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron called "the Californian ideology." Both genealogies of the Californian ideology revered the frontier narrative. For Silicon Valley counterculturalists, the Cowboy frontiersman was the prototype of their hippie forbears. For generally nationalist Republicans the frontier was the pearl of their country's founding mythology. It is no surprise, then, that the Californian ideology itself was often coloured by frontier rhetoric, imagery, and ideas. Silicon Valley CEOs and workers alike under the influence of the Californian ideology saw the technologies that they were developing as tools to create outlaw areas which, through the mechanism of exit, would eventually erode the power of the state. For PayPal founder Peter Thiel, for example, "the ability to move money fluidly [which PayPal facilitated] and the erosion of the nation-state [were] closely related."[59] Similar digital tools, the thinking went, could evade regulation and monitoring by the state and establish parallel, competing institutions and communities.

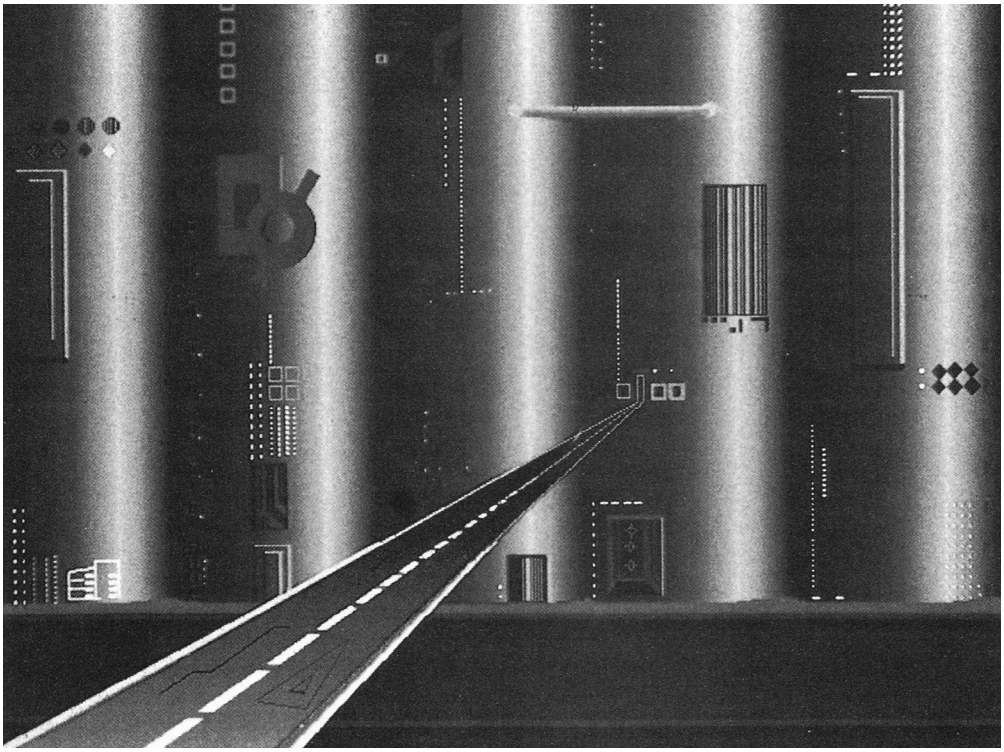
By the turn of the millennium, then, the outlaw area in cyberspace had begun to precipitate aspirations to establish new outlaw areas as territories in physical space. After a centuries-long trajectory in which the idea of the American frontier decoupled from the physical landscape of the West, despatialized, and dematerialized, the process had begun to reverse.

58
Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, "The Californian Ideology," *Science as Culture* 6, no. 1 (1996); Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*.

59
Steve Bodow, "The Money Shot," *Wired*, September 1, 2001, www.wired.com/2001/09/paypal/.

↘ 3.14
Cyberspace depicted as an open highway in *Mondo 2000*

↘ 3.15
Cowboy-hatted John Perry Barlow on the cover of *Wired*



3.14


Wired
Zero Issue
Soul of the
Digital Age
The FTC's
Secret Agenda
to Dismantle
Microsoft
Brit Hume:
What's Wrong
With The
Computer Press
WIRED
04
34395
0 48495 7 5
John Perry Barlow
What a Long Strange
Trip It's Been
The Wired Interview

3.15


Kazakhstan
Kiev
Volgograd
Astrakhan
Aral Sea
Caspian Sea
Black Sea
Odessa
Sevastopol
Bucharest
Istanbul
Trebizond
Tbilisi
Erzurum
Armenia
Ankara
TURKEY
Kaisaria
Konya
Smyrna
Athens
Tabriz
Kurdistan
Mosul
Aleppo
Alexandretta
Dier ex-Zor
Palmyra
SYRIA
Tripoli
Cyprus
LEBANON
Beirut
Damascus
Acre
Tehran
Qom
IRAN
Baghdad
Ispahan
Yezd
Persepolis
Shiraz
Laristan
Persian Gulf
IRAQ
Euphrates
Tigris
Jordania
Sinai
Cairo
Alexandria
EGYPT
Nile
Libyan Desert
Nefud Desert
Hedjaz
Medina
Riyadh
ARABIA
Red Sea
Mecca
Nubian Desert
Rubal-Khali
OMAN
Mongolia
Ulan Bator
Altai
Lake Balkhash
Dzungaria
Gobi
Hami
Turfan
Kuchcha
Kirghizia
Sinkiang-Uighur
Ansi
Dunhuang
Changyeh
Wuwei
Lanchow
Tianshui
Datong
Turkistan
Takla Makan Desert
Lobnor
Tarim
Yarkend
Karghalik
Cherchen
Khotan
Kunlun Shan
Tibet
CHINA
Kashmir
Himalayas
Peshawar
Kabul
Amritsar
Mathura
Agra
Gorakhpur
Benares
Patna
Calcutta
Ahmedabad
Indore
Nagpur
Deccan
INDIA
Indochina
Hanoi
Brahmaputra
Ganges
Indus
Narmada
Godavari
Krishna
Yenisey
Irtysh
Ob
Yangtse Kiang
Mekong
Huang Ho

3.16

Network: The Idea of the Silk Road

The Idea of the Network

Many narratives present networks — from the internet to fungal rhizomes to the global economy — as heterogeneous assemblages lacking ontological hierarchies among their components. Nodes in a network may have different qualities, magnitudes, and act differently on each other, these narratives assert, but they are all nodes. Networks, then, lack centres or foundations — which are necessarily ontologically privileged — that would fix them to a unifying order outside or above themselves. Instead, nodes in a network do not "slot in" to an organizing logic, but constantly produce and reproduce that logic through their relations.[60] If a centre defines the beginning of a system and a frontier defines its end, thus excluding that which comes before and after, a network is a system of only middles.[61] Networks, then, connect unlike or even contradictory elements into multiplicitous assemblages. If the binary pair centre/frontier belong to the model of a world governed by a unified law, with origins and limits, then the network belongs to an altogether different model: that of the constellation. A constellation encompasses many worlds, which may may have conflicting internal logics, and assembles them into an open system without a single organizational principle, shared origin, or common metric.[62]

60
Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 9.

61
Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

62
Faun, *Faunal Thoughts on the Carnivalesque* (Faunal Editions, 2021).

↖ 3.16
Map of Silk Road routes

Popular histories depict the Silk Road as a network of flows of people, goods, money, technology, religion, and ideas between caravan cities across Eurasia. Note also Xi'an (ancient Chang'an) depicted as the eastern beginning of the Silk Road. The above map comes from *The Silk Road Saga* (1989), a book of photographs taken by Japanese State Television (NHK) during the filming of the documentary television series *The Silk Road*, which popularized the idea of the Silk Road throughout the 1980s as neoliberal globalization took shape.

Though networks may not have a transcendent order, they do have organizational patterns that emerge from their internal relationships. Networks may tend toward decentralized or distributed organizations, but they may also tend towards monocentric or polycentric organizations too. When connections cluster around one or a few nodes in a network, that network may begin to function like a centred system. Even if networks lack ontological hierarchy among their components, they can still produce functional hierarchies in their organization.

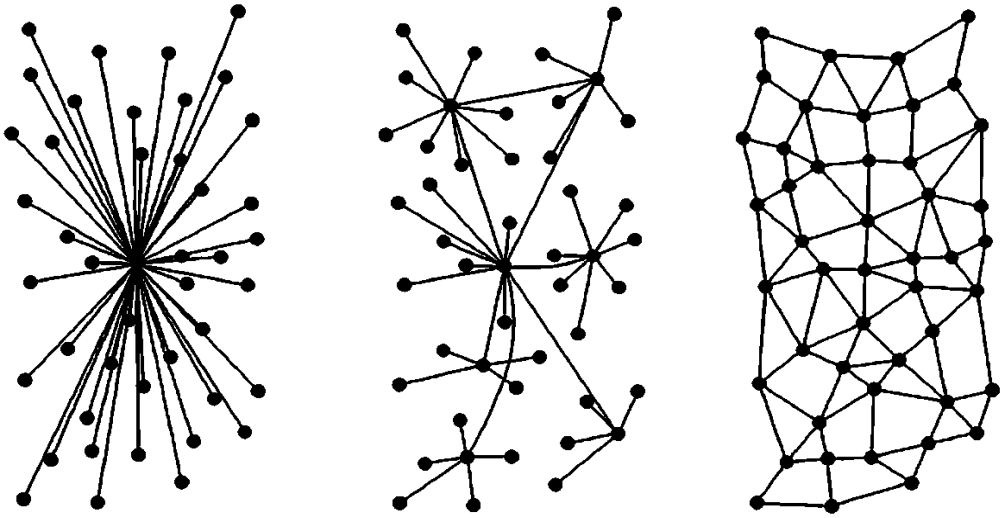
The Idea of the Silk Road

Where the network has been the dominant spatial metaphor of neoliberal globalization, the Silk Road has been its dominant historical metaphor. Much like world-images of globalization, maps and histories often picture the Silk Road as a web of nodes and flows; people, goods, ideas, and money flow along "Silk Roads" between urban centres of trade and production, or "caravan cities" (see figure 3.16 on previous page).[63] Popular narratives typically trace these routes through China, Central Asia, Persia, the Caucuses, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and the Eastern Mediterranean, with connections to other regions, notably South and Southeast Asia. Silk Road histories are usually bookended by the Han Dynasty (202 BC – 240 AD) and the Age of Discovery (fifteenth to sixteenth centuries). For its lack of single dominant power or forceful imposition of one culture over all others, histories tend to celebrate Silk Road trade as a vector of peaceful cultural exchange between Eastern and Western civilizations, in contrast to histories of empire and conquest.

The positive connotations of the idea of the Silk Road as a decentralized network of mutually enriching exchanges between civilizations has made it a common historical metaphor in Eurasian diplomacy, especially as an example of premodern globalization. In fact, the invention of the idea of the Silk Road is entangled with nineteenth century European colonial expansion that thrust Asia into an emerging global economy. Since then, Silk-Road diplomacy has instrumentalized the ambiguity between ideas of networks as ontologically non-hierarchical and organizationally hierarchical. Chinese diplomacy, for example, has used the notion of Silk Road revival to signify peaceful, respectful, and egalitarian relationships with neighbours while centring itself in Eurasian geopolitics through the idea that the country was the "beginning" of the historical Silk Road. Similarly, early Western colonial and commercial interests centred China in diplomatic narratives about reviving the Silk Road to flatter the

63
John E. Vollmer et al., *Silk Roads, China Ships: An Exhibition of East-West Trade* (Royal Ontario Museum, 1983).

↗ 3.17
Diagram of network types: centralized, polycentric, distributed



3.17

Chinese state and secure its cooperation in trans-Eurasian infrastructure projects. Here, the idea of a decentralized network legitimizes a thinly-veiled centre (China), which in turn legitimizes a second, more thoroughly disguised centre (Western commercial and imperial interest).[64] The spatial form of the network, then, enables Silk Road diplomacy to legitimize centres through the language of decentralization. The following section traces the development of the idea of the Silk Road in relation to its use as a diplomatic tool and proposals for its revival. Throughout this history, the idea of the Silk Road mutated in relation to contemporary conditions and interests but consistently signified mutually enriching and egalitarian cultural and economic relations between Eurasian peoples.

Globalization I: The Great Game and "Die Seidenstrasse"

The idea of the Silk Road first appeared in the late nineteenth century, in the context of colonial expansion into Central Asia. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Britain and Russia had established themselves as the dominant colonial forces in the region: the former expanding North from India to modern-day Afghanistan and the latter expanding South through the Kazakh steppe to the modern-day -stans. After reconquering Xinjiang, by 1884 the Qing Dynasty had reestablished itself on the Eastern edge of Central Asia. In the context of this colonial standoff and emphasizing the region's strategic location at the centre of the world's most populated and economically productive continent, Western analysts began to see Central Asia as the "geographical pivot of history."[65] Central Asia had become a region of critical geopolitical importance upon which the dynamics of colonial dominance seemed to depend.

To the East of Central Asia, the British Empire's victories in the Opium Wars (1839-1842; 1856-1860) had forced open the defeated Qing Dynasty and transformed China into an arena of competition for Western imperial and commercial interests.[66] Of this new frontier, Ferdinand von Richthofen – a German geographer, geologist, and explorer typically credited with coining the term Silk Road – wrote that "the era of the development of China for science and thus also for her full practical exploitation through world-traffic" had arrived, in which the trade of "this country – materially the most blessed among all countries on earth [...] will increasingly become the arena of competition amongst cultured peoples."[67] In China, Western imperial and commercial interests competed for access to natural resources and to control a possible Eurasian railway from China to Eu-

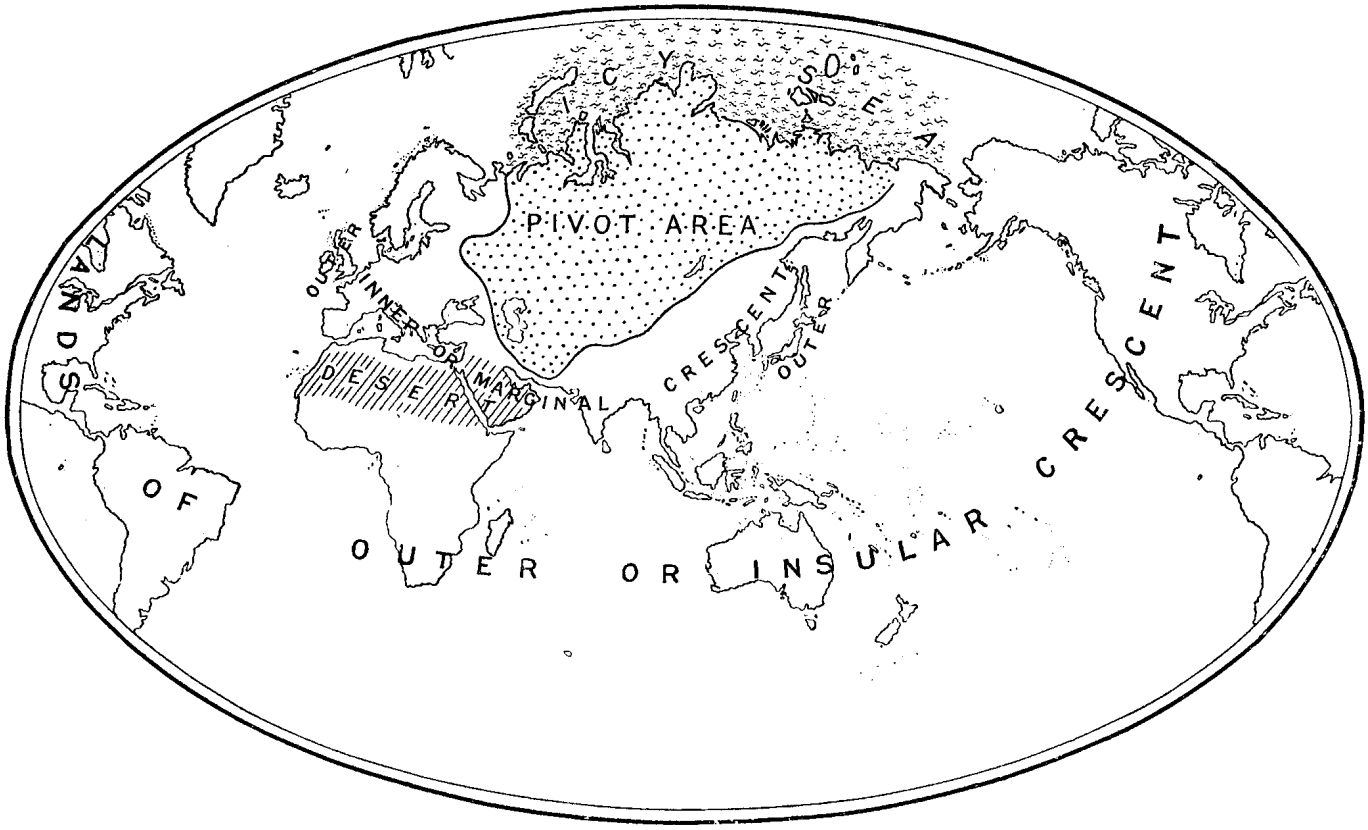
64
Here, I am thinking of the role of seeing and not seeing in shaping perceptions of the world, as described in Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*.

65
"Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world." H. J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1904).

66
Tamara Chin, "The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877," *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 1 (2013): 208–9.

67
Friedrich von Richthofen quoted in Chin, "The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877," 209.

↗ 3.18
Central Asia as "the geographical pivot of history"


C Y S O
PIVOT AREA
OUTER
INNER OR MARGINAL CRESCENT
OUTER
DESERT
LANDS
OF
OUTER OR INSULAR CRESCENT

3.18

rope. Control of such a railway would produce revenue from construction and concessions, give an advantage in trade, and facilitate access to and transportation of coal, which had become essential to modern warfare and industry.[68] For the states and empires competing for resources and railway rights, geographic and geological information on (still not yet thoroughly-mapped) Central Asia and China became a critical resource. [69]

To gather geographic and geological information and to establish a presence in the region, imperial states, mining companies, and other commercial interests sponsored expeditions, including Richthofen's, to Central and East Asia. From 1868 to 1872, Richthofen travelled and surveyed China, sponsored by European and American businesses and the German empire.[70] When he returned to Germany, he began work on *China*, an uncompleted, five-volume study of the geography, geology, and human history of the country, published between 1877 and 1912, in the first volume of which he first used the term Silk Road.[71]

In Richthofen's usage, "the Silk Road" had a narrower geographic and temporal scope than contemporary usage and did not yet have connotations of cultural connection and exchange. In *China,* Richthofen strictly uses the terms *Seidenstrasse* (Silk Road) and *Seidenstrassen* (Silk Roads) in a study of Greco-Roman geographic knowledge of the East and Chinese geographic knowledge of the West between 128 BC and 150 AD, the era of the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty.[72] Richthofen's methodology consisted of extracting records of routes and distances between cities from classical travel narratives and plotting them on modern maps.[73] His primary Greco-Roman source was Marinus of Tyre's description of a route from the Mediterranean to Serica ("the land of silk" — or China) recorded in Ptolemy of Alexandria's *Geography* (~ 150 AD); his primary Chinese source was the first-century *History of the Former Han Dynasty*.[74] Although he considered Marinus's era an exceptionally active period of Eurasian trade, he acknowledged that earlier, later, and contemporaneous trade routes existed and may well have eclipsed Marinus's in importance, and even argued that maritime routes were more consequential than their overland counterparts.[75] However, for Richthofen "the Silk Road" referred only to Marinus's route, with its Eastern terminus at Sera Metropolis, which he identified as modern Xi'an.

Richthofen's studies of historical Eurasian trade routes seem to have informed proposals to his commercial and imperial patrons for a potential trans-Eurasian railway that would revive a post-Han period trade route. In his 1870-1872 reports to the Euro-

68
Chin, "The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877," 208; Tim Winter, *Geocultural Power: China's Quest to Revive the Silk Roads for the Twenty-First Century* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 43.

69
Karl E. Meyer and Shareen Blair Brysac, *Tournament of Shadows: The Great Game and the Race for Empire in Central Asia* (Basic Books, 2006), 367–68.

70
Between 1862-1868, under similar circumstances, Richthofen conducted surveys and expeditions for mining interests in America where, in Colorado, there is a mountain named after him. Chin, "The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877," 210; Daniel C. Waugh, "Richthofen's 'Silk Roads': Towards the Archaeology of a Concept," 2010, 3.

71
Waugh, "Richthofen's 'Silk Roads,'" 4; Winter, *Geocultural Power*, 42.

72
Waugh, "Richthofen's 'Silk Roads,'" 8.

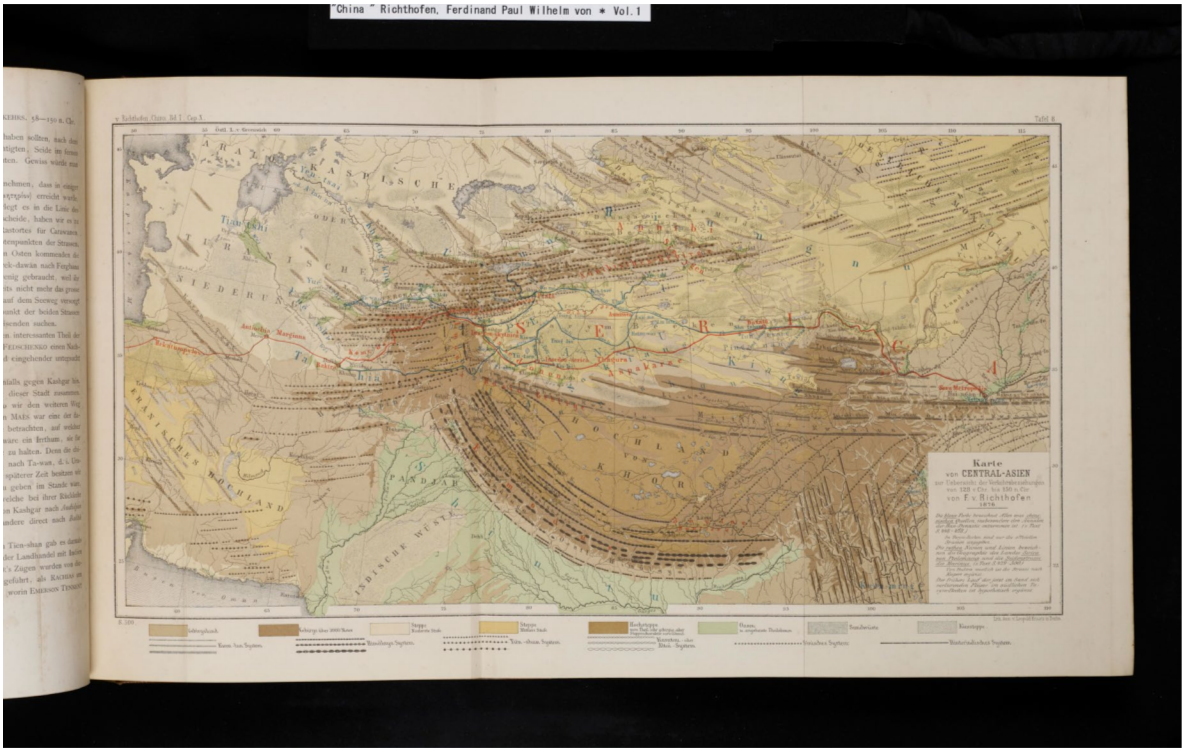
73
Chin, "The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877," 206–7.

74
Waugh, "Richthofen's 'Silk Roads,'" 9; Chin, "The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877," 198–200.

75
In *China*, Richthofen wrote that "it would be a mistake to consider that [Marinus's route] was the only one at any given moment or even the most important one." Waugh, "Richthofen's 'Silk Roads,'" 7, 9–10.

↗ 3.19
Richthofen's original Silk Road map

China ~ Richthofen, Ferdinand Paul Wilhelm von * Vol.1



3.19

pean-American Chamber of Commerce, he suggested as "the only line which ever can come into consideration" for a Eurasian railway a route starting in Xi'an and heading North around the Tarim Basin. In the first volume of *China,* in the series of maps that included his *Seidenstrasse* map, he plotted and identified the same corridor as a historical trade route that developed after the Han Dynasty.[76] He seems to have had the same route in mind when, as a consultant on Germany's imperial strategy in China, Richthofen identified the coastal city of Jiaozhou as a tactical target for colonization largely for its potential connection to Xi'an and, from there, to a trans-Eurasian railroad terminating in Europe.[77] In 1897, when the German Empire captured Jiaozhou, Richthofen wrote the official imperial booklet on the city, in which he states that Jiaozhou's "importance lies in its role, when keenly administered, as the departure point for railroads." While it is unlikely that Richthofen's advice substantially informed German imperial strategy, it does seem that he conceptualized strategic proposals for modern infrastructure as revivals of the ancient Silk Roads.

76
Chin, "The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877," 210.

77
Waugh, "Richthofen's 'Silk Roads,'" 3–4; Chin, "The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877," 210.

78
Winter, *Geocultural Power*, 47.

79
British Library Board, "Manuscripts," International Dunhuang Program, 2026, idp.bl.uk/discover/collection-categories/manuscripts/; Xinjiang Rong, "Rewriting the Silk Road: A New Chapter for Dunhuang Manuscript Studies," *Journal of Chinese Humanities* 4, no. 26 (2025).

80
Winter, *Geocultural Power*, 50–52.

New Histories of Eurasian Exchange

Two decades after Richthofen's travels, further expeditions to Central Asia and Western China began to uncover previously unimagined histories of Eurasian cultural and economic exchange. The 1890 discovery of the Bower Manuscript in Kucha, Xinjiang provided the first evidence of substantial historical contact between India, China, and Central Asia and initiated a flurry of scholarly interest in trans-Eurasian histories.[78] In 1907, the Hungarian-British archaeologist Aurel Stein discovered more than 50,000 manuscripts in the Mogao Caves near Dunhuang in Northwest China. The manuscripts — written in Chinese, Tibetan, Sanskrit, Sogdian, and Turkic — attested to flows of people, religion, and ideas throughout Eurasia, including migrations of Iranian Sogdian merchants from Central Asia to China, the circulation of Chinese Buddhist texts to Turkic Xinjiang, and the transmission of Zoroastrianism, the East Syriac Church, and Manichaeism from West Asia to China.[79] The Dunhuang manuscripts, read by Western scholars through the accounts of Marco Polo and Marinus, bolstered an emerging narrative of Eurasian cultural exchange through trade, with Central Asia at its core.[80]

In the early twentieth century, new Eurasian histories began to converge with the idea of the Silk Road as explorers, particularly Richthofen's Swedish student Sven Hedin, relaxed the term's definition and popularized it among Western audiences. In the

↗ 3.20
Buddhist murals at the Bezeklik caves

Throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, archaeologists uncovered artefacts that attested to previously unimagined interactions between the civilizations of Eurasia. Discovered by German wine merchant and amateur archaeologist Albert von Le Coq in a complex of Buddhist caves near Turpan, Xinjiang in 1913, the Bezeklik murals (figure 3.20), for example, depicted Sogdians (an eastern Iranian people) praying and offering tribute to Buddha alongside Uyghur locals.



3.20

early twentieth century Hedin had become a prominent public figure writing popular travel books.[81] In 1936, he borrowed his mentor's term for the title of his book *The Silk Road,* which was immediately translated from Swedish into English and German and soon reprinted ten times. The book's success boosted the visibility of the term. Rather than Richthofen's classical trade routes, however, Hedin's book primarily concerned his adventures and exploits travelling Central Asia by car between 1933 and 1935. Hedin's popular version of the Silk Road was more impressionistic than Richthofen's, transforming the new shared Eurasian histories into a culturally fluid oriental space of mystery and adventure.[82]

In addition to popularizing the term, Hedin also transformed the Silk Road into a diplomatic tool by framing modern Eurasian infrastructure proposals as revivals of ancient routes. Like his mentor, Hedin's work in Asia was sponsored by and entangled with commercial and political actors with interests in the region. His first Sino-Swedish Expedition to North and Northwest China from 1927 to 1928, for example, was sponsored by the German government and Lufthansa and, alongside its cartographic and archaeological ambitions, was intended to determine a route for flights between Berlin and Beijing or Shanghai. Hedin's use of history for strategic purposes, then, is no surprise. The eponymous chapter of *The Silk Road,* for example, opens with an account of the Han dynasty's embassy to the West in 138 BC, which he frames as the beginning of a history of the Silk Road that culminates in a request to the Chinese government to collaborate in building "the world's longest motor-road" on the historic route.[83] Hedin had transformed the Silk Road into a diplomatic tool by creating a parallel between ancient trade routes and modern roadways, and by appealing to the Chinese government's cultural-political ambitions with a Sinocentric framing that put China at the centre of Silk Road history, and thus of a new Silk Road.

81
Hedin was "without a doubt the most famous Swede of his time." Tobias Hübinette, "Asia as a Topos of Fear and Desire for Nazis and Extreme Rightists: The Case of Asian Studies in Sweden," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 15, no. 2 (2007).

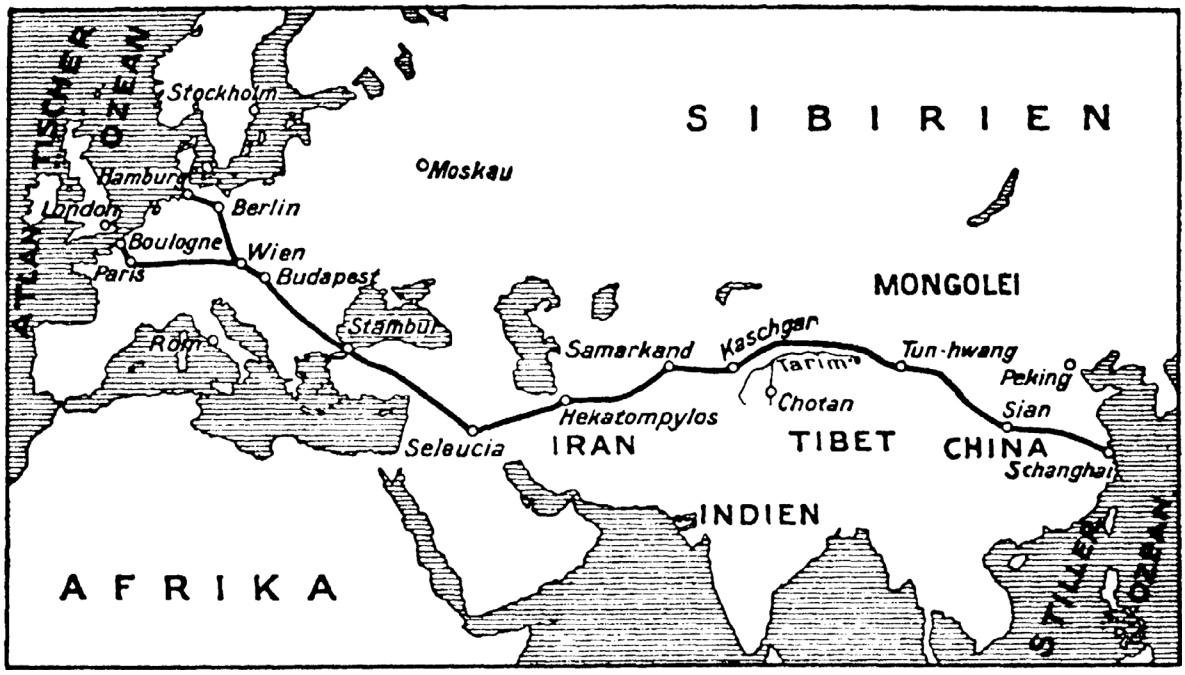
82
Waugh, "Richthofen's 'Silk Roads,'" 17.

83
Years earlier, Hedin had proposed a revival of the Silk Road as a railway. This proposal came out of an arcane scholarly debate between Richthofen and his Russian rival Nikolay Przhevalsky on the location of the Lop Nur Lake. Hedin attempted to resolve the dispute by arguing that the lake had migrated North in 1921 in tandem with the Tarim River. The last time that the river migrated, he said, was when it shifted South after the Han Dynasty 330 AD, devastating oasis communities in the Gobi Desert and thus ending the classical Silk Road. This invented history, he transformed into a justification for a rail line. Because the river and lake had shifted back north in 1921 and "returned to their old historic beds, the time had come to revive the old Silk Road" and to "[reopen] the Han-period road from Kansu via Lop-nor to Kashgar." Chin, "The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877," 214–17.

The Cold War: From Routes to Boundaries

In the mid-twentieth century, activity around the idea of the Silk Road declined as the Cold War reconfigured Eurasia into rigid geopolitical blocs, replacing the comparatively more fluid imperial frontiers and overlapping spheres of influence of the colonial era. Most regions of the classical Silk Road found themselves well within the Eastern bloc: the 1922 establishment of the Soviet Union had included the Central Asian -stans and the Caucuses, and the 1949 establishment of the People's Republic

↗ 3.21
Map of a proposed trans-Eurasian motorway from Sven Hedin's *The Silk Road*


ATLANTISCHER OZEAN
Stockholm
SIBIRIEN
Moskau
Hamburg
Berlin
London
Boulogne
Wien
Paris
Budapest
MONGOLEI
Stambul
Rom
Samarkand
Kaschgar
Tarim
Tun-hwang
Peking
Chotan
Sian
Hekatompylos
Seleucia
IRAN
TIBET
CHINA
Schanghai
INDIEN
AFRIKA
STILLER OZEAN

3.21

of China had included Xinjiang and Tibet. As they turned their focus to the contested territories of the Third World, Western strategists lost interest in Central Asia.[84] While the idea of the Silk Road retained some relevance in China and Japan, its connotations of cultural and economic exchange were reconceptualized as a diplomatic metaphor for peaceful trade and political relations between bounded national units.

Throughout Asia – in socialist and non-socialist, ex-imperial, uncolonized, and decolonized countries alike – archaeology and history in the mid-twentieth century focused on constructing new, bounded national histories and identities, rather on the histories of connection and exchange. In the Soviet Union, history and archaeology supported the "double assimilation" of peoples to a new, overarching Soviet identity and to the new national identities of their republics. In Iran, the 1971 "2,500-year celebration of the Empire of Iran" used reenactments of ancient Persian garrisons in the ruins of Persepolis to ground modern Iranian nationhood in the ancient history of the Achaemenid empire.[85] In the many recently-decolonized countries throughout Asia, states used archaeological sites and histories of ancient empires and kingdoms alongside language, religion, and ethnicity to construct modern national identities around recently-drawn borders.[86] The fluid, hybrid identities and histories that had begun to emerge nearly a decade earlier around the idea of the Silk Road had been eclipsed.

In China, while archaeology and history supported the construction of modern Chinese nationhood, the state also began to adopt the Silk Road as a diplomatic narrative. The term "Silk Road" entered Chinese as a translation from texts by European geographers, including Hedin. At first, the term was used in quotation marks or styled as the "so-called Silk Road." But following the revolution, the official state newspaper *People's Daily* adopted the term without qualifiers to describe Chinese diplomatic and economic relations with historic Silk-Road countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan as a revival of the Silk Road.[87] During the gradual cooling of relations with the USSR beginning at the end of the 1960s, the state downplayed the historical ties of China's Turkic West to the Central Asian Soviet Republics by emphasizing a common Chinese identity instead.[88] The *People's Daily*, however, continued to use the Silk-Road revival narrative, largely in articles on relations with Turkey and the Middle East. The paper also centred China in the history of the Silk Road by adopting Hedin's historical framing beginning with the Han embassy to the West.[89] Like Hedin, the state had begun to use the Silk Road simultaneously as a metaphor for peaceful relations,

84
Winter, *Geocultural Power*, 68. In addition to having been the historic capital of the Achaemenid Empire, Persepolis is in the geographic centre of the country. As a consequence, perhaps the city lent itself more readily to an expression of pure Persian-ness than the hybrid cultures of borderlands or Silk Road flows to the north. Talinn Grigor, "Preserving the Antique Modern: Persepolis '71," *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism* 2, no. 1 (2005).

86
Winter, *Geocultural Power*, 57–68.

87
Chin, "The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877," 217.

88
Winter, *Geocultural Power*, 68–69.

89
Chin, "The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877," 217.

and as a way to centre itself in a narrative of mutually-enriching connections.

Globalization II: Neoliberalism and the Silk Road

Toward the end of the twentieth century, as neoliberalism dissolved Cold War boundaries, the regions of the historical Silk Road again became an arena of geopolitical competition. To legitimize interventions throughout Asia, states and other institutions promoted the idea of the Silk Road as an example of premodern globalization.

In the 1970s, Chinese and Japanese uses of the Silk Road as a diplomatic metaphor converged into pop-culture phenomena that (re-)mainstreamed the idea and history of the Silk Road throughout Asia and the West while inflecting it with the connotations that had been attached to it by diplomatic use. In 1972, the visits to China of American president Richard Nixon and Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei marked an early de-escalation of tensions between China and the Western bloc. During Tanaka's trip, in line with Japan's diplomatic use of the Silk Road through UNESCO, a director from the NHK, Japan's public broadcasting corporation, proposed a collaboration with China Central Television on a television series about the Silk Road as a way to rebuild Japan-China relations.[90] When the series aired as "The Silk Road" in the 1980s, it became massively popular, was dubbed into English, and shown in thirty-eight countries. Through this and other popular and mass-media Silk Road histories, the Silk Road entered collective memories from America to Asia.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the newly-popular idea of the Silk Road became a hegemonic metaphor for the economic and political trends since the 1970s that culminated in neoliberal globalization. In 1978, China initiated a program of economic liberalization that opened the country to international markets. When the USSR fell apart in 1991, most ex-Soviet countries underwent rapid liberalization, privatization, and "shock therapy." By the end of the twentieth century, liberal capitalism had won the Cold War and the regions of the classical Silk Road were integrating into new global markets. Under these conditions, state, interstate, and especially cultural organizations adopted and promoted the diplomatic narrative of the Silk Road as a pre-modern precedent for neoliberal globalization.[91] The curator of the Smithsonian Institution's 2002 "The Silk Road: Connecting Cultures, Creating Trust" festival put the logic clearly:

> One reason Smithsonian staff has been particularly excited

90
Winter, *Geocultural Power*, 71.

91
To take only a few examples from many throughout Europe, North America, and Asia, between 1988 and 1997 UNESCO ran the "Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue" project; cultural institutions in Hong Kong and Guangzhou presented the exhibition "The Maritime Silk Road: 2000 Years of Trade on the South China Sea;" and Japan's Nara National Museum held the "Grand Exhibition of Silk Road Civilizations" in 1988. Winter, *Geocultural Power*, 71–73, 75–76.



3.22

> to work on a Silk Road project at this time is the political transformations that have taken place in the region over the previous two decades. The opening of China and the collapse of the Soviet Union have enabled researchers, businessmen, and travelers alike to visit a vast area little known to Westerners in the past 100 years. A new Silk Road is being traveled. The modest victories of democracy and capitalism at the end of the second Millennium allowed strangers once again to meet along the ancient roads of silk and once again exchange ideas and products.[92]

By presenting neoliberal globalization as a revival of the ancient Silk Road, this narrative naturalized and invested it with the Silk Road's positive associations: peace, mutual enrichment, trade, and tolerance. Cultural institutions were putting Silk Road histories to work to generate consent and ideological support among national publics for economic reforms, liberalization, and the new systems of global trade.

In the 1990s, the idea of neoliberal globalization as a modern Silk Road transformed from a descriptive into a prescriptive narrative in proposals to revive the Silk Road through transnational infrastructure projects designed to better integrate Asian economies with each other and the global economy. Decades of cultural programming had facilitated this development by presenting the Silk Road as an atemporal phenomenon. The Smithsonian's *Along the Silk Road* publication, for example, included a timeline of Silk-Road-related events transposed to the timespan of one year, starting with "India hits Asia" one year ago, and ending with "internet becomes widespread" four seconds ago.[93] By the turn of the millennium, it was not difficult to see pipelines, high-speed rail, international security agreements, or networks of fibre-optic cables as a continuation of the history of the Silk Road. States in Asia and elsewhere used this temporal flexibility to market globalizing infrastructure projects. Taking only a few from many examples, in 1994, Chinese Premier Li Peng proposed the New Silk Road project; in 2004, South Korea proposed its Iron Silk Road project; in 2011, Hillary Clinton unveiled the United States's own New Silk Road Initiative.[94]

A pattern had been established: whenever the world globalized, state and commercial interests that stood to benefit from the process proposed to revive the Silk Road. Only a century earlier, under grand imperial globalization, Richthofen and Hedin had imagined reviving the Silk Road as railways and motorways. Now, under neoliberal globalization, the Silk Road was once again about to be resurrected, this time as a network of advanced communication, information, and transportation technologies.

92
Quoted in Winter, *Geocultural Power*, 76–77. A similar quote comes from the exhibition book for *Silk Roads China Ships* at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, in the preface by the chairman of the American Express Company: "Throughout history people have been captivated by the exploration of civilizations foreign to their own familiar sights and sounds. Nowhere is this more evident than in the exhibition Silk Roads China Ships, which unveils objects that chronicle the cultural, economic, political, and social effect of the trade between the Orient and the West through nineteen centuries. As an international corporation, dedicated to the encouragement of world trade, American Express is pleased to join the Royal Ontario Museum in presenting this special exhibition." The parallel structure sets up an equivalency between the historic Silk Roads and the activities of American Express as an international corporation.

93
Marie Thorsten, "Silk Road Nostalgia and Imagined Global Community," *Comparative American Studies* 3, no. 3 (2005): 312.

94
Winter, *Geocultural Power*, 12, 19, 78–79.

↖ 3.22
Still from the NHK and CCTV series *The Silk Road*

Conclusion

In the above three case studies, material landscapes are lost, ruined, or built over but preserved in memory and metaphor as malleable signifiers. Jerusalem and the Temple are preserved in ritual reminders of absence, the American frontier is transformed into a hegemonic cultural metaphor, and the Silk Road is reconfigured into a diplomatic tool. The processes in which these material landscape are transformed into mythscapes, however, has varied. A mythscape may appear after its material referent has disappeared. Richthofen and his contemporaries only developed the idea of the Silk Road more than three centuries after the trade routes that the concept describes had ceased to exist. In other cases, both material landscape and mythscape may emerge simultaneously and shape each other. Even as American colonization continued westward, political and popular discourses on the frontier produced a mythological idea of the frontier which shaped the Western landscape. While, especially in these latter cases, it may be difficult to disentangle the place and the idea of the place, they are separate entities with their own histories of authorship. Mythscapes are not simply neutral cultural representations of material landscapes, but historical, manufactured abstractions.

Because mythscapes are manufactured, they are shaped by the

worldviews and material interests of their authors. Israelite monarchs used the idea of Jerusalem as the dwelling place of YHWH (and by extension, the centre of the cosmos) to reify political power by forging throughout the kingdom spiritual relationships to the city. This political strategy shaped both the material city itself and the idea of the city – for example, in the design of the Temple's inner sanctuary as a composite of the kingdom's many tribal traditions. Even where a material landscape no longer exists, its memory can be instrumentalized through narratives of rebuilding. Sven Hedin used the idea of reviving the Silk Road to legitimize proposals for railways and motorways. When he centred ancient China as the beginning of the Silk Road to flatter and win the cooperation of the modern Chinese state, Hedin's strategic concerns shaped the geographies of the Silk Road mythscape. Whether layered on top of existing material landscapes or embedded into rebuilding narratives, mythscapes function as discursive and symbolic tools for their authors. Where lost mythscapes are mobilized into rebuilding narratives, their semiotic malleability becomes critical to establish continuity between a mythic past and a promised future (that is, a relationship of likeness between two unlike things). Perceptions of continuity provide various types of utility to the authors of rebuilding narratives. Continuity can transfer emotional associations from a mythic past to a potential future, thus functioning as an "affective trigger."[95] Continuity can naturalize a project by presenting it as a return to a historical norm after a period of abnormality. In any case, whether by activating useful emotions, producing a sense of inevitability, or otherwise, rebuilding narratives do work on target audiences at the behest of narrative authors – to gain public or state consent, to secure collaborative partners, to procure investment. As discursive tools, however, mythscapes are not endlessly malleable – their spatial form functions as a link between mythical past and potential future and structures their possibilities of instrumentalization. Throughout the previous case studies, for example, the idea of the centre consistently stabilizes foundational institutions and boundaries of inclusion and exclusion; the idea of the frontier consistently legitimates experimentation, expansion, and enclosure; and the idea of the network consistently naturalizes the freedom of flows and transregional integration.

Though spatial form constrains their semiotic malleability, ideas of a lost urban landscape can drift far from their material referents. In the rebuilding proposals examined in this chapter, proposals for rebuilding often have little in common with the original urban landscape. Projects of rebuilding consistently conceive of the past in the fashion of their own time. In the industrial age,

95
Lina Benabdallah, "Spanning Thousands of Miles and Years: Political Nostalgia and China's Revival of the Silk Road," *International Studies Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2020); Andrew Malcolm Law, "Historical Imaginaries, Historic Urban Branding, and the Local State in China: Rejuvenation Discourse, Manufactured Heritage, and Simulacrascapes," *Built Heritage* 7, no. 1 (2023): 5

the Silk Road becomes a railway or a motorway. In the age of nation building, the return to the Land of Israel becomes a project of modern, secular nation-state building. In the internet age, homesteads on the American frontier migrate into cyberspace. Projects of rebuilding do not, as they claim, truly reconstruct the past; instead, they do the strategic work of the present through the vocabulary of the past.

IV
The Global-Archaic City, Restoration through Globalization

Introduction

Hedging the faulty narrative of globalization with time-tested narratives of rebuilding and return, global-archaic cities present themselves as rebuilding the monumental buildings, infrastructures, landscapes, or cities of national mythology while also linking into the futuristic networks of the global economy. In so doing, global-archaic cities — as built landscapes or as speculative proposals — hybridize opposite historical and geographic imaginaries. Consequently, these megaprojects breed historical anachronisms and geographical contradictions — they are at once in the future and in the past, at once floating in hyperglobal networks and grounded in local place. A metaphor: in David Cronenberg's 1986 body-horror film *The Fly*, scientist Seth Brundle has invented a teleportation device. When a housefly lands on the device as Brundle teleports himself, the device scrambles their DNA and Brundle becomes a grotesque mutant: half-human, half-fly. The authors of the global-archaic city have developed not a defective transportation device, but a defective time travel device. In the process of restoring lost national mythscapes from the past to the present, the device has scrambled their DNA with that of the global city trope. The rebuilt national mythscapes have as a result come out of this process as mutant hybrids: half-mythscape, half-global-city. Ancient Jerusalem has grown an extra appendage with a megamall and a stock ex-

change; automated factories for building flying cars have proliferated throughout the old Wild West.

This chapter contains three case studies of global-archaic cities. Each case study extends the history of a lost national mythscape from chapter three and shows how it has "returned" in the twenty-first century as a globalizing urban megaproject. The first case study, "Jerusalem Rebuilt," examines a pair of speculative urban masterplans that attempt to recentre Jerusalem as the national centre of the Jewish people and the religious centre of the world while also establishing the city as a global economic centre. The second case study, "Freedom Cities," examines the Trump administration's Freedom Cities proposal, which attempts to "reopen the frontier" as a collection privately-owned-and-operated cities in special jurisdictional "acceleration" zones. The third case study, "New Silk Roads," examines the Belt and Road Initiative's narrative of reviving the ancient Silk Road as a global network of modern infrastructures and transcontinental economic corridors. The case study focuses especially on initiatives to restore China's ancient capital of Xi'an to its ancient position as "the starting point of the Silk Road," now as a major logistics node and digital innovation hub.

Even though global-archaic cities share a common narrative structure, they vary in their motivations, aesthetic and rhetorical specificities, and material effects. While identifying the commonalities between the following case studies, then, this chapter also examines where they diverge. First, the projects may diverge in their strategic motivations. While on a narrative level the following projects all hybridize neophilia and nostalgia, the real strategic emphasis on acceleration or return is rarely symmetrical. In most of the projects, narratives of rebuilding function to legitimize or naturalize economic or geopolitical ambitions essentially indistinguishable from those of more typical global urban megaprojects. Other (admittedly rarer and more peripheral) projects invert this hierarchy and use globalization narratives to legitimize truly restorationist political or cultural agendas. Second, the relationship between the neophilic and nostalgic components within a project's design and narrative may vary. The imaginaries of the future and of the past that a project produces may reinforce or conflict with each other. To take examples from this chapter, the affinities between images of the ancient Silk Road and of contemporary globalization both as decentralized networks of economic and cultural exchange produce a relatively frictionless narrative of restoration through globalization. On the other hand, the friction between the image of globalization as a decentralized network and the image of Jerusalem as the

centre of the world creates quite legible narrative disjunctions and incongruities. Some narratives are simply more carefully crafted or more effective than others. The variations, tensions, and asymmetries within the narrative structures and strategic motivations of global-archaic megaprojects create an equally diverse range of built and speculative urban landscapes. All global-archaic cities are hybrids of the global city trope and a national mythscape, but how these two components interact in space varies. All these variations underscore an important point: the global-archaic city is not attached to a specific ideology or shared political project; it is a common narrative structure distributed between space, rhetoric, and aesthetics.

For the Lord has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His seat. ‘This is my resting place for all time; here I will dwell, for I desire it.’

– Psalm 132:13-14

Holiness in space, in nature, was known in other religions. New in the teaching of Judaism was that the idea of holiness was gradually shifted from space to time, from the realm of nature to the realm of history, from things to events. The physical world became divested of any inherent sanctity.

– Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*

Our role is to centre the country around Jerusalem. In this regard, we are very zealous. Tel Aviv will remain as it is, but the center of gravity will be tied to Jerusalem. [...] We do not want any competition with the capital of Israel. The relationships within the Land of Israel must be clear.

– Yehuda Etzion, 2013

Jerusalem Rebuilt:
Holy Centre, Central Business District

To assert Jerusalem as the undivided national centre of the Jewish people, the religious centre of the world, and a centre of the global economy: these are the ambitions of Jerusalem 5800 and Jerusalem Rebuilt, a loosely-linked pair of unofficial urban masterplans prepared by Israeli private groups and individuals. Insofar as they respatialize the idea of Jerusalem as a centre, these visions more closely resemble the ancient Israelite idea of the city as a monarchic capital and dwelling place of YHWH than they do the last two millennia of Jewish spiritual speculation on the city. In effect, the masterplans would undo the decentring of the city that began with the Assyrian conquest of the Kingdom of Israel and that displaced God's dwelling from space to time and Jerusalem from place to memory. In so doing, they would complete a trajectory initiated by the nineteenth-century Zionist movement. By recentring Jerusalem as a national but not religious and symbolic but not spatial or political centre, Zionism went halfway to reversing the diasporic decentring of Jerusalem.[1] Jerusalem 5800 and Jerusalem Rebuilt complete this trajectory by reasserting the city's centrality in the urban and political hierarchies of the State of Israel and reasserting the theological centrality of the city as a physical place rather than a memory or metaphor. The masterplans, however, propose to achieve their deeply nostalgic agendas through transforming Jerusalem into

1
As a reminder: Early Zionism reasserted the Land of Israel – first in collective imagination, then in political space – as the centre of the Jewish people, but now as a modern, secular nation-state and national group. Although early Zionism privileged Jerusalem symbolically, the early Israeli state privileged the scale of the national territory, and devised a national masterplan to decentralize urban hierarchies within the country.

global economic centre. Jerusalem as the centre of the world re-emerges as a global city, as a centre of the world economy. This double centring creates anachronisms and dissonances that include recreations of ancient Israelite agricultural sites alongside hotels, airports, and high-speed rail, and rebuilding the Temple alongside a shopping mall and stock exchange.

Jerusalem 5800 and Jerusalem Rebuilt attempt to cross-legitimize religious, national, and global-economic notions of the centre. First, the idea of Jerusalem as a national centre defines hierarchies and boundaries – of what people and histories do and do not belong in the State of Israel. Second, the global-economic notion of the centre within a network recasts in more liberal terms the illiberal politics of the exclusive national centre. These global-economic narratives reframe the idea Jerusalem as a centre in terms of international and interurban competitiveness. Third, the religious notion of the centre legitimizes the previous two notions of Jerusalem as a centre. The biblical centring of Jerusalem provides, either as divine command or refashioned into secular national history, the ultimate justification for the exclusive national notion of the centre. The city's privileged religious centrality also provides a competitive edge for interurban competition in global tourist economies and thus justifies its position as a global-economic centre. The three notions of the centre in these two Jerusalem masterplans have certain affinities and certain discordances. In some instances, they reinforce each other – converting, for example, Jerusalem's religious centrality into a global tourist attraction. In other instances, they come into conflict – between, for example, the sacred boundaries implicit in the religious notion of the centre and the profane transgression of boundaries performed by the transnational flows that converge in the global-economic network centre.

Neoliberal Decentralization and Religious Recentring

Unofficial masterplans like Jerusalem 5800 and Jerusalem Rebuilt trace their immediate lineage to the arrival of neoliberalism in Israel. War measures and the hegemony of labour politics had given the early Israeli state exceptional centralized power to implement its territorial vision through the national masterplan. The arrival of neoliberalism in Israel following the 1977 election of Likud, however, exploded agency over the territorial project into decentralized networks of both state and non-state groups. Like neoliberal governments elsewhere, Likud implemented policies – dismantling state-led building projects, selling off public housing stock – to marketize the production of urban space.

Groups outside the state now had an opportunity, through the market, to shape the geographies of the Israeli territorial project.[2] Some of these groups, however, saw this project in religious-messianic rather than secular-nationalist terms. By settling historical Judea and Samaria — the biblical term for the mountainous region around Jerusalem that overlaps with the modern Palestinian West Bank — these groups hoped to fulfill biblical prophecies and bring the End Times. Beginning in the 1970s, messianic organizations pushed into the West Bank by establishing temporary hilltop camps, requesting protection from the Israeli military, building the camps into permanent settlements, and eventually demanding formal recognition from the Israeli state.[3] For the first time in modern history, explicitly *religious* Jewish ideas were extensively reterritorializing the land of Palestine. And the geographies of this project — to shift the centre of Jewish settlement toward Jerusalem — inverted the state's earlier efforts to decentralize the population.

While settlers reconfigured the physical territory of Jerusalem and the surrounding area, other messianic groups, in the tradition of early Zionist literature, reconfigured the imaginative territory of public discourse through speculative masterplans for the country. In 1991, Edward Said wrote that "only first by projecting an idea of Jerusalem could Israel then proceed to the changes on the ground."[4] Since the 1970s, the task of "projecting Jerusalem" was conducted not only by the Israeli state, but by myriad non-state groups too. In 1973, far-right messianic activist Shabtai Ben Dov published an early and influential religious messianic speculative plan for Jerusalem titled *On the Planning of Jerusalem*. In the book, Ben Dov lays out his priorities for the city's future urban planning following the Israeli conquest of East Jerusalem and the Old City. Like the postwar national masterplan, *On the Planning of Jerusalem* focuses on the problems of settlement patterns and population redistribution, but from a religious perspective. While the Jewish population had largely settled on the coastal plains around Tel Aviv, Ben Dov wrote, it should instead cluster in historical Judea and Samaria.[5] Since the 1970s, other non-state groups have developed their own speculative urban plans for Jerusalem. After the transformation of the global city into a buzzword and best-practice model, some plans have adopted the characteristic urban design, legislation, and branding formulas of a global city.

Jerusalem 5800: Making an Ultranationalist World City

The 2016 speculative plan Jerusalem 5800, commissioned and

2
Efrat, *The Object of Zionism*.

3
Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (Verso, 2024).

4
Edward Said, "Projecting Jerusalem," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25, no. 1 (1995).

5
Shabtai Ben Dov, *On the Planning of Jerusalem* (1973), www.daat.ac.il.

funded by Australian tech entrepreneur Kevin Bermeister, is uncharacteristically well-funded and publicly endorsed. On the project committee sat the Canada-based global architecture firm IBI Group. Unlike other non-state plans for Jerusalem, Jerusalem 5800 has been explicitly endorsed by major Israeli state ministries – the Ministry of Jerusalem and Heritage and the Ministry of Tourism – whose letters of support adorn the first pages of the masterplan document. Given the unusual financial and political weight behind the project, it has received considerably more attention than other non-state plans. Major Israeli newspapers *The Times of Israel* and *HaAretz* have discussed the project, enthusiastically, and critically, respectively.[6] Palestinian research institutions have criticized the project's monoethnic vision of the city that excludes any traces of Palestinian life and heritage.[7]

Jerusalem 5800's self-declared goals are twofold. On one hand, the project seeks to "uncover Jerusalem's innate potential as a true 'World City' and tourist destination capable of attracting more than ten million tourists a year."[8] On the other hand, the project reaffirms that "the State of Israel is the heart of the Jewish people, and Jerusalem is the heart of the State of Israel, the Jewish people in Israel, and the Jewish people in the diaspora" by consolidating the city's status as the undivided capital of the State of Israel.[9] As part of its strategy to transform Jerusalem into a global economic centre and a national-political-spiritual centre, Jerusalem 5800 proposes to consolidate the cluster of cities, villages, settlements, and suburbs around Jerusalem – including the West Bank cities of Ramallah, Bethlehem, and Jericho, currently administered by the Palestinian Authority – into a formal metropolitan area under integrated planning jurisdiction. Without going into detail, the project assumes that

> by the year 2050 the current political problems will be resolved [and] (for apolitical reasons) that the metropolitan Jerusalem region will not be divided. Thus, [the project] relate[s] to the metropolis as a territorial stretch wherein people and goods move freely.[10]

Despite its self-proclaimed apoliticality, the proposed geographies of Jerusalem 5800 mirror the messianic project of settling Judea and Samaria and centring the Jewish population in Jerusalem. Though describing its vision of Jerusalem as a "binational metropolis" the masterplan immediately goes on to describe the "demographic challenge" of maintaining a Jewish supermajority in Jerusalem after expanding the metropolis to include Palestinian West Bank cities. A Jewish supermajority, the masterplan argues, is a necessary precondition for the capital of the Jewish state. The masterplan contemplates ideal demographic ratios

6
Ari Ben Goldberg, "Australian Hi-Tech Investor Unveils Audacious 30-Year Jerusalem Master Plan," in *The Times of Israel*, June 2012, www.timesofisrael.com/ambitious-30-year-jerusalem-master-plan-unveiled/; Nir Hasson, "Right-Wing Master-plan Envisages Mega-Jerusalem in 2040 – With Invisible Palestinians," *HaAretz*, November 28, 2016, www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2016-11-28/ty-article-magazine/.premium/rightist-plan-mega-jerusalem-in-2040-with-invisible-palestinians/0000017f-e889-da9b-a1ff-ecefe5a90000.

7
The Palestinian Information Centre, "Jerusalem 5800 New Master Plan to Judaize Holy City," *The Palestinian Information Centre*, March 2, 2017, www.english.palinfo.com/o_post/Jerusalem-5800-new-master-plan-to-Judaize-holy-city/.

8
Jerusalem 5800, "The Project," *Jerusalem 5800*, 2013, www.jerusalem5800.com/about/the-project.

9
Jerusalem 5800, *Jerusalem 5800/2050: The Metropolitan Jerusalem Master Plan* (2016), 14.

10
Jerusalem 5800, *Jerusalem 5800/2050*, 12–13.

between Jews and Arabs: 80:20 would be ideal, it states, but in a worst-case scenario, maintaining the current ratio of 65:35 would do.[11] The word "Palestine" or "Palestinian" only appears in the masterplan document in reference to the Palestinian Authority, never in reference to a place or a people. Despite its occasional liberal-democratic rhetoric, Jerusalem 5800 claims Jerusalem as a singular and exclusively Israeli political-national-spiritual centre. As a solution to "the demographic challenge," Jerusalem 5800 proposes that future Jewish population growth should centre on the Jerusalem metropolitan area. This would not only secure a Jewish supermajority in the city but would also establish Jerusalem as the undisputed population centre of Israel, a position still held – despite the early state's best efforts at decentralization – by the Gush Dan metropolitan area around Tel Aviv. The masterplan, then, echoes in secular language the messianic desire to resettle the Jewish population around the Holy City and to establish clear hierarchical relationships in the Land of Israel with Jerusalem in the unambiguous centre.

Even as it echoes the ambitions of religious-messianic recentering, the masterplan also brands itself as a global city. Jerusalem 5800's spatial strategy includes urban and architectural interventions throughout the metropolitan area to support the growing tourist economy and increase its global economic standing. Jerusalem, the masterplan suggests, needs to build between 30,000 and 40,000 new hotel rooms before 2050 to meet growing demand, particularly from East Asian markets. The masterplan also proposes extensive international and intraurban transportation infrastructure to improve tourist mobility. The international transportation strategy includes a new major Israeli airport in the West Bank, which would not only bring more tourists to the city, but would also tap into the lucrative international travel economy and establish Jerusalem as a Dubai-style stopover destination. Within the city, the transportation strategy includes extensive new bus, train, and subway networks, and, bizarrely, a system of public urban conveyor belts (with Shabbat mode included). To increase the city's appeal to potential tourists, the masterplan proposes a "Biblical Experience Network," and other initiatives that would transform Jerusalem's historical and archaeological sites into tourist-friendly attractions. To increase the city's economic standing, the masterplan proposes to expand the existing Atarot Industrial Zone in the West Bank into a major employment centre of 400,000 people, exploiting the area's status as place of exception under military law to create a deregulated special economic zone. At the level of urban design, the authors of the masterplan espouse all the typical wisdoms of contemporary planning consensus and advocate for the mixed-

11
Jerusalem 5800, *Jerusalem 5800/2050*, 15.



4.1

use, mid-rise, walkable urbanism that defined 1980s global city development.[12] Sketches for proposed neighbourhoods look indistinguishable from those for Silicon Valley campuses (see figure 4.1). In typical neoliberal fashion, the masterplan argues that to efficiently and economically deliver the proposed urban and architectural interventions, the state should get out of the way, "create the appropriate conditions for entrepreneurs and investors (including removal of bureaucratic barriers), and even attract them using marketing, advertising, and educational strategies."[13] Although the respectable liberal aesthetics and rhetoric of the global city trope seem far from Jerusalem 5800's illiberal ultranationalism, the project hybridizes them into a single vision.

The Uses of Biblical Locality: Nation Building and Tourism Marketing

Some surprising affinities between Jerusalem 5800's efforts at national-political-spiritual and global-economic centring arise in its project for "the Tourism Network." The masterplan document describes the Tourism Network as "a physical and virtual space for an experience that incorporates both the ancient and the contemporary [and that] bridges the gap between spirit, vision, the visitor's experience, and historical tale and tourist activity."[14] In plain language, the project proposes to create an easily-navigable urban network of Temple-era Israelite-themed tourist attractions, created either from scratch or from Jerusalem's historical and archaeological sites.

The two Tourism Network subprojects described by the masterplan — the Mikva'ot Project and the Nehal Refa'im National Park Project — recreate and reenact ancient Israelite space and transform visitors into avatars of ancient Israelites. The Mikva'ot Project has already been completed by members of the Jerusalem 5800 committee with funding by Kevin Bermeister. The project excavates Temple-era ritual baths (called *mikva'ot* in Hebrew) underneath the Temple Mount and transforms them into a tourist attraction by making them accessible and linking them together with pathways and wayfinding infrastructure. The project also strengthens "the link connecting the City of David and the Temple Mount, on which the Temple built by King Solomon was constructed."[15] This curated network of paths lets tourists trace "the *exact route* followed by [Temple-era] pilgrims" (emphasis added), thus, in the masterplan's words, "[enabling] the tourist to fully experience life in the Temple times."[16] Walking the path from the ritual baths to the Temple, the tourist becomes an avatar of an Israelite pilgrim. The Nehal Refa'im National

12
The masterplan advocates, for example, a vision of a "a city wherein the overwhelming majority of daily travel would not employ private transportation, rather, others (public transportation, walking, biking, etc.)," and making Jerusalem "a world capital of sustainability."

13
Jerusalem 5800, *Jerusalem 5800/2050*, 50.

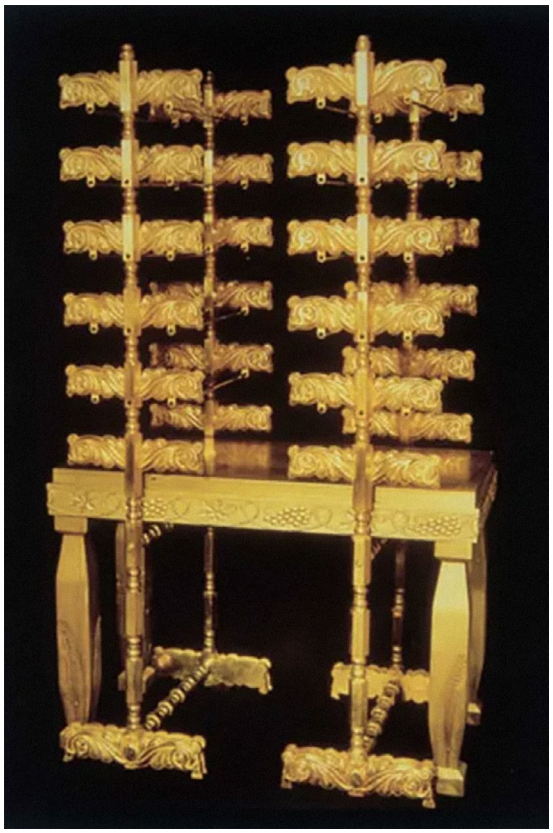
14
Jerusalem 5800, *Jerusalem 5800/2050*, 53.

15
Jerusalem 5800, *Jerusalem 5800/2050*, 54.

16
Shmuel Bar-Am and Aviva Bar-Am, "On the Mikveh Trail, Follow the Rugged Path of Jerusalem's Ancient Pilgrims," *The Times of Israel*, March 25, 2017, www.timesofisrael.com/on-the-mikveh-trail-follow-the-rugged-path-of-jerusalems-ancient-pilgrims/; Jerusalem 5800, *Jerusalem 5800/2050*, 54.

↖ 4.1
Rendering of the proposed Atarot Industrial Zone from the Jerusalem 5800 masterplan

In contrast to its nostalgic landscapes of simulated Israelite agricultural and ritual life, Jerusalem 5800 also includes proposals that mimic the neophilic, universalizing architectural aesthetics and urban design principles of other global-city style and new city megaprojects. The masterplan's proposal for the Atarot special industrial zone features a typical cluster of towers, eco-signalling through landscapes of bright green trees, and an infrastructural megastructure reminiscent of Superstudio's "Continuous Monument" or Rem Koolhaas's "Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture."



4.1



4.2

Park Project also simulates Temple-era Israelite life, but focuses on agricultural practices rather than religious ritual, transforming the tourist not into a pilgrim, but a peasant. The project also differs from the Mikva'ot Project in that it produces a biblical attraction not by excavating an archaeological site, but through historical reenactment. The park includes reproductions of Israelite homes, terrace agriculture and animal farms, irrigation infrastructure, and workshops – all for actual use, and which will host celebrations of the three Jewish pilgrimage holidays.[17] Tourists visiting the park, the masterplan explains, will dress in Israelite clothes, farm the Israelite way, eat Israelite food, and generally immerse themselves in all aspects of quotidian Israelite life, such that "the cultural heritage of biblical times [will] be reenacted and preserved."[18] (As if to hedge its bets, however, the project also proposes to include placeless spectacles like "zoos [...], an outdoor extreme sports park, and futuristic hotels.")[19] By simulating long-extinct Israelite landscapes and place-based Israelite traditions – Temple rituals, harvest festivals, and agricultural practices – the Tourism Network brands Judaism to visitors not as a religion of time, but as a religion of place. The masterplan reinforces its Israelite branding of Jerusalem by linking fragments of space together into continuous, homogenous Israelite landscapes at the urban scale. In some locations, the project "exposes" fragments of Israelite space through archaeology, as in the Mikva'ot project. At locations where biblical texts suggest historically significant sites may have once stood, but where archaeological remains have not been found, the project simply hallucinates fragments of Israelite space into being through reenactment and simulation, as in the Nehal Refa'im project. The masterplan then links these fragments together at many scales. At the scale of the single attraction, for example, wayfinding infrastructure links dozens of *mikva'ot* together and connects them to the Temple Mount. At the scale of the city, the Tourism Network links biblical attractions throughout metropolitan Jerusalem into a coherent system. By following the Tourism Network, a visitor can travel through large sections of the city while only encountering Israelite space, whether in its archaeological form or as a simulacrum. The plan creates an urban infrastructure that curates experiences of the city in which Temple-era sites alone are rendered "local" while heterogeneous layers of other (especially Palestinian) history are discarded and rendered "foreign."[20] In other words, the ultimate product of the Tourism Network is an exclusionary sense of *biblical locality*.[21]

Biblical locality functions as cultural and political currency for Jerusalem 5800's simultaneous tourist-marketing and nation-building ambitions. On one hand, biblical locality serves the master-

17
Jerusalem 5800, *Jerusalem 5800/2050*, 60–61.

18
Jerusalem 5800, *Jerusalem 5800/2050*, 56.

19
Jerusalem 5800, *Jerusalem 5800/2050*, 52.

20
Hava Schwartz, "The Return to the Monument: The Looming Absence of the Temple," *Israel Studies Review* 32, no. 1 (2017).

21
Here, I am referencing the idea of "producing locality" in Arjun Appadurai, "The Production of Locality," in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

↖ 4.2
Reconstruction of the table of the showbread

↖ 4.3
Reconstruction of the Temple menorah

The reconstruction of Temple-era ritual infrastructure and agricultural sites through the Mikva'ot Project and Nehal Refa'im National Park aligns with a broader trend among Israeli nationalists and messianic activists of recreating Israelite landscapes and material culture. Third Temple activists, for example, have recreated Temple-era ritual instruments down to biblical specifications. The Temple Institute currently uses the instruments pictured above for educational purposes, but intends that they will be used for ritual purposes in the Third Temple. Cumulatively, these re-created spaces and objects create a narrative landscape that renders Israelite history local and other histories foreign.

plan's tourist-marketing strategy by increasing the scarcity and desirability of Jerusalem's offering of experience commodities. The project (partially) eschews the Dubai-style strategy of placeless spectacle and instead promotes Jerusalem's "unique tourism sites that cannot be found elsewhere in the world."[22] On the other hand, biblical locality serves the masterplan's nation-building ambitions by framing the city's Israelite history as its only truly indigenous heritage. In a commercial mutation of the early Zionist project of national reinvention, the Tourism Network attempts to recreate Israelite Jerusalem not only as national territory, but as tourist attraction.

Jerusalem Rebuilt: The Profane Central Business District in the Holy City

While Jerusalem 5800 has the blessings of central Israeli state institutions, the project also has links to another urban masterplan on the peripheries of Israeli politics. Two years before the release of Jerusalem 5800, Yoram Ginzburg, an architect on the project's monitoring committee, released his own masterplan for Jerusalem, called Jerusalem Rebuilt, in collaboration with messianic activist Yehuda Etzion.[23] A disciple of Shabtai Ben Dov and member of the Gush Etzion affiliated Jewish Underground, in 1985 Yehuda Etzion was convicted in Israel's first anti-terrorism case against Jewish citizens for his involvement in violent attacks on Palestinian politicians and cultural sites.[24] Jerusalem Rebuilt, then, makes no attempt to shroud its messianic and ethnonationalist ambitions in liberal rhetoric as Jerusalem 5800 does. At its centre, the masterplan proposes to relocate the Dome of the Rock, rebuild the Jewish Temple, and install a religious government. If Jerusalem 5800 is the Superego of messianic-ethnonationalist Jerusalem projects, then Jerusalem Rebuilt is the Id.

Like Jerusalem 5800, Jerusalem Rebuilt attempts both to restore the Holy City as the national-spiritual centre of the Jewish people, and to transform it into a centre of the global economy. In an interview about Jerusalem Rebuilt, Etzion says

> as long as Zionism is built on the coastal plain, like Acre in the days of the Crusaders, we will not be able to truly be the inhabitants of the land. We do not want to be a Crusader entity [...] We must move the centre of gravity of the entire Land of Israel up, to the mountain [toward Jerusalem]. Geographically this is the true centre of the land.[25]

Following Etzion's mentor Ben Dov, Jerusalem Rebuilt sees the project of shifting the Jewish population toward Jerusalem as a matter of spiritual and national recentring. The effect of that

22
Jerusalem 5800, *Jerusalem 5800/2050*, 46.

23
Similarities between Jerusalem Rebuilt and Jerusalem 5800 abound. Both projects seek to consolidate and formalize metropolitan Jerusalem as the unique and undivided capital of a Jewish state. Both projects also seek to transform Jerusalem into a world city and a global economic hub: Jerusalem 5800 as a tourist hub, and Jerusalem Rebuilt as a financial hub. The similarities continue into minutia: both projects imagine three concentric ring roads around metropolitan Jerusalem, cite the same population projections (five million inhabitants and ten million tourists). The first chapter of the Jerusalem 5800 masterplan is even called "Jerusalem Rebuilt." The two projects share roots, and it seems likely that Yoram Ginzburg imported ideas from Jerusalem Rebuilt into Jerusalem 5800 or vice versa.

24
Thomas L. Friedman, "Israeli Court Sentences 15 Jewish Terrorists," *The New York Times*, July 1985, www.nytimes.com/1985/07/23/world/israeli-court-sentences-15-jewish-terrorists.html; Thomas L. Friedman, "Jewish Settlers Are Convicted in Terror Cases," *The New York Times*, July 1985, www.nytimes.com/1985/07/11/world/jewish-settlers-are-convicted-in-terror-cases.html?searchResultPosition=18.

25
Arnon Segal, "The Vision of the Underground Prisoner: A Train to the Temple," *Makor Rishon*, September 2013, www.makorrishon.co.il/nrg/online/11/ART2/504/492.html.

↗ 4.4
The Third Temple under construction visualized in a promotional video by the Temple Institute

By re-creating Israelite landscapes and ritual infrastructure around the site of the ancient Temple, Jerusalem 5800 makes the absence of the Temple itself increasingly conspicuous. Jerusalem Rebuilt extends this logic by proposing to relocate the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa mosque and rebuild the Jewish Temple in their place. In this ambition, the project is alligned with other Israeli messianic organizations, especially the Temple Institute, which depicted the Third Temple under construction in a promotional video pictured above.



4.4

recentring would be, according to Etzion, a national transformation from a "crusader" to an indigenous identity, or, as an affiliate of the Third Temple movement puts it, to "[trade] our Jewish customs for our true Israelite identity."[26] The problem of recentring extends to the urban design of the city itself. Ginzburg asks

> what is wrong with the structure of the city of Jerusalem? [He answers himself:] the fact that there is no hierarchy in space [...] Jerusalem has no centre, no anchor point. It is impossible to create a sense of sublimity without monumental construction.[27]

Jerusalem's missing centre is, of course, the Temple. Jerusalem Rebuilt's plan to rebuild the temple would completely reverse the diasporic decentring of the Land of Israel from space to memory and the Temple from territory to metaphor. The project, however, also plans to transform the city into the undisputed economic-financial centre of the Middle East by building the region's largest stock exchange and shopping centre in the city. "We are essentially severing Tel Aviv as the business centre," says Etzion. "We do not want any competition with the capital of Israel. The relationships within the Land of Israel must be clear."[28] The hierarchies of economic space must match the hierarchies of sacred space.

But collocating secular and sacred centres causes more trouble for Jerusalem Rebuilt than it does for Jerusalem 5800. According to *halakha* (Jewish religious law), the entire city of Jerusalem is sacred space, and within its boundaries, a unique set of religious laws apply.[29] Consequently, Jerusalem Rebuilt faces a problem with its proposed "business center of Jerusalem" with "the stock exchange [and] office buildings" because those functions are all "mundane matters we don't want conducted in the Holy City."[30] Jerusalem Rebuilt creates an impossible spatial puzzle for itself: to establish a global economic centre both inside and outside of Jerusalem. The masterplan's solution draws both on the neoliberal logic of the zone and on the demographically informed border drawing exercises of Israeli military occupation in Jerusalem and the West Bank.[31] Contorting the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem, the masterplan adds to the city a long westward appendage that absorbs the coastal city of Ashdod and transforms it into "Maritime Jerusalem," where the masterplan puts its business centre (see figure 4.5). This solution includes the business centre within Jerusalem on a legislative technicality, while maintaining a safe distance between the sacred space of the Holy City and the profane space of the central business district. In effect, Maritime Jerusalem functions like a special economic zone, but for religious law. Where Jerusalem 5800 converts sacred space into a tourist commodity, Jerusalem Re-

26
Rachel Z. Feldman, *Messianic Zionism in the Digital Age: Jews, Noahides, and the Third Temple Imaginary* (Rutgers University Press, 2024), 133.

27
Segal, "The Vision of the Underground Prisoner."

28
Segal, "The Vision of the Underground Prisoner."

29
Meron Benvenisti, *City of Stone: The Hidden History of Jerusalem* (University of California Press, 1996), 53.

30
Yisroel Lapidos, "Exclusive: The Temple's Architect," *Beis Moshiach*, 2022, www.chabadinfo.com/magazine/exclusive-the-temples-architect/.

31
Weizman, *Hollow Land*.

↗ 4.5
Map of the proposed municipal boundaries of Jerusalem in Jerusalem Rebuilt


Tel Aviv
Mediterranean Sea
proposed boundary of "Metropolitan Jerusalem"
Ramallah
Jericho
"Maritime Jerusalem"
Ashdod
existing boundary of Jerusalem
Jordan
Surif
Hebron
Dead Sea
Gaza

4.5

built's more orthodox theology makes sacred space antagonistic to economic space and thus requires elaborate legal and spatial manoeuvres to resolve this antagonism.

Instances of friction between neophilic-globalist and nostalgic-localist imaginaries make legible the basic structure of the global-archaic city. Jerusalem Rebuilt's plan to rebuild the ancient Jewish Temple alongside building the largest stock exchange and shopping mall in the Middle East condenses into a single image the project's dissonances between neophilia and nostalgia, and between universalism and localism. If the dissonances between these two imaginaries were not legible enough on their own, then the project's exercise of drawing knotted administrative boundaries to resolve the contradiction between its two centres only heightens the fundamental tensions. And while Jerusalem Rebuilt may be an extreme case, it tunes the eye to a pattern that shows up more subtly in Jerusalem 5800. Jerusalem 5800 may reduce the friction between neophilia and nostalgia by converting religious ideas and histories into secular national history that functions as a resource for tourism marketing, but the same dissonances persist in, for example, the project's proposal to celebrate as tourist attractions biblical festivals in simulacra landscapes of ancient Israelite farming villages. In both projects, there is a tension between the nostalgia of a desire to revive ancient traditions, and the neophilia of the global city. Simultaneously, there is a friction between the localism of Jerusalem's privileged place in Judaism's sacred geographies and the isotropic networks of neoliberal globalization. And while both projects attempt (sometimes successfully) to synthesize and cross-legitimize these imaginaries, cracks and seams always remain. The Jerusalem projects, then, clarify the model of the global-archaic city in its most explicit form, making visible a narrative logic that will reappear in the following cases.

He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now [on the closing of the Western frontier] entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise. But never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves.

— Frederick Turner Jackson, 1893

We must seek our future in the virtual world because there is no economic room left in the physical one.

— John Perry Barlow, "Jack In, Young Pioneer," 1994

Freedom Cities will reopen the frontier, reignite American imagination, and give hundreds of thousands of young people, and other people, all hard-working families, a new shot at home ownership and, in fact, the American dream.

— Donald Trump, 2023

Freedom Cities: Pastoral Tech Hubs

In 2023, Donald Trump declared that his proposal for "Freedom Cities" would reopen the American frontier as a collection of built-from-scratch, high-tech innovation hubs throughout the US. Like masterplans to rebuild Israelite Jerusalem and the Temple, Trump's rhetoric of reopening the frontier promised to respatialize a national mythscape which, though long disappeared from physical space, had survived in memory and metaphor. As the idea of the American frontier outlived the settling of the West in metaphorical "new" frontiers, it decoupled from the physical landscape of the West and became increasingly immaterial. For American colonists, the frontier was a physical place and a physical condition of "untamed" land which created legal and jurisdictional insulation from Eastern sovereignty. The communes of the 1960s counterculture were also tied to the Western landscape. But while the rural location of the communes did distance them from "square" society, it was instead hippie consciousness that transformed the American countryside into a new frontier. When ex-counterculturalists and Silicon Valley promoted the idea of the electronic frontier in the 1990s, not only did the frontier entirely lose its physicality, but that lack of physicality became the very characteristic that made it a frontier. Only the legal code of the frontier as "outlaw area" persisted, leaving the physical behind. When at the turn of the millennium

some Silicon-Valley libertarians applied that legal code to urban space, attempting to "exit" regulation, taxation, and democracy by creating private jurisdictions and new cities from scratch, they began to respatialize the frontier. As the first potential sign of US state support for Silicon-Valley exit projects, Trump's Freedom Cities proposal represents a potential inflection point in the re-spatialization of the frontier.

The proponents of Freedom Cities use nationalist nostalgia for the historical frontier to legitimize their escape from the constraints of liberal-democratic politics. By presenting erosion of state sovereignty, market deregulation, and privatization of urban governance as a return of the legal indeterminacy of Wild Western outlaw areas, Freedom Cities present themselves as reinvigorating the historical American "spirit" of the individualist outlaw. This narrative uses the neophilia within nostalgia for the American frontier – imagined as a golden age of American innovation – to suggest a historical trajectory that accelerates into the past. Thus, Donald Trump talks about investing in sci-fi technologies like flying cars as returning to the golden age of the Wild West. Similar anachronisms mark the proposed urban landscapes of many urban masterplans with connections to the freedom cities proposal. Most strikingly, many of these masterplans present themselves simultaneously as reviving the simple pastoral life of the frontier while accelerating into high-tech sci-fi futures.

Exit Projects:
Reterritorializing the Electronic Frontier

Freedom cities' direct precedents date to the 2000s and 2010s, when the electronic frontier of virtual space began to crystallize into new frontiers in physical space. By the turn of the century, the internet had accelerated neoliberal globalization, but it had not created a stateless utopia organized by decentralized electronic markets. In response to this impasse, some Silicon Valley libertarians developed a new strategy to achieve their political goals; based on Hirschman's concept of *exit,* they would create libertarian enclaves that would draw capital and people from neighbouring states, compelling them to adopt similar libertarian policies or risk economic decline. Unlike "homesteads on the electronic frontier," however, the new libertarian enclaves would be built in physical space. As self-styled frontiersmen, Silicon Valley libertarians explored the Earth's peripheries in search of unclaimed territory on which to build their new settlements. A prominent Silicon Valley exit project of the 2000s, the Seastead-

ing Institute (founded by Patri Friedman, an ex-Google software engineer and the grandson of economist Milton Friedman, with funding from Peter Thiel), for example, proposed to build settlements in international waters as a strategy to subject state sovereignty to market competition.[32] These early exit projects, however, never managed to break ground.

In the late 2010s and early 2020s, Silicon Valley began to pursue state support for their exit projects, and the spatial logic of the new frontier mutated again. While earlier exit projects like Seasteading had mimicked the expansionist logic of the American frontier — exploring and conquering territories perceived as virgin land — the new exit projects pursued a spatial strategy of erosion, carving out bubbles of libertarian territory from within state sovereignty. This mutation in frontier logic had been made possible by the global wave of right-wing populism beginning in the mid-2010s that installed throughout Europe and the Americas libertarian and even self-described anarcho-capitalist governments that sympathized with the politics of Silicon Valley's exit projects.[33] In the new political climate, Silicon Valley libertarians could simply negotiate to acquire land from existing states instead of searching for remote and undesirable unclaimed territory.

As a model for the next generation of exit projects, Silicon Valley libertarians adopted Paul Romer's concept of "charter cities." A charter city is a new city with extensive legislative autonomy, built from scratch and operated by a private developer. Patri Friedman's venture capital firm Pronomos Capital defines charter cities in two principles: "1) the city is designed as a product to attract and uplift its citizens, 2) the city has functionally different laws and institutions than the region surrounding it."[34] The model's proponents typically present it as a strategy to promote economic growth in low-income countries.[35] The Charter Cities Institute recommends that a charter city should be developed by a public-private partnership from scratch on a greenfield site and governed by a council of representatives from the developer and the host state. The council selects a city manager to administer the city, with total legal authority including "business registration, education, transportation, environment, energy, banking, finance, healthcare, public service, building codes, permitting, and tax administration" — every area of law except for "criminal law, international treaties, and the constitution."[36] The host state's sovereignty, then, is, as the Institute puts it, "devolved" to its share of ownership within the public-private partnership.[37] After securing a territorial agreement with a host state, charter city developers avoid "interference or resistance" from existing

32
Mike Solana, host, *Reimagining Governance: Charter Cities, Seasteading, & Freedom Zones w/ Kelsey Piper Patri Friedman*, Pirate Wires Podcast, May 30, 2025, YouTube video, youtube.com/watch?v=fZ0s7kCTUW8.

33
Some of the governments elected in this wave include those of Javier Milei in Argentina, Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, and Donald Trump in the United States.

34
Pronomos Capital, "Knowledge Base," *Pronomos Capital*, 2019, www.pronomos.vc/knowledge.

35
Paul Romer, "Why the World Needs Charter Cities," TED Talk, July 2009, ted.com/talks/paul_romer_why_the_world_needs_charter_cities.

36
Charter Cities Institute, "Frequently Asked Questions," *Charter Cities Institute*, 2024, www.chartercitiesinstitute.org/faq/; Charter Cities Institute, "An Introduction to Charter Cities," *Charter Cities Institute*, 2024, www.chartercitiesinstitute.org/intro/#whycc.

37
Charter Cities Institute, "Frequently Asked Questions."

Special economic zones	Charter cities
Limited governance reforms: Typically focused on tax incentives, infrastructure, and a one-stop shop	Deep governance reforms: Touches all aspects of the business environment, including registering a business, legal dispute resolution, labout laws, taxes, etcetera
Small geographic area: Often encompassing a small geographic area, for example, an industrial park, which limits growth potential	Large/expandable geographic area: Allows a successful charter city to grow and incorporate new communities into its governance structure
Single industry: Special economic zones often target a single industry such as textile or electronics manufacturing	Multi-industry and residential: Attracts multiple industries, including manufacturing and services, ensuring a broad economic base
Limited adminstrative autonomy: Administrative unit is not flexible and cannot respond to changing conditions	Administrative autonomy: New administrative unit with limited legislative authority ithin charter cities, allowing the charter city authority to pass legislation without further action from the national government

4.6

governments or urban populations by building the city and its laws from scratch. Once established, "the success of a charter city will also inspire the host country and surrounding region to adopt similar reforms."[38] Market competition is not only the end goal of the libertarian charter city, but the strategy to achieve it too.

Based on the charter city model, the project Próspera in Honduras (see figure 4.7 on next page) brought Silicon Valley libertarians closer than ever to realizing their territorial ambitions. With the cooperation of Honduras's right-wing National Party government, Próspera secured land and permissions to build a self-governing tech-oriented city on Roatán Island. After the centre-left Liberty and Refoundation party won the 2021 election, however, the new government attempted to revoke Próspera's special jurisdictional status, initiating an ongoing legal case that has threatened the project's viability. State cooperation had become, ironically, a critical component of Silicon Valley's exit projects; until the mid-2020s, however, they had only secured state support abroad, generally from small, low-income countries.

Freedom Cities: Bringing the Charter City Home

In 2023, many Silicon Valley libertarians saw an opportunity to pursue their exit projects at home in America when, during his presidential campaign, Donald Trump posted a speech on Rumble that seemed to promise state support for building charter-city-style private cities. In his speech, Trump proposed to "hold a contest to charter up to ten new cities," which he called freedom cities, "and award them to the best new proposals for development" to be built from scratch on federal land. Skipping more substantial details about his proposal, he went on to list other strategies to initiate a "quantum leap in the American standard of living;" for example, to invest in beating China in the race to develop "vertical take-off and landing vehicles" (industry lingo for flying cars).

Following Trump's speech, some Silicon Valley libertarians became involved in advocacy groups to promote the freedom cities concept. Now a year and a half into Trump's presidency, his government has not made any further reference to freedom cities. Three months after Trump's inauguration, however, *Wired* reported that two advocacy groups – the Freedom Cities Coalition and the Frontier Foundation – had been drafting potential legislation for freedom cities and meeting with government officials – the former group directly with the Trump administra-

38
Mark Lutter, "A Beginner's Guide to Building Charter Cities," Mark Lutter PhD, January 14, 2020, www.marklutter.com/post/a-beginners-guide-to-building-new-cities.

↖ 4.6
Special economic zones versus charter cities as per the Charter Cities Institute



4.7



4.8

tion, and the latter more casually with White House and Congress members.[39] Both groups have ties to Silicon Valley, and especially to individuals associated with prominent exit projects. The Freedom Cities Coalition was created by NeWay Capital, the venture capital firm that owns Próspera, and is funded by Pronomos Capital, one of Próspera's largest investors. Pronomos Capital was founded by Patri Friedman and describes itself as the first venture capital firm dedicated to funding "charter cities," "Special Administrative Regions," "Special Governance Zones," and "Prosperity Hubs." The firm is backed by libertarian Silicon Valley financiers including Mosaic and Netscape founder Marc Andreessen, Coinbase founder Balaji Srinivasan, and PayPal founder Peter Thiel. The Frontier Foundation has also worked with Patri Friedman and is partnered with Charter Cities Institute, a group that advocates for the development of charter cities in low-income countries.

The advocacy groups' proposals rebranded freedom cities and transformed Trump's proposal into a new iteration of the Silicon Valley exit project. Like charter cities, the advocacy groups' freedom cities would be built from scratch, privately developed and operated, and would enjoy special jurisdictional status to implement relaxed regulations and tax policies designed to accelerate technological and economic development. In the co-authored article "Building Freedom Cities," for example, the president of the Frontier Foundation and the founder of the Charter Cities Institute celebrated freedom cities as a "government-led approach to creating deregulated new cities" that "could draw on inspiration from international special economic zone models" from Disney World to Shenzhen.[40] The article went on to link Trump's promise to build freedom cities to his promise to invest in flying cars by suggesting that "Freedom Cities could pursue achievable regulatory reforms in areas including environmental permitting, drug approval/innovation, and friendlier regulations for drones and other vertical-takeoff-and-landing aircraft."[41] Freedom cities would be hubs of technological acceleration where high-tech research and development could proceed unhampered by "red tape" including health and safety regulations, environmental protections, and so on. The Freedom Cities Coalition, meanwhile, has consulted with the Trump administration on strategies to create special jurisdictional zones for freedom cities. The Coalition, too, has legitimized its vision of deregulated new cities by appealing to innovation, calling special jurisdictional areas "acceleration zones" that will "unleash American dynamism" through "regulatory innovation," a "fifteen percent flat tax," and "local control."[42] Considering that the advocacy groups' descriptions of freedom cities are essentially

39
Caroline Haskins and Vittoria Elliott, "'Startup City' Groups Say They're Meeting Trump Officials to Push for Deregulated 'Freedom Cities,'" *Wired*, March 7, 2025, wired.com/story/startup-cities-donald-trump-legislation/.

40
Lutter and Allen, "Building Freedom Cities."

41
Lutter and Allen, "Building Freedom Cities."

42
Blueprint for America Coalition, "The Acceleration Zone Compact," *Blueprint for America*, 2026, blueprintforamerica.org/acceleration-zones-compact.

↖ 4.7
Rendering of a proposed seastead

↖ 4.8
Rendering of a housing development in Próspera

indistinguishable from descriptions of the charter cities model, the main distinction between the two seems to be one of location – charter cities, originally conceived as a model of economic development for low-income countries, have been rebranded as freedom cities for a high-income country. If Silicon Valley's turn-of-the-millennium exit projects returned the frontier from virtual space to physical space, freedom cities have returned the frontier from the economic peripheries of the world to the economic core, and to the epicentre of the frontier narrative, the United States.

Freedom Cities and Frontier Branding

Unsurprisingly, the frontier has provided the dominant narrative framing for freedom city proposals. Trump's original video announcement of the concept already framed freedom cities in terms of reviving the spirit of the American frontier. He opened the video, for example, by reminiscing about "past generations of Americans" who had "pursued big dreams and daring projects that once seemed absolutely impossible" and "pushed across an unsettled continent and built new cities in the wild frontier." "But today," his tone switched, "our country has lost its boldness." Freedom cities, he said, would "reopen the frontier, reignite American imagination, and give hundreds of thousands of young people and other people, all hardworking families, a new shot at home ownership and in fact, the American Dream."[43] Freedom city advocacy groups followed Trump's lead by adopting the frontier framing too. The Frontier Foundation, for example, centred its identity around the frontier narrative in its very choice of name. In the same spirit, the website of the Freedom Cities Coalition's public-facing partner, Blueprint for America, includes a timeline of "American dynamism," which begins with the frontier and ends with acceleration zones.[44]

In addition to the example set by Trump, the dominance of the frontier framing of freedom city proposals reflects the involvement of Silicon Valley libertarians and the centrality of the frontier narrative to both genealogies of the Californian ideology. Many of the key Silicon-Valley-associated patrons of freedom city advocacy have made explicit their indebtedness to both the Turnerian and countercultural versions of the frontier narrative. Marc Andreessen's "Techno-Optimist Manifesto," for example, includes a list of "Patron Saints of Techno-Optimism," which features Frederick Turner Jackson; 1960s counterculture heroes and proponents of the outlaw area Buckminster Fuller

43
Donald J. Trump, "Agenda47: A New Quantum Leap to Revolutionize the American Standard of Living," *Trump Vance 2025*, n.d., donaldjtrump.com/agenda47/agenda47-a-new-quantum-leap-to-revolutionize-the-american-standard-of-living.

44
Blueprint for America Coalition, "It's Time to Build," *Blueprint for America*, 2026, future.blueprintforamerica.org/present.

and Stewart Brand; charter cities originator Paul Romer; and classical-liberal and libertarian economists Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek, David Friedman, and Milton Friedman (respectively the father and grandfather of Patri Friedman, who himself channeled the counterculture when he founded and lived in a polyamorous commune).[45]

Although the frontier is a common metaphor in modern American political discourse, the freedom cities version of the narrative is unique in that it claims to respatialize the condition of the Turnerian frontier. While modern American politicians have used the frontier narrative to describe abstract conditions like the cultural uncertainty of the 1960s or the novelty of the information economy, Trump's freedom city frontier is spatial — one in which Americans "actually build new cities in [their] country again."[46] In the freedom cities narrative, Turner's wild frontier on the periphery of state control, where frontiersmen develop capitalist democracy, becomes a special jurisdictional zone of "devolved" state control, where entrepreneurs develop new commercial technologies and experiment with libertarian forms of governance. Similarly, the "safety valve" — the mechanism by which the idyllic yeoman economy on the frontier compels Eastern capital to provide equally attractive labour conditions at risk of losing its workforce — becomes the politics of exit — the mechanism by which deregulated enclaves compel states to adopt libertarian policies at risk of capital and population flight. In a subtle inversion, the spatial characteristics and mechanisms of the Western frontier that, according to Turner, disciplined capital are redeployed by the freedom city narrative to discipline the state.

The Pastoral Fantasy of California Forever

While Trump and advocacy groups have explicitly described freedom cities in the language of the frontier, many other Silicon Valley exit projects are less explicitly but more extensively shaped by the frontier narrative. Freedom cities are, for now, only a potential piece of legislation; neither Trump's government nor the advocacy groups have articulated an urban and architectural vision for the concept. To get a sense of what freedom cities might look like from an urban and architectural perspective, one can look to other Silicon Valley exit projects that have focused more substantially on design. While none have broken substantial ground yet, many projects have produced urban masterplans and architectural renders, and some have even acquired land on which to build. For many exit projects, particularly those located

45
Marc Andreessen, "The Techno-Optimist Manifesto," *Andreessen Horowitz*, October 16, 2023, a16z.com/the-techno-optimist-manifesto/.

46
John F. Kennedy, *Acceptance of Democratic Nomination for President*, 1960, www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/acceptance-of-democratic-nomination-for-president; Robert B. Reich, *The Next American Frontier: A Provocative Program for Economic Renewal* (Penguin, 1984); Trump, "Agenda47."

in the American West, the frontier narrative not only functions as a well-worn, patriotic narrative device, but also shapes urban form and architectural aesthetics. One striking pattern among these projects is their infatuation with pastoral aesthetics, which mimics the romanticization of the middle landscape in post-revolution frontier discourse.

California Forever — a new city proposed forty miles northeast of San Francisco, in Solano County — is one of the most developed masterplans in the ecosystem of Silicon Valley exit projects. The developer, also called California Forever, projects that the city will accommodate a population of 400,000 people and will include mixed-use neighbourhoods, a shipbuilding yard and an "advanced manufacturing" foundry that they have dubbed "a hub for frontier tech."[47] The developer has marketed California Forever to Silicon Valley employees by presenting the city as solution to the housing shortage in the Bay Area. Unlike many Silicon Valley exit projects, California Forever owns land — 50,000 agricultural acres for which the developer paid roughly $900 million.[48] Currently, California Forever is attempting to rezone its property but has faced opposition from surrounding communities. Despite this final challenge, the project has made it closer to breaking ground than any other exit project, outside of Próspera.

Many prominent Silicon Valley libertarians have treated California Forever as a limited prototype for future, more radical exit projects. One of the project's prominent investors, venture capitalist Michael Moritz, originally pitched California Forever to potential co-investors as an "urban blank slate where everything from design to construction methods and new forms of governance could be rethought."[49] The developer, however, has not yet pursued any form of special jurisdictional status. Regardless, major Silicon Valley financiers of exit projects, including Marc Andreessen, have invested in California Forever, and others, like Patri Friedman and Balaji Srinivasan, have touted the project as a precedent for charter cities and network states.[50] Even without formal jurisdictional autonomy, California Forever rehearses future exit projects by marketizing urban responsibilities traditionally conducted by the state — including urban planning, building, operation, infrastructure, and services.

For a project funded by, promoted by, and marketed toward Silicon Valley tech accelerationists, California Forever has adopted a surprisingly nostalgic attitude to its historical references. Compare, for example, financial backer Marc Andreessen's comments on the frontier — "We believe that while the physical

47
California Forever, "Solano Foundry," *California Forever*, 2026, www.californiaforever.com/foundry/.

48
Jan Sramek, "When Was the Last Time We Built a New City?," *Asterisk Magazine*, April 2024, www.asterisk-mag.com/issues/06/california-forever-jan-sramek.

49
Conor Dougherty and Erin Griffith, "The Silicon Valley Elite Who Want to Build a City From Scratch," *The New York Times*, August 25, 2023, nytimes.com/2023/08/25/business/land-purchases-solano-county.html.

50
California Forever is also mentioned by Lutter and Allen in their City Journal article on Freedom cities. Patri Friedman discusses California Forever in the context of charter cities on Pirate Wires Podcast (amidst discussion of the loss of the American frontier). Blueprint for America describes, as an "example potential project" for their Acceleration Zone proposal, an "affordable housing community" in the "California interior" with "30,000 acres master-planned" "250k attainable homes + transit" and "50,000+ construction & service jobs" – this is clearly a description of California Forever. The project is backed financially by Marc Andreesen who is also an investor in Pronomos capital. Gil Duran, "Balaji Depicts California Forever as a Network State Project," *The Nerd Reich*, April 7, 2024, thenerdreich.com/tech-zionism-balaji-says-california-forever-is-network-state/; Lutter and Allen, "Building Freedom Cities"; Solana, *Reimagining Governance*; Blueprint for America Coalition, "The Acceleration Zone Compact."

frontier, at least here on Earth, is closed, the technological frontier is wide open. We believe in exploring and claiming the technological frontier" — to California Forever CEO Jan Sramek's comment that "we don't want to build a city of tomorrow, we want to build a city of yesterday."[51] Unlike the typical allusions of Silicon Valley libertarians to the frontier as a symbol of an American spirit of exploration to legitimize tech accelerationism, California Forever's references to national history seem to betray a straightforward desire to return to a lost American past.

The main object of California Forever's nostalgia is America's postwar industrial golden age, until the last moments before globalization and deindustrialization. The developer's website reminisces about "the California of the 1970s and 1980s," and its forgotten "California Dream – a chance for families to own their own home and build a future for themselves and their children."[52] To resuscitate the California Dream, the project proposes to revive the twin pillars of America's postwar economy: home ownership and well-paying industrial jobs. Though the project includes no clear strategy to reduce housing costs, it does include a relatively developed industrial strategy; California Forever's designs include "The Foundry" — "a 40 million-square-foot ecosystem for the most innovative industries, including advanced transportation, robotics, energy, and defense" — and a shipbuilding yard. The project presents its industrial ambitions as part of Trump's reindustrialization program, adopting the president's rhetoric of "beating China" and "making America great again."[53] But despite glorifying America's lost industrial past, the project's vision of specialized high-tech manufacturing as "the foundation of the new American economy" differs fundamentally from American postwar industrialism, which focused on affordable mass consumer goods, and would not restore the era's relatively low income inequality. California Forever's postwar nostalgia, then, does not so much revive the California dream as costume a high-tech manufacturing hub in the mythological rhetoric and aesthetics of America's postwar golden age. And the project's nostalgia shapes not only its rhetoric, but also its urban and architectural design. According to CEO Jan Sramek, the project's new urbanism influenced design recreates "what old towns in America used to feel like."[54] Renderings of tree-lined streets with midrise apartment buildings look like Brooklyn or other suburbs of the major industrial centres (see figure 4.9 on next page). The first temporal dissonance within California Forever, then, is between the neophilic economic proposal of a hi-tech hub and the nostalgic urban form of the postwar mass-industrial city.

51
Andreessen, "The Techno-Optimist Manifesto"; J. K. Dineen, "'We Want to Build a City of Yesterday': These Are the Latest Details on New Solano County City," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 25, 2025, sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/solano-city-california-forever-18442940.php.

52
California Forever, "Building the Next Great American City," 2026, californiaforever.com/.

53
California Forever, "Solano Foundry."

54
Sramek, "When Was the Last Time We Built a New City?"

↘ 4.9
Early promotional image of California Forever depicted as a prewar American industrial town

↘ 4.10
Recent rendering of California Forever emphasizing the project's industrial ethos



4.9



4.10

Some renderings of California Forever, however, contradict again the image of a postwar industrial city and portray the project instead as a pastoral utopia. In early promotional images (see figure 4.12), California Forever becomes a small, Mediterranean village surrounded by a landscape of rolling agricultural fields; only the windmills on the horizon indicate that the image is not set in Renaissance Italy. The contradiction between early depictions of California Forever as an agricultural village and later depictions of the project as a postwar city is not simply an artefact of the design changing over time. The same set of early promotional images that includes illustrations of the city from afar as a village also includes street views that resemble more recent renderings, depicting a large city with a streetcar system and eight- and nine-story postwar-style apartment buildings. Taken together, the set of images depicts the project as an Escherian illusion: from the outside, it is an agricultural village of, at most, a few thousand people; from the inside, it is a much larger industrial city. California Forever, then, is wrapped in two layers of anachronistic nostalgia. The first layer of nostalgia disguises the post-neoliberal high-tech manufacturing hub as a postwar industrial city. The second layer of nostalgia reaches further back into history, to pre-industrial agricultural society, and disguises the simulacrum of the postwar industrial city as a renaissance agricultural village. While the postwar fantasy, then, provides the project's economic narrative, the pastoral fantasy provides its cultural narrative.

The dissonance between neophilic technological ambitions and nostalgic pastoral aesthetics recurs in other Silicon Valley exit projects too. In rural Sonoma County, within a two-hour drive from California Forever, the village of Esmerelda is slated to break ground on 267 acres of land that an eponymous development group (headed by software engineer Devon Zuegel) is in the process of purchasing next to the existing town of Cloverdale. In 2024, the group hosted a "popup village" as a prototype for the future "permanent village," which included a "crypto academic workshop," the "Edge Esmeralda Hackathon," and sessions on "Neurotech, AI, VR/XR, and Biotech/Longevity."[55] The popup village gave a sense of the character of the future village – that is, a rural exclave of Silicon Valley. The project's promotional imagery is strikingly similar to the image of California Forever as a renaissance village. Esmeralda, too, is a little terracotta-rooved village on a hill, set among farms and fields (see figure 4.11). If California Forever's version of the American dream is building high-tech military, robotics, and transportation hardware in a city disguised as a traditional European agricultural village, then Esmeralda's is developing cryptocurreny, AI, and neurotech

55
Edge Institute, "Edge Esmeralda 2024 Recap," *Edge Esmeralda*, 2026, www.edgeesmeralda.com/2024; Network State Podcast, *02 - Network State Conference 2024 - Devon Zuegel on Esmeralda*, 2025, YouTube video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=M-m3Ow_gFVEU.

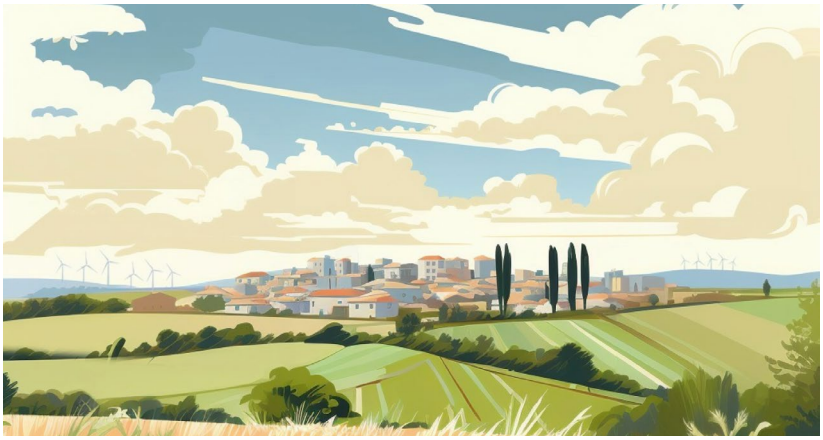
↗ 4.10
Esmeralda

↗ 4.11
California Forever

↗ 4.12
Praxis



4.11



4.12



4.13

software in a village wearing the same pastoral disguise.

The similarities between California Forever and Esmeralda beg the question: why do projects with high-tech accelerationist ambitions depict themselves visually and architecturally as coy little farming villages? The network state project Praxis goes part of the way to providing an answer.[56] While California Forever and Esmeralda present themselves as Western pastoral utopias, Praxis has embraced both guises of the frontier as a peaceful, agrarian landscape and as a site of violent conquest. Like other exit projects, Praxis is backed by Silicon Valley investors and seeks to establish an autonomous city where technological experimentation could proceed unhampered by current regulations (the project website frequently refers to aspirations of "life among the stars" and "life everlasting"). Yet, the project also betrays a now-familiar nostalgia in both its rhetoric ("our purpose is to restore Western civilization") and aesthetics.[57] The rolling agrarian landscapes depicted in much of the project's promotional imagery (see figure 4.13 on previous page), for example, resemble those of California Forever and Esmeralda. But in contrast to the project's almost twee fantasy of the pastoral landscape, it depicts itself architecturally as a piece of medieval military infrastructure: where California Forever and Esmeralda are Mediterranean villages, Praxis is a gothic citadel. In line with its military architectural aesthetics, Praxis's blog frequently lauds histories of violent conquest. Unsurprisingly, many of these posts – like "The Digital Yeoman's Plight," or "Faith in the Frontier" – refer to the conquest *par excellence* in the American popular imagination, the Western frontier.[58] Another blog post explains the military fixation: war is to be celebrated because it is the historical engine of technological acceleration.[59] This idea might be the crux between the project's neophilia and its nostalgia. Understood through the mythology of the American frontier, technological acceleration through conquest and the return to an Edenic garden are flipsides of the same phenomenon. The production of the utopian middle landscape is a process of conquest – both of people and of nature.[60] The structure of the American frontier narrative has always been one of acceleration into the past. The Silicon Valley libertarian fantasy of high-tech acceleration into a nostalgic agrarian utopia, then, is not new, but extends the frontier narrative into the digital age.

The frontier narrative, then, shapes many exit projects from their politics to their aesthetics and urban form. In their strategy, Freedom Cities and exit projects have inherited from the frontier narrative the idea of the outlaw area in a spatial politics based on exit, the zone of exception, and the blank slate. In their aesthetics,

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Alongside Seasteading and charter cities, network states are among the most prominent models through which Silicon Valley libertarians seek to realize their larger exit project. Bitcoin entrepreneur and progenitor of the network state model Balaji Srinivasan summarizes: "A network state is a highly aligned online community with a capacity for collective action that crowdfunds territory around the world and eventually gains diplomatic recognition from pre-existing states." The model proposes to develop national communities – with their own national identity, and values – on the internet before acquiring physical territory. When an e-nation becomes large and wealthy enough, it can pool resources to buy land. The new national community can then declare independence, secede from its host nation (or nations, in the case of a geographically decentralized network state), and write its own legal and administrative frameworks. Balaji Srinivasan, *The Network State: How to Start a New Country* (2022), thenetworkstate.com/.

57
Praxis Nation, "Praxis Nation," Praxis Nation, www.praxisnation.com/.

58
Geoff Shullenberger, "The Digital Yeoman's Plight," *Praxis Nation*, June 30, 2023, www.praxisnation.com/writing/the-digital-yeomans-plight; Dryden Brown, "Faith in the Frontier," *Praxis Nation*, November 22, 2020, www.praxisnation.com/writing/faith-in-the-frontier.

59
Alpha Barry, "War and Peace and Life Everlasting," *Praxis Nation*, March 27, 2021, www.praxisnation.com/writing/war-and-peace-and-life-everlasting.

60
Paul Heike, "Agrarianism, Expansionism, and the Myth of the American West," in *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies* (Transcript Verlag, 2014).

the projects have inherited from post-Revolution and frontier-era discourse the romanticism of the middle landscape in a fixation on pastoral aesthetics, even when a project has no agricultural basis. These two geographic imaginaries from the frontier narrative – the outlaw area and the middle landscape – function together to present the often-anti-democratic libertarian politics behind the projects in terms of popular national mythology. The proposal to privatize and marketize urban governance, shifting urban power away from democratic representation to market representation would be a hard sell to the general American public. Reframing the same urban and political program as a return to the freedom and independence of the frontier, however, activates deep-rooted feelings of national identity and patriotism. Similarly, reframing technological deregulation as leading back to the simplicity and ease of the middle landscape activates a collective American fantasy of a temperate, peaceful life on the homestead. Like the Jerusalem cases, this narrative rebranding works by establishing an equivalence between a possible future and a mythical past.

The narrative mechanisms by which the frontier cases equate possible futures and mythical pasts, however, differ from those of the Jerusalem cases. Most visibly, the frontier cases lack the explicit historical anachronisms within the urban landscape of a project like Jerusalem Rebuilt. Renderings of California Forever or Esmeralda do not depict, say, a cowboy saloon or tipi next to a data centre in a way that would parallel the jarring juxtaposition of the rebuilt ancient Jewish Temple against the stock exchange and mall. Instead, project images pick a historical reference and stick to it. Think here of the image of California Forever as a Renaissance village where the only anachronism is the row of windmills on the horizon. Similarly, Praxis may sci-fi its Gothic aesthetics, but it consistently applies this neo-Gothicism throughout promotional materials. Instead of anachronism within the urban landscape or the image, then, the historical dissonance of the frontier cases arises in the relationship between rhetoric, material function, and urban design. On one hand, marketing narratives celebrate Silicon-Valley technological accelerationism while the projects' spaces provide the infrastructure to enact this acceleration. On the other hand, their urban design celebrates the lost mythscapes of the mid-century mass-industrial city, the frontier village or homestead, or the agricultural villages of Renaissance Europe. By equating these two imaginaries, the projects posit that unleashing technology from the shackles of regulation (and unleashing tech companies from the shackles of democracy) will effect a return to the golden age of the American frontier, and will perhaps even realize the vision of the founding fathers to an even greater extent than they could themselves.[61]

61
Barbrook and Cameron, "The Californian Ideology."

In the year 138 BC the great Emperor Wu-ti, of the older Han dynasty, sent an embassy of a hundred persons, headed by Chang Chi'en [Zhang Qian], to the Yüeh-chih [in Central Asia. Through Zhang Qian's campaigns], which are recorded in the annals of the Han dynasty, the Chinese came in contact with Western civilization. New roads were opened for the exchange of goods, art and thought.

[...] It is not a fantastic dream to affirm that the time need not be far off when an enthusiastic motorist can start from Shanghai in his own car, [and] follow the Silk Road to [Europe]. A traffic artery such as this [...] should facilitate trade communications within the Chinese Empire and open a new traffic route between the East and the West. [...] Those who say that such a plan is impossible and impracticable should not forget that it was actually carried out two thousand years ago.

– Sven Hedin, *The Silk Road,* 1936

More than 2,000 years ago, Zhang Qian set out from Chang'an (present-day Xi'an, Shaanxi Province) to explore the Western Regions, opening up the world-renowned Silk Road and the door to East-West exchange. Over the past decade, Shaanxi, as an important node in the Belt and Road Initiative, has once again become a frontier of opening up to the outside world and a crucial gateway for China to connect with the world.

– Belt and Road Portal, 2023

New Silk Roads: Caravan Routes and Logistics Networks

China's Belt and Road Initiative proposes to revive the Silk Road as an advanced infrastructure network for a new, Asia-centric phase of neoliberal globalization. The initiative, however, is only the most recent addition to the lineage of modern Silk Road revival proposals. Like earlier projects to revive the Silk Road, China's proposal is a product of contemporaneous conditions of accelerated global economic integration. The same was true of Silk Road revival proposals in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which used Silk Road history to naturalize trans-Eurasian rail and motorway infrastructure proposals that would accelerate the integration of Asia into the world economy as expanding intercontinental empires pushed into the continent. This rule held true again when Silk Road diplomacy and "new Silk Road" proposals legitimized and accelerated the Western-led neoliberal globalization of the 1980s and beyond. Likewise, China's new Silk Road proposal coincides with the country's increased prominence in the geographies of globalization and the state's continued efforts to expand the country's economic "opening-up."

Like earlier Silk Road revival initiatives, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) uses the narrative to legitimize its economic and geopolitical motives. The Silk Road revival narrative presents

the BRI's Asia-centric global economic geographies and China's new central role in globalization as a return to the historical norm after an anomalous period of Western domination. The affinities between imaginaries of the New Silk Road and the ancient Silk Road as networks of economic, cultural, and technological exchange allow this narrative device to function smoothly and without the frictions that arise in a project like Jerusalem Rebuilt. The narrative also enables a convenient switching back and forth between an image of the Silk Road as a decentralized network and an image of the Silk Road as a centralized network, which performs different kinds of work on domestic and foreign audiences. At home, China has a privileged position at the beginning of the New Silk Road; abroad, the New Silk Road is a decentralized, egalitarian network. While the BRI's Silk Road revival narrative is subservient to the project's geopolitical goals, the narrative has itself become a powerful material force shaping according to its internal logic urban landscapes throughout Asia and beyond. Alongside geopolitically and economically strategic advanced logistics infrastructure and digital-tech innovation hubs, the BRI has spawned, for example, re-enactments of imperial military rituals and plans to restore the city of Xi'an's feudal masterplan. The temporal dissonance between the two trajectories of the New Silk Road is heightened by their separation in space: while neophilic urban landscapes cluster in places of production, nostalgic urban landscapes cluster in places of consumption. Thus, even as the New Silk Road creates narrative equivalencies between the ancient and the contemporary, it heightens the dissonance between the two in urban space.

Silk Road Revival and the Origins of the Belt and Road Initiative

The BRI traces its origins to a 2013 speech by Xi Jinping at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, where he began with a story about the origins of the ancient Silk Road:

> Over 2,100 years ago during China's Han Dynasty, a Chinese envoy, Zhang Qian, was sent to Central Asia twice with a mission of peace and friendship. His journeys opened the door to friendly contacts between China and Central Asian countries as well as the Silk Road linking east and west, Asia and Europe.[62]

This was not just a diplomatic vignette of shared heritage between China and Kazakhstan; in the fashion of Sven Hedin seventy-seven years earlier, it was also a vision of a possible infrastructural future. (And like Hedin, Xi's telling of the Zhang Qian story put China at the historical and geographic beginning of the Silk Road.) The speech continued, "over the past 20 years

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Jinping Xi, "Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China: Speech by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China at Nazarbayev University," September 8, 2013, worldjpn.net/documents/texts/BR/20130907.O1E.html.

and more, the relations between China and Eurasian countries have developed rapidly and the ancient Silk Road has gained fresh vitality."[63] An opportunity had come to revive the Silk Road. But for Xi, that meant, counterintuitively, to accelerate the distinctly contemporary trend of economic globalization that, by the end of the twentieth century, had reached liberalizing China, post-socialist Kazakhstan, and much of the rest of Asia. To this end, he proposed a transnational hard and soft infrastructure project to create, a continental-scale "economic belt along the Silk Road."[64] One month later, Xi gave a similar speech in Jakarta to the Indonesian parliament, highlighting their countries' histories of comradery before unveiling a proposal for a "Maritime Silk Road of the Twenty-First Century."[65] In late 2013, China integrated its originally separate proposals for the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road into a single project called One Belt One Road. In 2015, the project the state rebranded the project again as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or, informally, the New Silk Road.[66]

The New Silk Road, if executed as planned, will reshape the geographies, flows, and hierarchies of the global economy. While retaining its predecessors' focus on "the area of the ancient Silk Road" (Eurasia and, to a lesser extent, Africa), the scope of the New Silk Road has expanded to the entire globe.[67] The five corridors of the Silk Road Economic Belt cross national boundaries, spanning from the Pacific coast, through Central Asia and Siberia, to the Atlantic, and connecting into Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East (see figure 4.14 on next page). Throughout each of these corridors, the BRI proposes hard and soft infrastructure projects including special economic zones, industrial parks, pipelines, free-trade agreements, and investment treaties.[68] Cumulatively, these infrastructures could connect new sites of extraction and nodes of production and consumption into global geographies significantly different from today's.[69]

Publics, analysts, and institutions in and outside of China have interpreted very differently the implications of how the New Silk Road reconfigures global economic geographies. The Chinese state and aligned actors insist that the BRI addresses the unevenness of the current Western-dominated order and creates fairer conditions for developing countries.[70] In this reading, the BRI decentralizes and flattens the hierarchies of the global economy. It is a benevolent initiative: "a great undertaking that will benefit people around the world" and "promote World Peace and development."[71] Antagonistic (often Western) actors instead read the initiative as selfishly-motivated and exploitative, typically focusing on Chinese loans to BRI-partner countries as neocolonial

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Xi, "Speech by H.E. Xi Jinping At Nazarbayev University."

64
Xi, "Speech by H.E. Xi Jinping At Nazarbayev University."

65
Jinping Xi, "Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Indonesian Parliament," October 2, 2013, asean-china-center.org/english/2013-10/03/c_133062675.htm.

66
Winter, *Geocultural Power*, 9.

67
National Development and Reform Commission of the People's Republic of China et al., "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road," *Strategic Studies* 35, no. 1 (2015).

68
Michele Bonino et al., eds., *Grounding the Belt and Road Initiative: A Guide to the Architecture of the New Silk Road* (Birkhäuser, 2025).

69
Joe Williams et al., "China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Emerging Geographies of Global Urbanization," *The Geographical Journal* 186, no. 1 (2020).

70
According to the state, China offers "a new option for other [read: developing] countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence." Xinhua News Agency, "Socialism With Chinese Characteristics Enters New Era: Xi," Xinhua, October 18, 2017, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/18/c_136688475.htm.

71
National Development and Reform Commission of the People's Republic of China et al., "Vision and Actions Plan."


北 冰 洋
太 平 洋
印 度 洋
新 亚 欧 大 陆 桥
中蒙俄经济走廊
中国—中亚—西亚经济走廊
中巴经济走廊
孟中印缅经济走廊
中南半岛经济走廊
新加坡
Saint Petersburg
圣彼得堡
Moscow
莫斯科
Berlin
柏林
Warsaw
华沙
Brest
布列斯特
London
伦敦
Duisburg
Frankfurt
法兰克福
Paris
巴黎
Lisbon
里斯本
Istanbul
伊斯坦布尔
Ankara
安卡拉
Piraeus
比雷埃夫斯
Alexandria
亚历山大
Tehran
德黑兰
Bandar Abbas
Riyadh
利雅得
Doha
多哈
Dubai
迪拜
Jeddah
吉达
Sudan
苏丹港
Djibouti
吉布提港
Nairobi
内罗毕
Toshkent
塔什干
Dushanbe
杜尚别
Almaty
阿拉木图
Astana
Irkutsk
伊尔库茨克
Ulaanbaatar
乌兰巴托
Blagoveshchensk
布拉戈维申斯克
（海兰泡）
Khabarovsk
哈巴罗夫斯克
（伯力）
Vladivostok
符拉迪沃斯托克
（海参崴）
Beijing
北京
Xi'an
西安
Shanghai
上海
Fuzhou
福州
Kunming
昆明
Nanning
南宁
Hanoi
河内
Vientiane
万象
Kyaukphyu
皎漂
Bangkok
曼谷
Kolkata
加尔各答
Dhaka
达卡
Chittagong
吉大港
Mumbai
孟买
Bangalore
班加罗尔
Colombo
科伦坡
Kuantan
关丹
Kuala Lumpur
吉隆坡
Jakarta
雅加达
Darwin
达尔文
Sydney
悉尼
图 例
“一带一路”节点城市
丝绸之路经济带
21世纪海上丝绸之路
河流、湖泊

4.14

debt traps. In this reading, the BRI does not decentralize global economic hierarchies but, as Henry Kissinger put it, advances China's "quest to shift the world's centre of gravity" toward itself.[72]

For potential BRI partners, Silk-Road-revival narratives soothe anxieties about China's motivations and instead link the BRI to inclusive, non-exploitative histories of prosperity through trade and collaboration. To this end, China often counterposes Silk-Road history to developing countries' recent memories of Western colonial domination. For example, Chinese diplomat and politician Yang Jiechi said of the fifteenth century Chinese navigator Zheng He's excursions throughout the Indian Ocean that his fleet "did not invade, colonize, or swindle but went for trade along with spreading amity."[73] Similar stories of China's mutually-enriching economic and cultural relations through the Silk Road legitimize by historical precedent a narrative that China "respects that development paths and domestic and foreign policy is chosen independently by the people of every country" and that the country does "not seek to dominate regional affairs or establish any sphere of influence."[74]

For Chinese audiences, Silk-Road-revival narratives link the BRI to the project of national rejuvenation. Political discourses on the "rejuvenation of China" (as phrased by Sun Yat-Sen) go back to the beginning of the modern Chinese state. National rejuvenation has typically referred to restoring China's dignity and global prominence as a great civilization, especially following the country's history of domination by more industrially-advanced European and Japanese imperial powers during the Century of Humiliation from 1839 to 1949. In contrast, many in China view the Silk Road as a peak of Chinese prosperity, power, and global recognition. As a tool of affective politics, Silk-Road-revival mobilizes both the trauma of China's recent history and the glory of its ancient past to generate approval for the BRI and the state.

In contrast to its frequent anecdotes about deep-rooted national histories, BRI rhetoric also regularly invokes images of smooth, globalized economic spaces beyond national borders. The 2015 "Vision and Action Plan" juxtaposes Silk-Road nostalgia with a vision

> designed to uphold the global free trade regime and the open world economy, [and to promote] orderly and free flow of economic factors, highly efficient allocation of resources, and deep integration of markets.[75]

The document proposes hundreds of infrastructures that would smooth over barriers to the flow of goods, capital, finance,

72
Canadian Security Intelligence Service, "Expanding Regional Ambitions: The Belt and Road Initiative," 2018, www.canada.ca/en/security-intelligence-service/corporate/publications/china-and-the-age-of-strategic-rivalry/expanding-regional-ambitions-the-belt-and-road-initiative.html.

73
Although China's foreign relations have historically been mostly peaceful, BRI Silk Road anecdotes do tend to be sterilized. In 1411, for example, Zheng He's fleet attacked the Sri Lankan Kingdom of Kotte, abducted the king, and replaced him with a puppet ruler. Winter, *Geocultural Power*, 130.

74
Xi, "Speech by H.E. Xi Jinping At Nazarbayev University."

75
National Development and Reform Commission of the People's Republic of China et al., "Vision and Actions Plan," 207.

↖ 4.14
Map of BRI corridors

The overland corridors of the BRI are illustrated in yellow. The spine of the initiative is the New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor, which spans Eurasia from east to west – from China's Pacific coast, through Xi'an, Ürümqi, Moscow, and Berlin to Europe's Atlantic coast. Four economic corridors branch off of the Land Bridge: 1) The China - Central Asia - West Asia Economic Corridor, 2) The China - Pakistan Corridor, 3) the Bangladesh - China - India - Myanmar Economic Corridor, and 4) the China - Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor. The China - Mongolia - Russia Economic Corridor travels parallel to but north of the New Eurasian Land Bridge.

energy, and information: a high speed transportation corridor from Beijing to Moscow; pan-Asian investment, financing, and credit information systems; cross-border optical cables; removing barriers to investment and trade.[76] These interventions cluster around unresolved interfaces between systems: borders between national economic spaces; ports where air, land, and sea transport connect; the discrepancies between legislative systems. While altering the geographies of late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century Western-led globalization, the BRI accelerates previous trajectories of time-space compression by smoothing over boundaries.

The New Silk Road, then, hybridizes many dissonant and even contradictory historical and geographic imaginaries. The BRI will accelerate the world into an ultramodern future, but it will also return it to a glorious Silk Road past. It will create smooth spaces of continental-scale economic corridors that flow unrestricted over dozens of borders, but it will also maintain the striated space of national sovereignty by respecting the development pathways and domestic policies of each country. The BRI's idea of the Silk Road itself contains similar dissonances. For international audiences, the Silk Road is a flat network and shared, universal heritage, but for domestic audiences, China occupies a privileged position at its historical and geographic beginning. This polyvalence of New-Silk-Road rhetoric allows the Chinese state to smooth over diplomatic relations with the various local and foreign state- and non-state actors involved in building the BRI.

Landscapes of Production and Distribution: Smoothing Space

The dissonances and contradictions of the BRI's many historical and geographic imaginaries have encoded themselves into the landscapes of the New Silk Road. The BRI creates neophilic-globalizing landscapes, nostalgic-localist landscapes, and hybrids of the two, and links them all together through its Silk-Road-revival-as-globalizing-acceleration narrative. The initiative's Silk-Road symbolism, however, is not evenly distributed throughout these landscapes.

The New Silk Road's infrastructural links, which smooth and compresses global economic space, generally materialize as generic, backend landscapes. China-Europe freight trains (CEFTs), which began to run in 2011 on the initiative of many Chinese municipalities and were integrated into the BRI after 2013, have accelerated China-Europe trips from more than a month

76
National Development and Reform Commission of the People's Republic of China et al., "Vision and Actions Plan."

to ten to fifteen days.[77] The CEFT initiative has achieved this acceleration in part by coordinating continental-scale legislative infrastructure. CEFTs, which run on existing tracks, were first enabled by a 2010 agreement between China, Kazakhstan, and Russia to streamline border clearance. But the CEFT's acceleration of cargo flows also comes from increased coordination of millimetre-scale hard infrastructure. For CEFTs travelling through the twin Chinese-Kazakh border cities of Khorgos-Horgos, an expanded dry port and new digital management software have more than doubled the efficiency of transferring cargo between the 1.524 millimetre gauge rails in ex-Soviet territory and the 1.435 millimetre gauge rails in Europe and China.[78] Since adopting CEFTs, the central state has integrated them into the BRI's Silk-Road discourse. The Belt and Road Portal refers to the CEFT as a "'steel camel' caravan along Belt and Road routes" and emphasizes its historical continuity with the ancient Silk Road: "2,000 years after the ancient Silk Road was opened, the China Railway Express is now crossing continents."[79] This Silk Road branding, however, does not extend to the built landscapes of the CEFT itself, the aesthetics of which derive primarily from functional and technical requirements. The same is true of most of the New Silk Road's infrastructural links, which publics generally only observes through media rather than through physical proximity.

Other generic infrastructural landscapes have developed in BRI nodes. As new infrastructural links reshape global economic flows, they have created opportunities for some second-tier or peripheral cities to rise to global-city status. Over the past decade, Xi'an, for example, has ascended through the BRI from a relatively unimportant, second-tier city in central-Western China to a logistics hub for CEFTs and, in state discourse, the Eastern terminus of the New Silk Road. Xi'an can attribute part of its recent success to its strategic location in central China, from where it can ship to 85% of national territory within two days. The city launched its first CEFT in 2013, and by 2020 it had become the busiest CEFT city with 3,670 trips per year. After the central state adopted the CEFT program, it enshrined Xi'an's new hub status into national policy. In 2020, for example, the central state selected Xi'an alongside four other cities for a 200-million-yuan investment in CEFT infrastructure.[80]

Investments to transform Xi'an into a "hub, gateway, and flow space" have reconfigured large areas of the city according to the universal technical and economic demands of neoliberal globalization.[81] The city's logistics infrastructure is clustered to the northeast of the city centre in the Xi'an International Trade

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Xiangming Chen, "Reconnecting Eurasia: A New Logistics State, the China-Europe Freight Train, and the Resurging Ancient City of Xi'an," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 64, no. 1 (2021).

78
Maia Adele Simon, "Asymmetrical Flows," *E-Flux Architecture*, 2020, www.e-flux.com/architecture/new-silk-roads/313106/asymmetrical-flows.

79
Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, "China Railway Express: 'Steel Camel' Caravan Along Belt and Road Routes," *Belt and Road Portal*, n.d., eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/z/230714/index.shtml.

80
Chen, "Reconnecting Eurasia," 75–76.

81
Chen, "Reconnecting Eurasia," 66–68.

and Logistics Park (ITLP). The ITLP predates the CEFT and contains specialized legislative zones for duty-free warehousing, manufacturing industries, and so on.[82] Since Xi'an's emergence as a logistics hub, the city has upgraded and expanded the ITLP to improve its function as a switchboard of transcontinental logistical flows. These upgrades include legislative infrastructure (a dedicated E-Commerce Service Zone), urban spectacles (Xi'an Olympic Sports Centre), and hard infrastructure.[83] The ITLP's International Port Station (see figure 4.15) — where the first Chang'an Express train departed from in 2013 — has been expanded and a equipped with a new "intelligent system leveraging IoT [the internet of things], big data, and AI for real-time monitoring and scheduling of vehicles and cargo handling" which has increased the efficiency of cargo flow through the port "by 52.9 percent."[84] Through these and similar projects, the BRI has begun to reterritorialize parts of Xi'an into generic infrastructural landscapes practically indistinguishable from those across the world.

Xi'an's local state and China's central state have attempted to use the city's new status as a BRI logistics hub to transform it into a full-blown global economic hub, an effort that has produced many global-city style urban landscapes. The city's efforts have centred on establishing Xi'an as a "Silk Road science and technology centre" with a focus on digital technologies — AI, 5G, cloud computing.[85] In the past decade, the city's plans have included: a five-kilometre national science park equipped with a heavy ion accelerator and a financial centre for scientific research; a pilot zone for artificial intelligence; and a technology museum.[86] The city intends that its 882 square kilometre Xixian New Area, which integrates Xi'an with the neighbouring city of Xianyang, will "build itself into a center of strategic emerging industries and modern service industries, a center of energy, finance and trade along the Silk Road Economic Belt."[87] The project contains five masterplanned new cities, mostly designed in typical high-tech-global-smart-city style.[88] The New Area contains a smattering of innovation, science, and industry parks — like the Sino-Russian Silk Road High-Tech Industrial Park, Fengxi Information Industry Park (focusing on "cloud computing, Internet of Things, e-government and e-commerce"), and the West China Science and Technology Innovation Port. Cumulatively, the city hopes that these new urban infrastructures will establish Xi'an as "an engine for technological development" and increase its global standing.[89] Through the BRI, Xi'an is being transformed into a specifically high-tech variation of the global city.

82
Chen, "Reconnecting Eurasia," 80.

83
Xi'an International Land Port Investment & Development Group, "Xi'an Olympic Sports Centre," ITL Group, September 29, 2020, en.xaitlgroup.com/projects/sports/519.htm.

84
Bin Zhang and Chenrong Jiang, "In Xi'an, Witness How the China-Europe Freight Train Is Accelerating Its Journey," *Xinhua News*, November 18, 2025, www.news.cn/20251118/7766009bd18c4a6cb5d367aac828e6aa/c.html.

85
Sarah O'Meara, "Taking the Silk Road to High-Tech Growth," *Nature* 563, no. 7732 (2018): 27.

86
China Daily, "Xi'an Aims to Build National Science Centre," *The State Council, the People's Republic of China*, n.d., english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202103/12/content_WS604ac275c6d0719374afaaef.html; Xinhua News Agency, "The Ancient Capital, Steeped in the Spirit of Tang and Han Dynasties, Continues to Flourish Even More Today," Tang West Market News Centre, October 24, 2023, www.dtxs.cn/index.php?ac=article&at=read&did=744#; Lizzie Crook, "Stefano Boeri Architetti Unveils Design for Museum of Technology in Xi'an," *Dezeen*, April 3, 2024, www.dezeen.com/2024/04/03/stefano-boeri-museum-of-technology-in-xian/.

87
China Daily, "Xixian New Area," *China Services Info*, May 15, 2019, govt.chinadaily.com.cn/s/201905/15/WS5cdbd6fb498e079e68020f61/xixian-new-area.html.

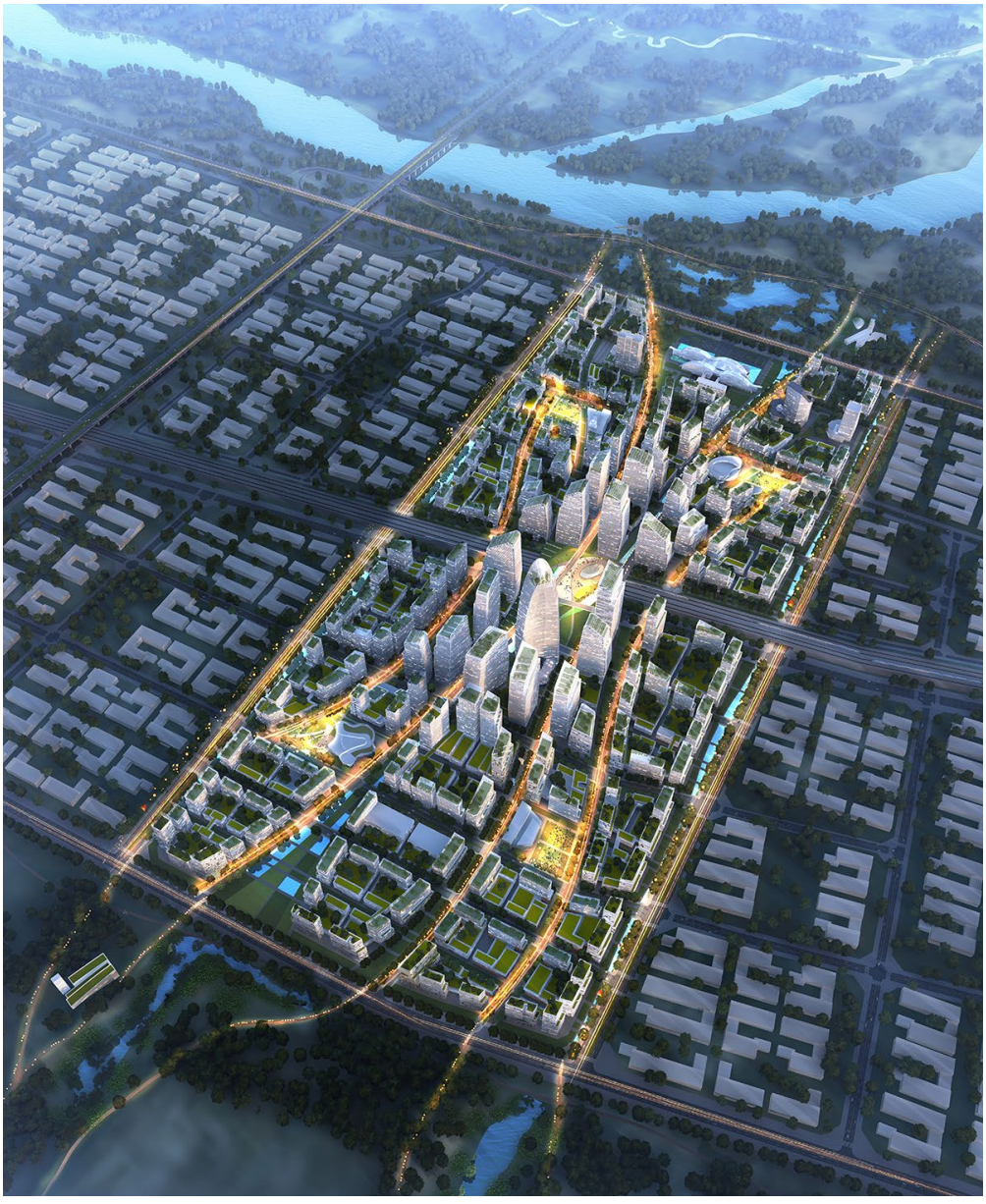
88
Shaanxi Provincial People's Government, *Xixian New Area*, n.d., en.shaanxi.gov.cn/business/dz/ndz/201709/t20170907_1594661.html.

89
China Daily, "Xixian New Area."

↗ 4.15
Xi'an International Trade and Logistics Port



4.15



4.16

Landscapes of Consumption: Simulating the Silk Road

Like the Jerusalem masterplans and proposals for freedom cities, the BRI has, alongside neophilic globalizing landscapes, incorporated and driven the expansion of many nostalgic heritage landscapes. Some projects encode the dissonance between the BRI's neophilia and nostalgia is in a single space. Along all its high-tech aspirations, Xixian New Area, for example, "will build towns emphasizing Silk Road culture and boost Silk Road tourism."[90] The New Area's Qin-Han New City (named for China's two most ancient imperial dynasties) focuses on "Qin-Han history and culture tourism, financial business, headquarter economy and urban agriculture."[91] The winning design for the city's proposed technology museum features a high-tech parametric design that, according to the architect, references "the ancient origins of the city of Xi'an."[92] But by linking separate neophilic and nostalgic landscapes, the BRI's temporal dissonance is also distributed at the urban scale. In Xi'an, as the city's peripheries accelerate into the future, its centre retreats into the past as a simulacrum of its ancient history.

Both before and during the BRI, Xi'an's local state and private enterprises have promoted Silk Road and imperial revival narratives alongside projects to re-create the city's lost heritage landscapes. These narratives and projects have generally focused on the city's past, under its historical name of Chang'an, as the imperial capital of the Han and Tang dynasties (202 BC – 220 AD and 618 – 907 respectively). Popular perception of these dynasties as the heights of China's prosperity, power, and glory have made historical Chang'an a centre of the Chinese nationalist imagination.[93] Simultaneously, popular narrative positioning of Chang'an at the historical and geographic beginning of the Silk Road has made the city a symbol of Chinese cosmopolitanism.[94] Both Chinese and Western histories present the Tang dynasty as the height of historical China's openness, the peak of the country's involvement in the Silk Road, and Tang-era Chang'an as a cosmopolitan world centre home to communities of foreign (especially Arab and Persian) traders, pilgrims, travellers, and diplomats.[95] In 2005, Xi'an's local government released the Tang Imperial City Plan with the goal of converting the city centre into replica of Tang-era Chang'an by 2050.[96] On the level of urban design, the plan attempts to "restore the old layout and street names" of the Tang-era imperial city, when it was masterplanned and divided into three sectors reflecting the feudal hierarchy, with dedicated sections for the emperor, administrators, and commoners.[97] To this end, the city has demolished some narrow streets and tall buildings of the twentieth-century city to create

90
China Daily, "Xixian New Area."

91
Shaanxi Provincial People's Government, *Xixian New Area*.

92
Crook, "Stefano Boeri Architetti Unveils Design for Museum of Technology in Xi'an."

93
Law, "Historical Imaginaries, Historic Urban Branding, and the Local State in China," 7.

94
Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, "The First China Railway Express Trains From Different Cities in China," *Belt and Road Portal*, March 23, 2021, eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/168038.html.

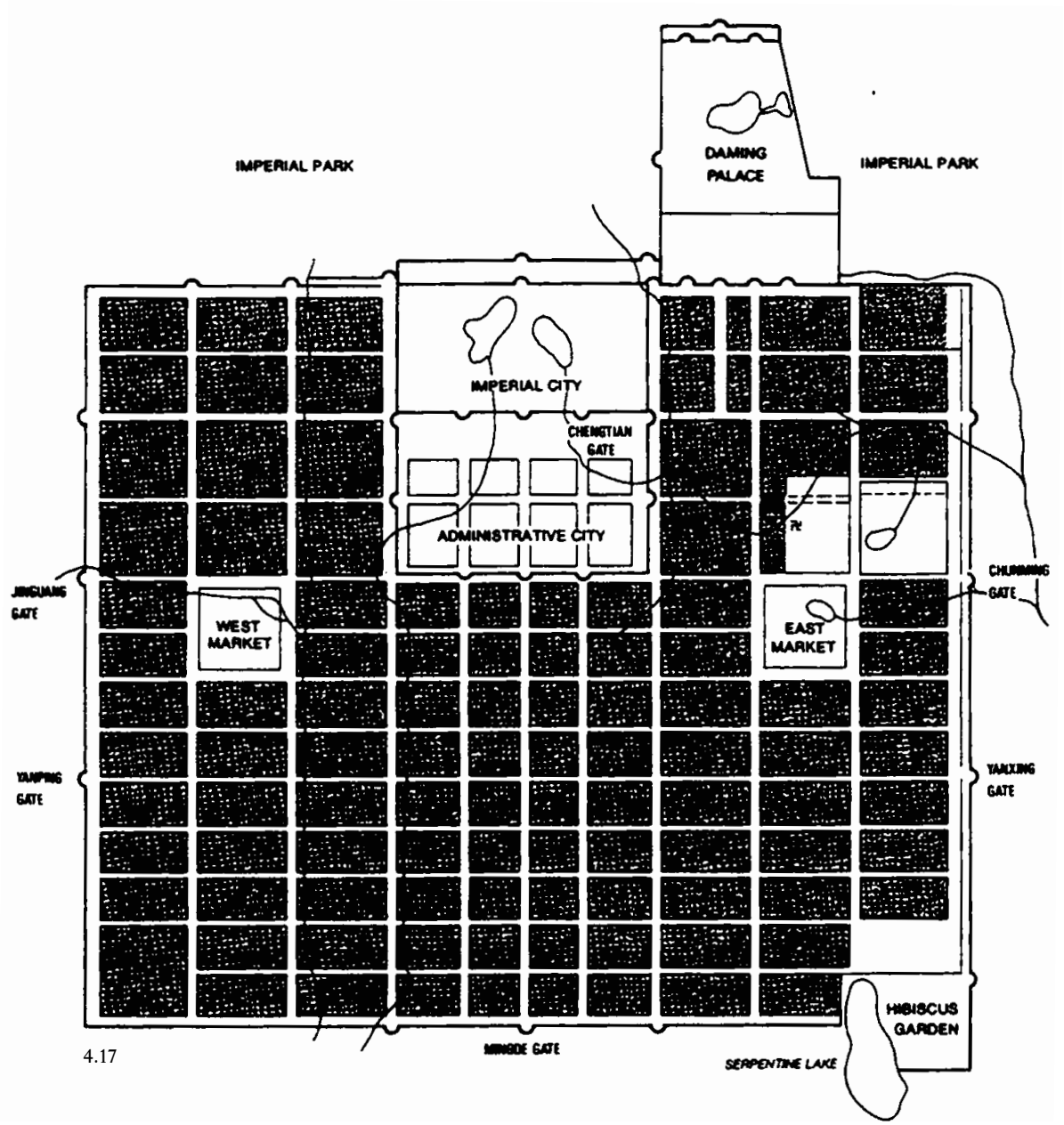
95
Shao-Yun Yang, "Tang 'Cosmopolitanism': Towards a Critical and Holistic Approach," *Modern Asian Studies* 8, no. 4 (2025).

96
Yujie Zhu and Yang Yang, "Travelling to the Past: Xi'an and the Tang Imperial City," in *Commercial Nationalism: Selling the National Story* (Channel View Publications, 2017).

97
It would be difficult to overstate how much of a transformation in state policy this represents. The celebration of an urban form so saturated with feudal hierarchy would have been practically unthinkable during the first decades of China's communist history, and during the Cultural Revolution, such landscapes were actively targeted and destroyed. W. Feighery, "Contested Heritage in the Ancient City of Peace," preprint, 2009, 4–5.

↖ 4.16
Xixian Great City masterplan

This rendering of a masterplan for Xixian Great City, part of the larger Xixian New Area masterplan, recreates the typical neophilic, univeralist aesthetics of contemporary new city megaprojects and the global city trope.


IMPERIAL PARK
DAMING PALACE
IMPERIAL PARK
IMPERIAL CITY
CHENGTIAN GATE
ADMINISTRATIVE CITY
JINGUANG GATE
WEST MARKET
EAST MARKET
CHUNMING GATE
YANPING GATE
YANXING GATE
HIBISCUS GARDEN
MINGDE GATE
SERPENTINE LAKE

4.17

a central axis and wide boulevards to resemble those of ancient Chang'an.[98] At the architectural scale, the plan has guided efforts to reconstruct and redecorate buildings in and around the old city in Tang-dynasty architectural style and to restore the city wall (of mixed Tang- and Ming-era origins), where, every day, actors in Tang-era military costumes welcome visitors into the city with greetings from the emperor.[99]

Xi'an presents its archaeological past in way that collapses it with the present and future of neoliberal globalization. The city's lack of intact Han- and Tang-era structures (only two pagodas remain) has presented difficulties for displaying its imperial connections through archaeology on an urban scale.[100] Thus, museums have become a critical tool to display the city's Silk Road and imperial connections through smaller-scale archaeological artefacts and fragments. In 2010, the city opened the Tang West Market Museum, and in 2025 opened the China West Airport Group Museum of Heritage within Xi'an Xianyang International airport ("the world's first on-site cultural heritage museum within an airport"), both of which focus on Xi'an's Silk Road history.[101] Exhibitions induct audiences into ways of seeing that narrow the distance between the city's modern and Silk Road histories. The program of one Silk Road exhibition at the Tang West Museum, for example, paired lectures on Chang'an's history of trade through the Silk Road with a tour through the adjacent Tang-themed shopping mall. This experience made one visitor remark that "shopping in such a marketplace made me feel like I had travelled back to the past."[102] Since the announcement of the BRI, Xi'an has increased its engagement with international archaeological institutions to emphasize the transnational implications of its Silk Road history. Xi'an's city walls, for example, were nominated in 2006 (before the announcement of the BRI) to the UNECSO world heritage list as the historical starting point of the Silk Road. In 2014 (shortly after the announcement of the BRI), the city walls were integrated into a transnational heritage corridor by UNESCO's recognition of the "Silk Roads: The Routes Network of Chang'an-Tian Shan Corridor."[103] This and similar initiatives have increased the recognition of Xi'an (and other Chinese cities) within transnational histories of cultural and economic exchange, and suggest a way of viewing China's Silk Road history as a form of proto-globalization.[104]

Where archaeology presents Xi'an's past in the image of its future, the city's heritage-themed pastiche landscapes present the contemporary city in a way that suggests continuity with its ancient past. The city's Tang West Market shopping centre, which opened in 2012, presents itself as reviving "the West Market of

98
Yujie Zhu, "Uses of the Past: Negotiating Heritage in Xi'an," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 24, no. 2 (2018): 184.

99
Zhu and Yang, "Travelling to the Past," 69.

100
Law, "Historical Imaginaries, Historic Urban Branding, and the Local State in China," 9.

101
China Daily, "Tang West Market Museum," *China Services Info*, December 7, 2018, govt.chinadaily.com.cn/s/201812/07/WS5c0a2573498eefb3fe46e63c/tang-west-market-museum.html; IAMS Secretariat, "World's First On-Site Museum Within Airport to Open in Xi'an, China," *International Alliance of Museums of the Silk Road*, February 21, 2025, www.musesilkroad.com/en/news/news/202503/t20250305_271208.html.

102
Zhu and Yang, "Travelling to the Past," 71.

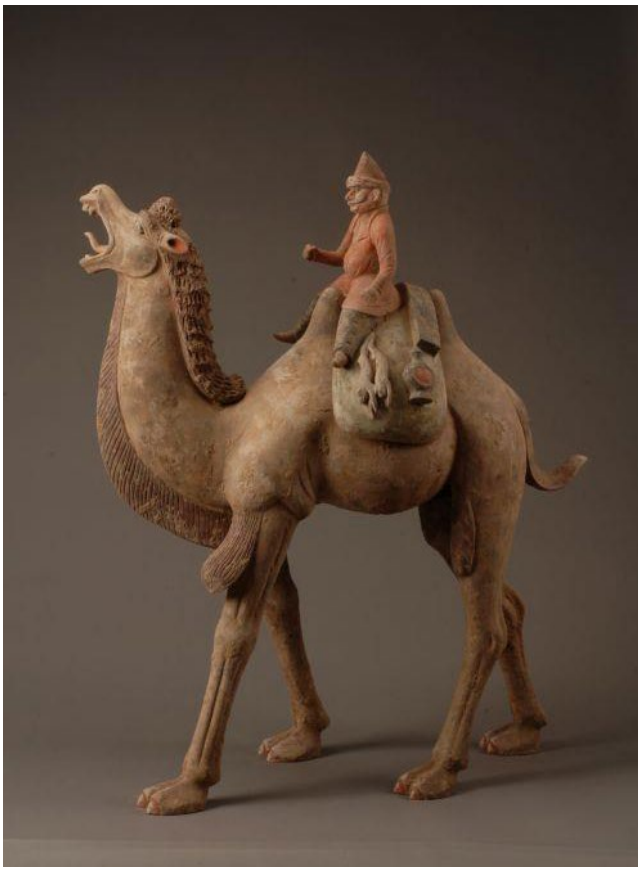
103
Zhu and Yang, "Travelling to the

↖ 4.17
Map of ancient Chang'an

↘ 4.18
Chinese figurine of a foreigner on camelback

↘ 4.19
Xi Jinping visiting Yuncheng Museum, Shanxi

↘ 4.20
Tang West Market, Xi'an



4.18



4.19



4.20

Chang'an, the starting point of the Silk Road during the Sui and Tang Dynasties," on the site of which it sits. The shopping centre contains the Tang West Market Museum, an antique market, a department store, an international trade centre, a luxury products exhibition, a Silk Road Experience Centre, and the recently-opened Silk Road International Central Business District.[105] "Based on the ancient buildings of the Tang West Market and rooted in the commercial and folk culture of the Tang Dynasty," the complex contains Tang-dynasty style buildings and pastiches of the traditional architecture of twenty-two countries — including a Japanese pagoda, a Turkish bazaar, and replicas of India's Red Fort and Italy's Roman Forum — along a "Silk Road Themed Street [...] authentically showcasing Silk Road civilization and exotic customs" that "allows tourists to experience a dreamlike journey 'through the Silk Road in one hour' without leaving the country."[106] Historical and regional pastiche become architectural symbols for the city's historical cosmopolitanism through the Silk Road. Together, these simulated heritage spaces suggest a historical continuity between the historical trans-Eurasian trade routes that intersected in Chang'an and the globalized chains of trade and production that intersect in this contemporary shopping centre.

Past," 74; Zhu, "Uses of the Past," 184.

104
Winter, *Geocultural Power*.

105
Datang Xishi Cultural Industry Investment Group, "Company Introduction," *Tang West Market*, 2019, www.dtxs.cn/index.php?ac=article&at=list&tid=101; Feighery, "Contested Heritage in the Ancient City of Peace," 6; Datang West Market, "High-Tech Gateway, Dual-Track Surrounding, Final Masterpiece! Datang West Market Silk Road International Central Business Centre Office Space Project Is Now Available for Online Sale," *Weixin*, February 20, 2020, mp.weixin.qq.com/s/MRzl7qfXhxjIt-JDDxL-LPg?

106
Datang West Market, "High-Tech Gateway, Dual-Track Surrounding, Final Masterpiece!"; Gabby Li, "Tang West Market," *Travel China Guide*, March 16, 2026, www.travelchinaguide.com/attraction/shaanxi/xian/tang-west-market.htm.

107
Yang Yang, "Producing Multiple

Flattening Xi'an and Chang'an

Xi'an's emerging urban form diagrams in miniature how the BRI's "acceleration into the past" narrative is materially enacted and spatially differentiated throughout its broader geographical scope. The city's public-facing spaces of consumption have reversed into the past as a simulation of historical Chang'an while its backend spaces of production have accelerated into the future as high-tech logistics and digital innovation infrastructure. These opposite trajectories have heightened the historical dissonance within the city's urban landscape. But simultaneously, the BRI has linked these landscapes into a semiotic relationship in which symbolic spaces of consumption resignify functional spaces of production as themselves a revival of the Silk Road. This semiotic linking has occurred on one hand through a dominant rhetorical and sometimes spatial Silk-Road branding of many of the city's emerging logistics and digital technology spaces. It has also occurred through changes in the character of the city's heritage urbanism. Since the announcement of the BRI, the city's pre-BRI municipal-level heritage urbanism initiatives have shifted focus away from the city's imperial history and archetypal Chineseness as a strategy to position the Xi'an as a "heritage city" and attract tourism. It has been supplanted by a focus on the city's

↗ 4.21
Map of major globalizing and heritage-themed urban development initiatives in Xi'an


Xixian New Area
Xi'an International Trade and Logistics Park
ring road / built-up area of Xi'an
Tang Imperial City Plan
Qujiang New District
municipal boundary of Xi'an

4.21

transnational connections and cosmopolitanism through the Silk Road to access BRI funds and to naturalize its new global-city aspirations as a return to historical norm.[107] This semiotic linking of the city's divergent neophilic and nostalgic trajectories has produced a temporal flattening of Chang'an and Xi'an. Freight trains carrying LED televisions and SUVs become hypermodern camel caravans and SEZs and smart cities hypermodern caravanserai.

Though the flattening of historical difference is common to all global-archaic megaprojects, the New Silk Road has, in some instances, practically annulled all historical depth to maximize the semiotic and instrumental flexibility of history. For example, discussions of "the Silk Road spirit," which feature in most official BRI discourse, consistently detach the Silk Road from embeddedness in a specific time or place. A 2017 speech by Xi Jinping displays this phenomenon:

> spanning thousands of miles and years, the ancient silk routes embody the spirit of peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit. The Silk Road spirit has become a great heritage of human civilization.[108]

The transformation of the Silk Road into an atemporal phenomenon erases the historical distance between the present and the times of the historical Silk Road. Representations of Xi'an produce the same temporal flattening. Promotional videos on the Douyin (TikTok) account of the Xi'an Tourism Bureau depict the city as a site of anachronistic time travel. In one video, the cartoon character "Qin-style Boy" time-travels from Qin Dynasty (third century BC) Chang'an to contemporary Xi'an to participate – still wearing Qin-era clothing – in a viral dance set to Michael Jackson's "Dangerous."[109] Other videos describe ancient Chang'an in typical global-city rhetoric, for example as "an international hub."[110] There is a similar historical flattening in the self-aware "artificiality" of the city's many constructed or re-constructed Silk Road and imperial landscapes. For example, the head of Qujiang New District, said of the district's "Tang Paradise" theme park that it "is not cultural heritage, but cultural property, which will become a cultural heritage site in the future."[111] There is no discomfort with the fact that many of the city's "historical" sites are no older than its contemporary ones. While maintaining a sense of antiquity, the city's histories are simultaneously uprooted from their historical context and transformed into malleable signifiers. This temporal flatness, then, increases the possibilities for what strategic work urban heritage can do in the present.

Imaginations of the Silk Road in Xi'an, China's Urban Development," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 26, no. 6 (2020): 855; Zhu and Yang, "Travelling to the Past," 70; Zhu, "Uses of the Past," 184.

108
Benabdallah, "Spanning Thousands of Miles and Years," 9.

109
Yilei Wang and Dezheng Feng, "History, Modernity, and City Branding in China: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Xi'an's Promotional Videos on Social Media," *Social Semiotics* 33, no. 2 (2023): 410–12.

110
Wang and Feng, "History, Modernity, and City Branding in China," 415.

111
Yang Yang, "Displaying Han-Tang Culture in Urban Development Projects in Xi'an, China," in *Making Cultural Cities in Asia: Mobility, Assemblage, and the Politics of Aspirational Urbanism* (Routledge, 2015), 121

V
Conclusion:
Simulating Resurrection

The Global-Archaic City as a Narrative Structure

A pair of masterplans to redistribute the Israeli population around Jerusalem; a scheme by Silicon-Valley libertarians to exit taxation, democracy, and technological regulation by building private cities; history's largest infrastructure project, designed to accelerate neoliberal globalization into the Asian century; at first glance, these projects appear to have little in common. Authors of global-archaic megaprojects range from fringe non-state actors to economically powerful private industries, to the largest and most powerful states in the world. The projects are in turn driven by motives as diverse as Jewish messianism, libertarian market fundamentalism, Chinese and American nationalisms, and global geopolitical strategy (including geopolitical ideologies as opposed as Trumpian protectionism and Chinese internationalism). In form and aesthetics too, global-archaic cities span generic global-city spectacularism, neo-Gothicism, New Urbanism, or renaissance pastiche. If a particular political project, authorship, aesthetic, or type of urban form does not define the global-archaic city, then what does?

This thesis has already suggested reading the global-archaic city in terms of a shared narrative structure. Despite differences in aesthetics, form, function, politics, and authorship, global-archaic cities all tell a story about themselves in which they bend back-

ward the trajectory of neoliberal globalization toward a golden past or, vice versa, in which they bend forward the trajectory of national return toward a neoliberal, globalized future. This general structure holds even as its contents vary, from ancient Xi'an revived as a global logistics hub, to Wild-Western homesteads reappearing as high-tech manufacturing hubs, to Israelite Jerusalem remade as a global financial hub. These narratives however do not circulate on their own as abstract stories detached from the material world of things and places. Instead, the global-archaic city tells its stories in all the very material fragments that make up an urban megaproject – in renderings and images, in logos and slogans, in the rhetoric of marketing materials and official statements, in the form and aesthetics of buildings. Having now examined cases of global-archaic cities in material detail, the following section develops the notion of the global-archaic city as a narrative structure by cataloguing the material techniques that global-archaic megaprojects use to project their typical narratives. This is the common thread throughout the built or imagined urban landscapes of global-archaic cities: not a particular style, aesthetic, or form, but the common *function* of various styles, aesthetics, or forms toward the same end of positioning themselves as agents of restoration through globalization or globalization through restoration.

For their narratives of rebuilding and return to function, global-archaic megaprojects must link or equate their proposed future landscapes to the historical landscapes of national mythology. Without establishing this relationship of continuity, audiences would not intuitively view, for example, a biblical theme park and tourist spectacle as reviving an ancient Israelite landscape, or special economic zones, railways, and logistics hubs as a resurrection of the ancient Silk Road. The ancient Silk Road and the New Silk Road are entirely distinct phenomena. To convince an audience that the latter is a revival of the former, the megaproject needs to convince them that the New Silk Road *is* the old Silk Road, only resurrected. In its most basic logic, this is what it means to restore a lost urban landscape to the present: that the historical original and the contemporary double are, in some way, the same. Flattening the difference between the past and the future is the foundational narrative device upon which global-archaic cities elaborate the rest of their stories in all their variations. The primary function of the following narrative-spatial techniques, then, is to flatten the difference between past and future and, consequently, to equate contemporary urban megaprojects with lost national mythscapes.

Rhetorical framing: continuity through discourse. Most com-

monly, global-archaic megaprojects establish a relationship of continuity between past and future urban landscapes by framing space through non-spatial media – both linguistic (official statements, marketing texts, names) and visual (renderings, images, logos). For example, the Chang'an Express freight train uses naming (exchanging Xi'an's modern name for its ancient one), a logo (a camel caravan that morphs into a modern freight train), and a slogan ("steel camel caravan"), alongside Silk-Road stories and imagery on its website to equate the modern railway to a Silk-Road caravan or trade route.[1] The Silk-Road caravan narrative, however, does not shape the form or aesthetics of the railway itself or its supporting infrastructure. Trains are not designed to resemble camel caravans; ports are not designed as caravanserai. Rather, the name, logo, and slogan provide an interpretive framework that encourages audiences to understand the material landscapes of the Chang'an Express in terms of the ancient Silk Road. In such cases, megaproject authors establish continuity between past and future not through the physical transformation of space itself, but through non-spatial framing or interpretive devices that organize how space is perceived, experienced, and narrated. Non-spatial media thus induct audiences into a mythological reading of contemporary urban landscapes, encouraging them to read globalized economic landscapes in terms of national history.

Historical pastiche: continuity through form. Some global-archaic megaprojects transform the aesthetic language of architecture and the city itself into an interpretive framework that flattens historical difference. Xi'an's Tang West Market, for example, dresses up a modern shopping mall in the architectural robes of the Tang dynasty. The mall's Tang-dynasty revivalism, however, remains on the level of *style*. The project is self-aware of its artificiality and does not claim to resurrect the structures of Chang'an's ancient West Market as they really were or to authentically restore lost urban fabric. There of course, for example, never was a "Silk Road Themed Street" replicas of the Red Fort and Roman Forum in the ancient West Market, and the project does not claim that there was. This is a self-conscious historicist construction or folly. Despite its acknowledged artificiality, however, the Tang-style historical pastiche establishes a perceived continuity between the between the modern mall and the ancient Silk-Road market. The architectural aesthetics induct visitors into a way of viewing the global markets and supply chains that intersect in this contemporary megamall as a modern instantiation of the intercontinental trade of the Silk Road that once intersected in Chang'an's West Market. While historical pastiche performs the same flattening of historical difference as non-spatial framing

1
Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, "China Railway Express: 'Steel Camel' Caravan Along Belt and Road Routes," *Belt and Road Portal*, n.d., eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/z/230714/index.shtml.

2
Jerusalem 5800, *Jerusalem 5800/2050: The Metropolitan Jerusalem Master Plan* (2016).

devices, it does so at the site of interpretation itself, through the styling, form, and visual experience of urban space. The mythological connection between past and future is no longer merely suggested; it begins to materialize in space.

Reconstruction: continuity through ontology. Some global-archaic megaprojects ratchet up historical pastiche into claims of truly rebuilding lost national mythscapes. While these proposals are entirely new constructions, they lack the self-aware artificiality of historical pastiche. Jerusalem Rebuilt, for example, does not present its proposal to build the Third Temple on Mount Moriah as an "Israelite-style" building, but as a truly Israelite building. Typically, such projects would assert to rebuild lost monuments or landscapes as they really were – that is, faithfully to the form, aesthetics, and materiality of the original – but this is not necessary. Ginzburg and Etzion's Third Temple may differ in form from the Second Temple, but there is an ontological continuity between the two structures in the sense that the Third is understood as a reconstruction of *the* Temple. The project claims to authentically restore to Jerusalem's urban landscape a lost monument in a way that the Tang West Market does not. The difference here is subtle, but has much to do with cultural context (an audience versed in a messianic culture, which anticipates the rebuilding of the Temple and is thus already primed to interpret the Third Temple as a reconstruction of *the* Temple), and the project's framing rhetoric (claims by authors in interviews and promotional materials to be rebuilding the Temple). Continuity of site and function too may reinforce perceptions that a new construction has genuinely restored a lost monument. Projects like Jerusalem Rebuilt's Third Temple escalate the flattening and continuity-making of historical pastiche; beyond evoking history through aesthetics, it asserts ontological equivalence between original and reconstruction.

Archaeological framing: continuity through matter. In a final escalation, some global-archaic megaprojects flatten historical difference by using archaeology to establish material continuity between the urban landscapes of past and future. Jerusalem 5800's Mikva'ot Project, for example, unearths the ruins of ancient Israelite ritual baths associated with Temple worship and converts them into a publicly accessible tourist attraction.[2] By inserting the material ruins of the ancient Temple's ritual infrastructure into the city's contemporary tourist infrastructure, the Mikva'ot Project supports Jerusalem 5800's larger effort to link Temple-era Jerusalem as the religious-political centre of ancient Israelite life and modern Jerusalem as religious-political-economic centre of the state of Israel. As a visitor to the *mikva'ot,* you

inhabit the same landscape as an Israelite pilgrim, you walk the same path, you touch the same stone. This experience inducts visitors into a way of seeing the rest of the city in terms of national mythology, from the perspective of an ancient Israelite pilgrim. The display of archaeological ruins in a museum, as in Xi'an's many Silk-Road archaeology museums, can perform a similar function of flattening historical difference by displaying physical evidence that the contemporary city is built on the real material ruins of the historical one, occupies the same soil, the same earth. Beyond discourse, aesthetics, or ontology, past and future are the same because they are made from the same physical substance.

Global-archaic megaprojects may not have invented these four techniques of spatial narrative-making, but they have repurposed them toward one end: to induce a perceptual flattening of the difference between past and future. Where urban pastiche, for example, has often revelled in its artificiality and temporal and geographic disembededness, in global-archaic cities, the same tool performs the opposite function: to ground the globalizing city once again in history and place. It is *how* the global-archaic city uses these tools that, that despite its diversity in other aspects, distinguishes it from other models of urban development.

The Global-Archaic City as a Mutation of the Global City Trope

The global-archaic city is largely a phenomenon of the past decade and a half. Plotting global-archaic megaprojects on a timeline would reveal a sharp uptick after around 2010. This timeline holds true for all the case studies in this thesis: Jerusalem 5800 and Jerusalem Rebuilt date from 2016 and 2014 respectively, Freedom Cities from 2023, and the New Silk Road from 2013.

While some global-archaic megaprojects predate the 2010s, around the turn of the decade there is a marked shift in the character of these projects, in which their contradictions become more intense and their narrative logics more unified. Some megaprojects of the late-twentieth-century global city — the London Docklands redevelopment, for example — used the same stories of acceleration into the past or return to the future that define the global-archaic city.[3] The corporate postmodernism of these 1980s global cities, however, was defined exactly by a lack of grounding in place or history. By contrast, the global-archaic city attempts to legitimize neoliberal globalization by grounding it in place and history. The idea of historical return now fundamentally structures the legitimizing narratives of the global-archaic city. The new role of nostalgia, however, has supplemented rather than replaced the neophilia of the early global city. Thus, the dissonance between acceleration and return has intensified.

3
Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, *Docklands: The Expanding City (1988 LDDC Corporate Video)*, 2021, YouTube video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=_-62ElSd8FI.

The neophilic aspects of contemporary dyschronic megaprojects continue to become more futuristic — more advanced technologies, faster global flows — but the nostalgic aspects reach further into the past — promising a return not just to the lost prosperity of a parent's or grandparent's generation, but centuries and millennia back to the foundations of a country or even the foundations of a civilization. But even while the global-archaic city increases the dissonance between acceleration and return, it binds them into tighter semiotic structures as integrated narratives of return to the future or acceleration toward the past. Together, the profusion in quantity and intensification of the basic structure have transformed a phenomenon latent in the earliest global cities of the 1980s and 1990s into a new phenomenon, the global-archaic city, specific to opening decades of the twenty-first century.

The development of the global-archaic city after 2010 has crystalized at least in part from the escalating legitimacy crisis of globalization narratives. Since the 2010s, the convergence of backlash to globalization from above and below has wrought a discursive splintering and inaugurated a search for new, more effective legitimizing narratives.[4] The Overton Window has shifted in all directions, but especially rightward. In this contest for new narrative hegemony has emerged a restorationist brand of nationalist populism: "national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in the antimodern mythmaking of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths."[5] Restorationist nationalism has distanced itself from its predecessor by inverting the historical and geographic imaginaries of globalization. In place of globalization's disgraced optimistic accelerationism, many nationalist populists have substituted narratives of return, or stories of a golden age, a period of decline, and a restoration of continuity. Donald Trump's campaign to "make America great again," for example, promises to restore a mythic, lost American conservative culture and industrial economy. Other movements like Fidesz in Hungary and Hindutva in India have used similar rhetoric and narratives.[6] Restorationists also appear to reject the universal geographies of neoliberal globalization. Many political parties, for example, have promoted an ethnic politics of anti-immigrant nativism and presented themselves as localists seeking to reclaim "indigenous" culture from the homogenizing forces of globalization, whether through religion, language, or tradition. In the stories that they tell, restorationists have swapped neophilia for nostalgia and universalism for localism.

The contemporary wave of restorationist nationalism shares with

4
Quinn Slobodian, "The Backlash Against Neoliberal Globalization from Above: Elite Origins of the Crisis of the New Constitutionalism," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 38, no. 6 (2021).

5
Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2002), 41; Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia* (Polity Press, 2017).

6
Much of Fidesz's political rhetoric centres on restoring Hungary's Christian identity, especially after forty years of communist rule. The national constitution that the party put forth in 2011, for example, began "We are proud that our king Saint Stephen built the Hungarian State on solid ground and made our country a part of Christian Europe one thousand years ago." Hindutva, similarly, claims to be restoring a pure Hindu identity that supposedly predates Islamic rule and European colonialism. At the inauguration of the Rama Temple in Ayodha — on a site often identified as the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama and, from 1528, where a mosque stood until Hindu nationalist organizations destroyed it in the 1990s — Modi said that religious flag atop the new temple "is the flag of the renaissance of Indian civilization." Hungarian National Assembly, "The Fundamental Law of Hungary," Constitution, Hungarian Ministry of Justice, 2021; Narendra Modi, "PM Addresses Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Mandir Dhwajarohan Utsav in Ayodhya," PM India, November 25, 2025, www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pm-addresses-shri-ram-janmabhoomi-mandir-dhwajarohan-utsav-in-ayodhya/.

the global-archaic city many structural similarities. While ditching the superstructure of cultural globalization for the rhetoric and aesthetics of nostalgic localism, many restorationists have retained the economic base of neoliberal globalization.[7] Similarly, the global-archaic city ditches the universalist aesthetics and rhetoric of the global city trope for a nostalgic localism without substantially altering its economic function. As economic infrastructure, global-archaic cities perform the same functions as their global city predecessors; they still facilitate the smooth flows of the global economy, whether, in the case of Xi'an within the New Silk Road, as logistics hubs within transcontinental flows of commodities or, in the case of Jerusalem Rebuilt's proposed stock exchange, as switchboards of global financial flows. Both restorationist nationalism and the global-archaic city produce a disjuncture between economic realities of placeless space and cultural imaginaries of local place. Both produce a disjuncture between the historical vectors of acceleration and of return. On a structural level, the global-archaic city and contemporary restorationism mirror each other. Restorationist movements and states, then, would conceivably adopt something like the global-archaic city as their preferred model of urban development. Indeed, most of the case studies in this thesis are either initiated or sponsored by nationalist-populist political parties with a restorationist bent. Jerusalem 5800 has links through endorsement to Israel's neoliberal-nationalist Likud party, Freedom Cities were initially proposed by Donald Trump as a campaign promise, and, if you see contemporary China's blend of neoliberal-economic globalism with cultural nationalism as a variation on the same political model, even the New Silk Road has its nationalist-populist ties. In cases without patronage or initiative from restorationist-nationalist states or political movements, seeing the success of the rhetorical and narrative strategy of the global-archaic city, private actors (including urban developers, investors, architects, branding consultants) might adopt it too. At the very least, the shift in cultural discourse from the optimistic, globalizing liberalism of the turn of the century to the restorationist nationalism of the twenty-first is partly responsible for the emergence of the global-archaic city after 2008.

Despite the development of the global-archaic city after 2008, it remains a relatively peripheral phenomenon in the wider field of global urbanization. For now, most global-archaic cities are speculative projects and exist only in the space of words and images; very few have been built and have made a mark on the material urban landscapes of the world (with the major exception of the New Silk Road). Some of these speculative projects – like Jerusalem Rebuilt, which lacks backing by political or

7
This pattern holds for both the 2016 election of Donald Trump and the 2016 Brexit referendum – which are typically cited as the two most significant events in the turn toward nationalist populism and antiglobalization. Trump's promise to build a southern border wall, for example, transposed to geography a closing of the national community, largely along ethnic lines. But while analysts have often interpreted his trade war with China as a challenge to economic globalization, the goal was, more subtly, to force "better market access for American products." Trump attempted not to exit trade relations with China, but to strongman a shift in the balance of power in trade relations to the benefit of the USA. The philosophy of free, global markets remained unchallenged, a position made clear by the statement of Trump's trade representative Robert Lighthizer that "the basic philosophy that we have is that we want free trade without barriers." Many of Brexit's proponents too viewed leaving the EU not only as a strategy to limit sociocultural globalization (largely by limiting immigration) and political globalization but also to *increase* the UK's trade openness and economic globalization by evading regulations imposed by Brussels and the European Court of Justice. This intersection of resentment toward certain aspects of neoliberal globalization while embracing other aspects has led some scholars to call this movement "the nationalist-populist mutation of neoliberalism" or "right-wing globalization." Slobodian, "Trump, Populists, and the Rise of Right-Wing Globalization"; Stefanie Walter, "The Backlash Against Globalization," *Annual Review of Political Science* 24 (2021); Scheiring, "The Nationalist-Populist Mutation of Neoliberalism."

economic power and sits outside of respectable public discourse – have slim prospects of ever being built. Others, like Freedom Cities, are backed by political and economic power. This backing, however, does not guarantee that they will be built. Indeed, many states and developers often propose "megaproject mirages" to shape discourse and perceptions of a place without real intentions of ever building them.[8] The global-archaic city, then, may live and die as a purely speculative phenomenon. The lack of built examples of global-archaic cites, however, could simply be the consequence of the mismatch between timelines of political-cultural change and of urban change. While the landscapes of political and cultural discourse can shift dramatically almost instantaneously, the built landscapes of cities take many years and decades to transform. Should the trajectory toward restorationist nationalism persist within the landscapes of culture and politics, urban landscapes may catch up in the coming decades. Contemporary stirrings of the global-archaic city on the peripheries of urban discourse may anticipate future movement in the centre.

8
I have borrowed the term "megaproject mirage" from Suzanne Harris Brandts.

The Global-Archaic City as a Neoliberal Resurrection of National Mythscapes

The transformation of the global-archaic city into a hegemonic model of urban development would give rise to simulated resurrections of lost national mythscapes from historical memory. When urban landscapes disappear, they are sometimes preserved as mythscapes. The Temple and Jerusalem survived their Roman destruction as memories, in Jewish material culture, in the Jewish home.[9] The American frontier survived the end of Western colonization as a metaphor in political discourse, in popular culture, in branding and marketing.[10] In these cases, urban landscapes evaporated from matter into memory and metaphor. The global-archaic city reverses this process, precipitating from memory a material landscape. The resurrection of these lost national mythscapes occurs on one hand at the scale of global urban geographies. Once-important but destroyed or long-peripheral cities reappear on the world map or ascend again to global relevance. Resurrection also occurs on the scale of the city as global-archaic megaprojects rebuild lost monuments, buildings, or infrastructures.

Because the resurrection of lost national mythscapes occurs through the global-archaic city's narrative of restoration through globalization, it requires a flattening of the perceived difference between past and future. This would entail on one hand the pre-

9
Dalia Marx, "The Missing Temple: The Status of the Temple in Jewish Culture Following Its Destruction," *European Judaism* 46, no. 2 (2013).

10
Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Harvard University Press, 1978); Paul Heike, "Agrarianism, Expansionism, and the Myth of the American West," in *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies* (Transcript Verlag, 2014).

dictable refashioning of urban futures in the image of the past; reconstructing lost buildings and monuments or, slightly less directly, dressing up in historical clothing shopping centres, stock exchanges, and logistics hubs. The refashioning of urban futures in the image of historical memory occurs as a necessity of narrative consistency. In most cases, global-archaic megaprojects are motivated by the very contemporary concerns of economic logic or geopolitical strategy. While the CCP may be truly invested in the idea of restoring the glory of the Han and Tang dynasties through the Silk Road, or Silicon-Valley libertarians in the idea of reopening the American frontier, these narratives do not drive global-archaic megaprojects. Instead, they serve hard economic or political motives and function to legitimize these motives in a changing cultural climate that now requires alternatives to past decades' optimistic stories of globalization. Once deployed, however, historical-mythological narratives can partially detach themselves from baser political-economic motives and assert themselves as independent material forces. This occurs as project authors — if they hope for their narratives of historical return to be taken seriously — are obliged to maintain the internal logic of the story and thus make occasional decisions purely in the interest of narrative consistency. Thus, global-archaic megaprojects end up "rebuilding" certain historical mythscapes that may not perform a clear economic function but work discursively to legitimize the broader project. Consequently, narratives begin to reconfigure urban landscapes and geographies in the image of collective historical imaginaries.

The centring of Xi'an within the New Silk Road exemplifies how the internal logics of legitimizing narratives and metaphors have material consequences that are not entirely reducible to economics or geopolitics. The recent elevation of Xi'an within the economic and political hierarchies of urban China can be explained partially by the economic logic of neoliberal globalization: the city is centrally located within the country, which makes it geographically strategic as a logistics hub, and it has benefited from the state's decades-long efforts to develop its western cities. These explanations, however, do not entirely account for the city's recent rise. No earlier national-level development project — even those specifically designed to develop western cities — centred Xi'an to the degree that the BRI has. From the beginning, the BRI has framed Xi'an as the starting point of the New Silk Road based on tales of ancient Chang'an as the starting point of the historical Silk Road.[11] The earliest of these statements predate by years the emergence of Xi'an as an important logistics hub.[12] The elevated importance of Xi'an to the BRI compared to earlier national development programs, then, cannot be entirely

11
The Vision and Actions Plan states that "we should [...] build Xi'an into a new focus of reform and opening-up in China's interior." Yang Yang, "Producing Multiple Imaginations of the Silk Road in Xi'an, China's Urban Development," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 26, no. 6 (2020): 855; National Development and Reform Commission of the People's Republic of China et al., "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road," *Strategic Studies* 35, no. 1 (2015).

12
Xi's statement during his inaugural BRI speech in Kazakhstan that "Shaanxi [the province of which Xi'an is the capital], my home province, is right at the starting point of the ancient Silk Road" predates by three months the launch of the first CEFT from Xi'an. The city did not emerge as a dominant CEFT hub until years later. Jinping Xi, "Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China: Speech by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China at Nazarbayev University," September 8, 2013, worldjpn.net/documents/texts/BR/20130907.O1E.html.

attributed to recent economic changes within the city. On the contrary, the city owes its success as a logistics hub in no small part to assistance from the central state through the BRI. It appears, then, that, as the site of historical Chang'an, the city's privileged symbolic place within the internal logic of the BRI's "reviving the Silk Road" narrative partially determined its recent economic and urban development. And this development has been significant: from being unranked on the Globalization and World Cities Index in 2010 to a Beta- ranking in 2024, Xi'an has become an important node in the networks of global capital, on par with Rio de Janeiro, Manchester, and Vancouver.[13] A city which was once a major node in global economic networks and which fell into obscurity for over a millennium is reemerging as a consequence of a historical metaphor.

As the Xi'an example illustrates, historical memory asserts itself on urban landscapes not outside of the logic of neoliberal globalization, but through it. In practice, this could look like *historical capital* becoming a more determinant factor in the development of urban geographies and urban form. The new nostalgic regime of sociocultural legitimation would give an edge in intercity competition to places tied to national mythology. Places with important archaeological remains or that figure prominently in founding narratives would simply have more opportunities to brand themselves in accordance with the emerging hegemonic model and more international recognizability. Consequently, without displacing the economic logic of neoliberal globalization, historical capital would lubricate certain pathways of urban development modelled after historical myth and collective memory.[14] If only the case studies in this thesis were to be constructed, for example, the world map would see the restoration of the Temple of Jerusalem, the Silk Road and the ancient city of Chang'an, and the legally indeterminate settlements of the American Wild West. To take another example from outside this thesis, New Kharkhorum City would restore Kharkhorum (the ruined thirteenth-century capital of the Mongolian Empire) as the capital of the modern Mongolian state.[15] Taken to its logical conclusion, this vector of development would make the urban geographies of next century's world map look, on one level, almost medieval or classical. Or, put more carefully, historical memory might increasingly shape the geographies and urban form of neoliberal development.

The global-archaic city's resurrection of mythscapes from collective memory, however, does not only occur through building future urban landscapes in the image of the past, but also through reshaping collective memory itself. Global-archaic megaprojects

13
Globalization and World Cities Research Network, "World Cities 2024," Globalization and World Cities, gawc.lboro.ac.uk/gawc-worlds/the-world-according-to-gawc/world-cities-2024/.

14
Because the incentive toward urban restoration is nested within the overarching system of neoliberal globalization, it is likely that the consequent resurrection of lost national mythscapes would occur primarily around second- and third-tier global cities, as is the case with Xi'an. It is unlikely that at the highest levels of the global economy — New York, London, Dubai, etcetera — that the narrative strength of historical capital could displace the inertia of hard economic logic.

15
Bolor Lkhaajav, "Building Mongolia's New, Old Capital at Kharkhorum," *The Diplomat*, January 8, 2026, thediplomat.com/2026/01/building-mongolias-new-old-capital-at-kharkhorum/.

do not only instrumentalize existing narratives about history but play an active role in reshaping the histories that they claim to revive. By reshaping collective memory about historical urban landscapes in the image of a globalized, neoliberal future, they establish the continuity between past and future that is necessary for their narratives of restoration through globalization to function. Global-archaic megaprojects achieve this in part in the way that they present history, either in the language and imagery of branding and promotional materials, or by referencing and quoting history in architectural and urban form and aesthetics. Promotional videos that refer to ancient Chang'an as an "international hub" or discourses that present the historical American frontier as an innovation incubator, for example, push audiences to see these historical landscapes as instances of high-tech neoliberal globalization *avant la lettre*.[16]

Some global-archaic megaprojects rewrite history more directly through archaeology. In the case studies of this thesis, for example, both Jerusalem 5800 and the New Silk Road include large archaeological initiatives. By funding archaeological research in connection with the New Silk Road, China has expanded collective imaginaries about the geographies of the ancient overland and maritime Silk Roads to mirror the geographies of the contemporary BRI. Since the announcement of the BRI, for example, China has boosted efforts to unearth archaeological evidence of Silk Road contact between China and countries of the increasingly geopolitically critical Indian Ocean Region. To legitimate tales of Chinese ships lost near the Kenyan coastal town of Lamu, the CCP has funded excavations of the coastline that have yielded artefacts including Ming-era porcelain and coins. Chinese scientists even conducted DNA tests on village locals in search of traces of Chinese ancestry. The state granted one Kenyan woman that the scientists determined to have Chinese blood a government scholarship to study in Nanjing before becoming an informal ambassador between the two countries.[17] Through similar archaeological initiatives, China has begun to alter contemporary understandings of the historical geographies of the ancient Silk Road, expanding networks of trade and contact to previously under-researched regions. However, China has undertaken research primarily in locations of major BRI projects and infrastructures, as stories of historical Silk-Road connection smooth out the diplomatic relations necessary to realize these projects. The new historical-geographic imaginaries of the ancient Silk Road, then, are shaped by the geo-strategic logic of the New Silk Road. In this way, the logic of contemporary neoliberal globalization reshapes the geographies of the past in its own image.

16
Yilei Wang and Dezheng Feng, "History, Modernity, and City Branding in China: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Xi'an's Promotional Videos on Social Media," *Social Semiotics* 33, no. 2 (2023); Mike Solana, host, *Reimagining Governance: Charter Cities, Seasteading, & Freedom Zones w/ Kelsey Piper Patri Friedman*, Pirate Wires Podcast, May 30, 2025, YouTube video, youtube.com/watch?v=fZ0s7kCTUW8.

17
Tim Winter, *Geocultural Power: China's Quest to Revive the Silk Roads for the Twenty-First Century* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 123–24

The twin processes of reconfiguring historical accounts in the style of the globalized present and restyling contemporary urban landscapes in historicist dress bend the economic geographies and historical imaginaries of the past and the future toward each other. Where these two processes intersect, they produce the perception that the past has returned in the present – that the ruined and lost monuments, landscapes, and infrastructures of national mythology are reappearing. This is, of course, just an appearance. The "restored" landscapes are in fact entirely distinct from the "originals" and the appearance of restoration only survives so long as both processes continue to operate in tandem. Remember that historical pasts were experienced in terms often foreign or even impenetrable to the present – that, for example, the ancient Silk Road was not simply contemporary globalization with more rudimentary technological infrastructure, but an entirely distinct phenomenon – and the illusion falls apart: the curtain printed all over with images of frontier homesteads falls away to reveal typical tech hubs, the curtain printed with images of camels and caravans gives way to a totally contemporary network of contemporary logistics and information infrastructures. The turn toward restoration then does not necessarily mark a break from neoliberal globalization and a hard reversal of its accelerationist historical trajectory, but a mutation within it. The global-archaic city, however awkwardly, responds to the nearly impossible task of reproducing and expanding the urban infrastructure of neoliberal globalization while justifying itself through the cultural grammars of nostalgia and localism. The still-germinating spores of the global-archaic city may continue to proliferate and restyle the world map as a simulated assemblage of pop-history's most recognizable cities and monuments. Equally, those spores may fail to germinate and leave behind only speculative plans but little in the way of physical ruins. Either way – although they would like you to believe that they originate from a distant mythological past – these global-archaic cities are artefacts of the very particular present moment of crisis and reconfiguration within neoliberal globalization.

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